

Well happy new year everyone! I hope you all had a good relaxing time with friends and family and had an enjoyable Christmas period. I'm sure some of you will be glad it's all over, whilst others will be counting down the number of sleeps until next Christmas. There's 352 by the way.

But no matter how you feel about Christmas, I think we can all agree that January is a bit of a strange month, isn't it? Though today is just like any other day, because we have ascribed a certain number to it, many of us will be filled with a renewed sense of purpose and will to achieve the things we want with our year. The slate has somehow been made clean. 2017 has passed and 2018 is now up to you.

It's the time of year we set out our goals for the coming 12 months. From our wallet size to our waist size. New ideas to dreams of old. January is seen as the perfect month to start afresh, to better ourselves, to wish something old into something new. New year, new me after all!

Well, maybe when all is said and done with Christmas, when the dust settles and you contemplate on the year ahead, maybe you wish for things other than your car to be new. Maybe you're tired of the same old world marred by all its violence and strife. Maybe you're tired of the same old Christian life.

Now, I'm very aware that this is a somewhat divisive film, some people love it and some well... don't. But if you've had the chance to see the latest Star Wars film, the last Jedi, you will come across a scene near the end which we can probably all relate to in some way.

Picture this. With their backs up against the wall, the last few remnants of the resistance fighters are cornered in a small cave with no way out. With the all the power of the biggest army in the galaxy barrelling towards them, their hope is at an all-time low. In a last-ditch attempt to get reinforcements, they send out a call for help. But... no one answers. I'm sorry if that's classed as a minor spoiler but it's not too hard to see

coming. But I want you to imagine what that must feel like. Exhausted, fatigued, hopeless. Calling out for help and yet no one answers.

Well for some of us, perhaps most of us, that won't be too hard to imagine at all, especially when it comes to how we live as a Christian. Perhaps you come here this morning tired of feeling as if you're part of your own resistance group against the evil of the world. Well take heart, you're not alone. Perhaps you're just like Habakkuk.

Now, that phrase might not mean much, as Habakkuk may be a complete stranger to you. It's not a book many people read that often and is easy to overlook.

However, though we may not know Habakkuk himself, we know his complaint intimately. Habakkuk was a prophet; a man sent from God to proclaim and pray over the nation. To speak words of truth to others and to pray for them. He is in a situation that we see many of the other prophets in the old testament in. Sin and injustice are rife, as the people of Judah rebel against God. And no one listens to him.

Though Habakkuk probably wasn't zipping around the galaxy in x-wings and using laser blasters to defend himself, he and the resistance share a common experience. An experience we all take part in at one time or another. Calling out for help in the face of evil, and feel like no one is answering.

And that's what we see at the start of this passage. Perhaps as the passage was read out, verses 2 and 3 resonated with you the most. How many times in your own heart have you cried out, "How long, Lord, must I call for help, but you do not listen?" "Why do you tolerate wrongdoing?"

The reason why this is such a striking passage, is because it resonates with one of the deepest parts of us. It echoes one of our deepest struggles and speaks to one of life's biggest questions. Why doesn't God act in the face of man-made evil? What's the point in my prayer when I

feel like God isn't answering it? It's not like I'm praying for a Lamborghini or to win the lottery! I'm praying for good things.

As followers of Christ we are called to speak out and pray over our nation, yet at times, if we're really honest, it can feel all a bit... pointless. We know we need to speak to and pray for the world, to be a prophet of sorts to the people around us, yet a lot of the time, if we are truly honest with ourselves, we often simply don't want to. We can't be bothered.

We would rather sit at home on the sofa watching strictly or binge-watching the latest series on Netflix than attend yet another prayer meeting. With all that's going on in the world, despite my prayers, it just doesn't seem to be that important or effective, so what's the point?

We have grown fatigued with our prayer life. Exhausted by the seemingly endless barrage of evil in the world coupled with the perceived bareness of our prayers. We too can feel like Habakkuk.

Thankfully though, through his book, we will see that Habakkuk understands how we feel, that at times it feels like it doesn't make much difference at all, but goes on to show us that we're wrong. Though, be warned, it may not be the answer you are thinking of.

Full disclaimer: this book does not answer all our big questions on the coexistence of evil and an all-loving, all-powerful God, it does not seek to be an apologetic lecture. Though there are good answers to those questions, and perhaps you'll discover those at our big issue events starting in February, but Habakkuk does not seek to provide them here.

Here, Habakkuk seeks put forward a different question, "Is God enough for me to continue praying and speaking in the face of evil?" And he will go about answering that question by taking us on a journey. A journey he goes on himself. A journey from doubt to trust.

We've seen how Habakkuk starts his book, but let's take a very quick look at how he finishes. Let me read to you chapter 3 verse 19, I'll put it up on the screen. "The sovereign Lord is my strength; he makes my feet like the feet of a deer. He enables me to tread on the heights."

Do you see the difference there? What we read in chapter 1 is weighed down by despair and doubt, yet in chapter 3 he is filled with strength and is able to skip and bound on the heights like a deer. That's where we want to end up. But how has God become enough for Habakkuk to deal with the evil he faces? How has God become enough for Habakkuk to continue to pray and speak to those around him?

Well, throughout the next 4 weeks we will embark on this journey together. We will come across many difficulties but always asking the same question, "Is God enough?"

It is only the first part of this journey that we see in today's passage, but it is a crucial one. If we don't get this, if we don't take this first step, then we won't end at the same destination as Habakkuk.

And to help us do that, we are going to look at 3 things we need to realise from this passage: Knowing the active God is enough, Knowing the ruling God is enough, and Knowing the trustworthy God is enough.

So first off, knowing the active God is enough. I wonder if you can remember a time when you simply couldn't believe it. Something so good or so bad that you weren't expecting, and you have that brief moment as if you were either in a dream or about to be pranked live on TV. Maybe when you were unexpectedly made redundant, or accepted into university, or perhaps when you found out you or your partner was pregnant, or that you or a loved one has a serious diagnosis. This moment of seemingly suspended time and reality can either bring euphoria or a sinking feeling of dread. Even though you have been told the facts, your mind can't process it as reality.

And we see something similar here, look at verse 5. God says, “Look at the nations and watch, and be utterly amazed. For I am going to do something in your days that you would not believe, even if you were told.”

Here God tells us that He is planning something so unbelievable that even if He told us, we still wouldn't believe it. But before we get to the unbelievable bit we need to realise something that you have probably already overlooked. I know I did. We need to realise that God says He is going to *do* something. He promises to act.

Habakkuk's complaint centres around why God doesn't do something, why doesn't he just act! And here, God replies with, “I *am* doing something. But it will be so strange to you that you won't understand.”

And perhaps this is the reason why we so easily overlook the wonder of a creator stepping into our world and acting. Perhaps we just don't see the line that links the apparently separated dots. Perhaps we don't see two seemingly unrelated events as in fact interrelating.

Think of it like this, perhaps what we see is the rise and fall of the waves and we see the moon. 2 seemingly unrelated things. But don't see the two interacting. We don't see the line connecting the two. In this case it's gravity, but perhaps in our prayer lives we don't see the connecting line of God. We don't see God in the middle.

To help us move from doubt to trust, we first need to realise that God *is* active, even when we feel like He isn't. We need to realise that sometimes the way He will act will confuse us, that we won't fully understand why or how. That we won't be able to draw the connecting line between 2 or even countless dots. Here in Habakkuk, God tells us that sometimes, even if he drew the lines for us, we wouldn't be able to understand. It would just look like a tangled ball of string.

Well I'm sure some of you are already thinking, "Well that's convenient isn't it! Just sweep these really hard concepts to grapple with under the rug, something I'm struggling with deeply, with the simple yet increasingly annoying phrase "God works in mysterious ways".

And to be honest, that is understandable. And as part of my disclaimer early, you may very well leave today feeling that your complaint is not fully answered. And that's because it's not. We will not have completed Habakkuk's journey in just the opening 11 verses. But to have a God that is limited to work only in ways in which the human mind can comprehend... well that's no God at all.

And next week we will see Habakkuk question why God works in certain ways, but what we need to understand here is that God *is* working in the first place. It seems simple in principle but we *must* get this. It is a crucial first step if we ever hope of going on Habakkuk's journey from doubt to trust. God *is* active, even when we feel like he's not.

Knowing that God is like this, that He is doing something in the world, helps us see that our prayers are not futile or a waste of time. That they are not just hot air in front of a stubborn and unmoving God. But that through prayer, we are petitioning an active, working God.

Now one of my most vivid memories as a kid was when me and my family went to Universal Studios in Florida, USA. I was around 7 years old at the time, and at that age I hadn't quite developed the love of fearing for my life every few seconds when you strap yourself into a 100 ft rollercoaster. Knowing this, my dad found a nice log flume ride that I could try.

He assured me it was safe, and that there was only a very slight drop near the end. I was sold. I could handle that. And as we are coasting gently around the Jurassic Park themed ride, sat in the front seat,

enjoying myself, suddenly... my face drops. The log flume tilts ever so slowly over the edge, inch by inch and then... Free fall. The log flume goes over the edge of what I would later come to know as the tallest, most steepest drop for a log flume in the entire world. I went from blissful excitement to utter dread in the blink of an eye.

And upon first reading of this passage, you could feel something similar. You could very easily read up to verse 5 and be quite excited. "Oh, good! God is going to do something totally amazing! Can't wait to see what it is!" But then you read on through verses 6-11 and your face drops.

God finally reveals what His action will be. Habakkuk has prayed and prayed for the evil of Judah to be dealt with, for God to save the righteous and get rid of evil, and how does God respond?

He responds by laying out His plans to raise up Judah's enemy to reek havoc. And we can see that these Babylonians are no joke. We read that they are a feared and dreaded people; whose horses are swifter than leopards and fiercer than wolves when they are ready to hunt! They are described as hordes that advance like a desert wind, who laugh at all fortified cities.

As a reader you almost do a double take, don't you? Did I read that right? Is that how God is really going to act? *That's* His answer to injustice?? It's almost like pouring petrol on a fire to try and put it out! I imagine Habakkuk's question goes from "why aren't you doing something?" to "Why are you doing that?!"

Which is precisely what we see in his second complaint. So, without stepping on the toes of next week, let's have a very quick look at the second half of verse 12. I'll put it up on the screen. Habakkuk writes, "You, Lord, have appointed them to execute judgement; you, my Rock, have ordained them to punish."

Do you see the difference between this and his first complaint? Habakkuk goes from wondering why God doesn't act in his first complaint to acknowledging that God has appointed and ordained these things in his second. He acknowledges that God *does* act and has chosen the Babylonians to carry this out. He recognises that God rules over everything. He is in control.

And this is the crucial point we need to get our heads round. This is a key point on Habakkuk's journey, and we need to realise this if we are to continue on the same path. If you take anything away from today, let it be this. We must come to know that God even uses evil people to achieve His purposes, that He rules and governs over *everything*.

This is the key to persevering in prayer and proclaiming to those around us in this broken and fallen world. We must realise that God uses everything to bring about His purposes. The good *and* the bad. Including the man-made evil we see in this passage.

And you know what? This is actually really great news! If we stop and think of the consequences of a ruling God, it means that all the evil and wickedness that we can see before us can have a purpose. And what's more, a God who rules over everything means that even the evillest, most sick and depraved person you can imagine right now, are not out of the realm His control. He can use them for His glory.

Now let me be clear, Habakkuk doesn't say to us that God causes evil, but He does use it. God sees evil and declares it as so. He doesn't just ignore it. And as we will see along this journey, He will judge it all in the end. But the realisation that God can and does use evil, rather than it just being a pointless tragedy, can help us persevere in prayer.

Knowing God is sovereign is key for us to move from doubt to trust. It enables us to see that our prayers, in the face of evil, can be effective and active, because God can use it.

And we have already seen that knowing God to be sovereign is a hallmark of Habakkuk's destination. Let me read 3:19 to you again, "The Sovereign Lord is my strength; he makes my feet like the feet of a deer. He enables me to tread on the heights."

Do you see? It is the sovereignty of the Lord that is his strength to continue to pray, even though evil surrounds him. It is Habakkuk's knowledge that God can and does work through all manner of things, including the very things we think He's not associated with. *That's* His strength to continue, even when He is exhausted.

Knowing the ruling God is enough for us to continue to pray, without being exhausted and fatigued at the apparent lack of action, because when we do, we see that God is at work in *all* things, including evil itself.

And no one knew this better than Helen Roseveare. Sent by God as a missionary to Congo in the 1960's, she was 1 of 10 missionaries put under house arrest by the rebel forces during the civil war. It was here that she was brutally beaten, dragged, kicked, and even raped.

She wrote, "Through the brutal heartbreaking experience of rape, God met with me—with outstretched arms of love. It was an unbelievable experience: He was so utterly there, so totally understanding, his comfort was so complete—and suddenly I knew—I really knew that his love was unutterably sufficient. He did love me! He did understand!"

She goes on to say, "He didn't take away pain or cruelty or humiliation. No! It was all there, but now it was altogether different. It was with him, for him, in him."

And it was through this renewed hope and sense of unspeakable love that she went on to help develop a 250-bed hospital, maternity ward, training college for doctors, and a center for leprosy. And she used that pain to write many books and help many others through their sufferings.

Helen trusted God through the most unspeakable evil and saw Him use it for good.

And some of you here today will know how Helen felt that night. Because you've lived through unspeakable evil too. You've lived through this kind of pain. But the good news is that God really does see it as evil, He doesn't think that it's ok, but He does use that unspeakable act for good. He can redeem it.

But for us to see that, just like Helen, we need to realise that knowing the trustworthy God is enough to continue in the face of evil. But how do we get there? How do we know He is trustworthy to do this?

And I think that's where the uneasiness may come from when reading this passage. It's an indication that we don't fully know who God is. That we aren't 100% sure that He is trustworthy enough. We're unsure that His character will lead Him to use evil in the right circumstances and in the right way.

Perhaps because every single other person we can think of, the answer would simply be that they're not. Just look at the news, seems like there's a story surrounding people of leadership, our politicians, our police force, and many others who we are supposed to trust, getting into yet more scandal and depravity every day. Using their position of power to abuse and self-promote. And that can spill over into our view of God.

What we need is a sign to show us that we can fully trust God, above all others, totally and completely. Something to show us unequivocally who God is. Something to help us trust God in the face of evil.

What we need is the cross. God's sign to all creation who He is and what He is like. A huge stake in the ground of history to show all of humanity His character. That He is utterly trustworthy. On the cross God shows us that He is in the business of using evil for good.

There is no better example. Here, God takes *the* most evil of things and turns it into unspeakable joy. He turns the horrendous and brutal murder of an innocent, perfect, incarnate God into the glorious, grace-filled, and radiant salvation that is available to all today. Something that should make us all weep and wail has been turned into something that should make us rejoice and celebrate. He works through the most evil act to bring about the most glorious act.

Here's what Peter says about it in Acts 2:23. He says, "This man was handed over to you by God's deliberate plan and foreknowledge; and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross."

So was the cross the result of a sovereign, ruling God or what it evil? Well, Peter says it's both! It's both God's deliberate plan and it's wicked. Through the cross, we see the ultimate example of God ruling over evil and using it for His purposes. And we see Jesus' trust in His father to do so.

Here Jesus, God's own son, actually experienced first hand the coexistence of real evil and real sovereignty. God ruling over evil and using it for His purposes. He experienced the evil Helen went through. He experienced the evil you went through. He doesn't just tell us to trust God in the face of evil, but He experienced it Himself. And because of this we can fully trust Him.

And let's not overlook the fact that God came Himself. He wasn't distant. He didn't delegate. The fact that He took the greatest punishment upon Himself even though He didn't have to, but actively wanted to, shows us that He is trustworthy. He would have been justified if He decided to just sit there and do nothing. No one could have blamed Him. But He didn't. God shows his character no more so than in his death and resurrection. He has shown himself to be utterly trustworthy.

For us to go on Habakkuk's journey, we need to realise that God is much bigger and more in control than we recognise. And with the bits we don't understand, He is trustworthy enough that we can be sure that He will get them right.

Knowing the trustworthy God is enough for us to keep praying in the face of evil, because when we do, we know that no matter what the answer to our prayer is, we can be assured that God will act justly and with righteousness.

If we come to know that God is active, that He can use evil, and can be trusted to do so, our despair and fatigue in prayer start to fade away. It won't feel like you're just speaking to a brick wall anymore.

This first step on Habakkuk's journey is the crucial foundation we need to realise so that we come to know God is enough for us to continue to pray and speak in the face of hardship.

But be warned. Habakkuk's journey isn't for the faint hearted. It's a long and winding road with many questions and bumps along the way. But if we take hold of these 3 points confidently, then we've already made a big stride from doubt to trust. From a place of exhaustion in prayer, to a place where we too can tread the heights with feet like a deer. And imagine what that would look like if we all went on this journey together. A church galvanised in prayer and proclaiming because of the strength we have in knowing an active, ruling, and trustworthy Lord. Let's pray.

Father God, we praise you that you know what it feels like to experience our pain and our sufferings. We thank you that you came yourself to experience what it means to have trust through sovereign evil. I pray that by the spirit, we will come to fully know that you are enough for us to pray and speak to a broken world. Amen.

We are just going to have a few moments of quiet to reflect on what we've just heard.

