

The Greatest Verse in the Bible

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[0 : 00] Let's bow our heads in prayer together. Our gracious God and Father, we thank you for bringing us to this place and time.

And we bless you that we have before us the living and enduring Word of God. And now we come to you and pray that you will do for us that which we cannot do for ourselves.

Lord, open your Word to our hearts and open our hearts to your Word. Give to each one of us the grace of understanding and the greater grace of obedience.

And we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen. Well, as you will have gathered from the little opportunity I had with your pastor earlier, we're going to be looking at the clean pages in this first service this morning.

So if you'd like to get a head start on some people and go back to those clean pages, the minor prophets, just before the New Testament begins. And we're going to be looking at, well, if I were to ask you, which do you think is the greatest verse in the entire Bible, I wonder how many of you would turn to the minor prophets.

[1 : 19] Now, to say which is the greatest verse in the Bible is actually an illegitimate question, but I think you know the kind of reasons it's asked. Which do you think would be the greatest verse in the entire Bible?

How many would go to one of the minor prophets? But I believe there's a case to be made out that it is there. And it's in what in England we call the prophet Habakkuk.

And I understand that in America you call it Habakkuk, but I will take no lessons in the English language from a country that parks its cars on the driveway and drives them on the parkway. So, but I will try to concede to my country cousins, and it may be a mixture between the two, but at least you know exactly.

It's the one that begins with H, and then A, and then B. And so if we get there, we'll have done well. I don't want to give you the history lesson here for the sake of time, but I will keep a very close eye on the time that's been allocated, and I think we'll be absolutely fine.

Habakkuk wrote to the nation of Judah about 600 B.C. You'll remember the Exodus and the journey to the Promised Land, the ructions in the nation split into the ten northern tribes which became Israel, the two southern tribes became Judah, and so on.

[2 : 37] Well, some of the minor prophets ministered to the northern tribes before their exile, some to the southern tribe before their exile, and some to the southern tribe when they were, and they were the only ones who were repatriated to their home country.

Well, Habakkuk prophesied to Judah when it was a terrible tailspin, so much so that God raised up four prophets to warn it of the coming catastrophe.

That is to say of invasion and deportation. Jeremiah, Nahum, Zephaniah, and Habakkuk. And of the four, our friend Habakkuk is the mystery man.

We know nothing about him, about his tribe, his home, his family, his occupation, or his background. But if we have problems with him because we are told very little about him, they are nothing, now hear me carefully, they are nothing compared to the problems that he had with God.

The prophet had problems with God. Look at the beginning of the book. The oracle that Habakkuk the prophet received, How long, O Lord, must I call for help?

[3 : 51] And you do not listen. Or cry out to you, violence, but you do not save. Why do you make me look at injustice? Why do you tolerate wrong? Destruction and violence are before me.

There is strife and conflict abounds. Therefore the law is paralyzed. Justice never prevails. Wicked him in the righteous. Justice is perverted.

You could get that on CNN tomorrow. Who says the Bible is out of date? These words could be written over tomorrow's headlines.

But this was the prophet's problems. See, he and others were praying that God would do something about this situation. And his whole concern was, why don't you listen?

And the particular word listen there simply means, well, why don't you listen and do something? Habakkuk may, I hope, have doubted that God actually heard what they were praying. When are you going to deliver our nation from this dreadful state?

[4 : 49] Their problem was that God didn't seem to be answering in a way that led to any answer being given. So all of this mess was going on in Judah at the time.

But that was not Habakkuk's problem. The heart of man is so corrupt that while the excesses of sin should always, of course, sadden us, they should never surprise us.

And this was Habakkuk's first problem. The country was an immoral and spiritual mess. If we have a true grasp of the depravity of the human heart, that should never shock us.

We are hearing things. I take what would be called, I think, a quality newspaper, a broadsheet in England. There are now things appearing in full color on the front page of a quality broadsheet that would never have been found in three lines on page 27 of that paper 50 years ago.

And it's the sheer excesses of violence, of immorality, of skullduggery in high places, corruption in the corridors of power.

[6 : 03] It's the sheer volume of it that is so distressing in these days. But, to repeat, if we knew of the depravity of the human heart, that would not shock us.

Habakkuk's problem was not man's actions. It was God's inaction. God was apparently not doing anything in answer to the fervent prayers of the prophet, and we must imagine a godly remnant with him.

Now, we've all heard growing up in our particular ecclesiastical circles, the phrase prayer changes things. And you may have that in your home somewhere, on a plaque or a wall or worked out in wood or in some other fashion.

Prayer changes things. Do you know you won't find those words in the Bible? That's not a text from Scripture. Prayer changes things is not actually taken verbatim from the Bible.

Now, we don't have time to develop what we mean when we say that prayer changes things. Habakkuk's problem, however, was it seemed to change nothing. And these verses we've read so far are some of the most honest in the whole of the Bible.

[7 : 20] But notice carefully, and it seems to me importantly, at the beginning of verse 2, how long. That seems to me to be a clue that the prophet wasn't giving up.

He did not say, I'm going to give up praying. Nothing is happening. That's the end of that. It's, but Lord, we will carry on praying. I think this is the unwritten text. We're going to carry on praying.

But Lord, please tell us, how long before you answer? The issue, it seems, was not whether God would answer, but when. Well, in verses 5 through 11, God answers Habakkuk.

And he begins like this, I am going to do something. What music that must have been to the ears of the prophet. I am going to do something.

If you've been praying for something for a long time, a physical situation, something within your family, a situation outside of your family that you're desperately concerned about, a nagging, a chronic problem within the church or whatever, and you in some way receive what seems to you to be a clear word from God, I am going to do something.

[8 : 37] Wouldn't that make your heart rate increase just a little bit? God is going to do something. But look, it gets better. I am going to do something in your days.

Well, that's even more exciting. I mean, to take this church family, for example, and I have no knowledge whatever of where the church stands in all sorts of areas at the moment. I know that it stands firmly theologically because I read and heard about your pastor and I rejoice in the ministry that God has given him here.

But there are issues within the church and you say, you know, for a long time we've wanted to make a move forward in that area. And if God were to say these things to you in order, firstly, I have heard your prayers and I'm going to do something.

Well, that would please you, although please seems a very weak word to use. If he were then to say, and it's going to happen in your days, in other words, well, it's going to happen, but you'll be dead and buried long before that.

It's going to happen in your day. Just imagine your pulse racing a little bit more. And God goes on. I'm going to do something you would not believe even if you were told.

[9 : 45] In other words, he is saying to the prophet, it is going to be something so stupendous that unless I, God, had told it to you, if somebody else had said to you, this is going to happen and God is going to do it, you'd say, we have a phrase in England, tell it to the Marines, which simply means nobody's going to believe you.

Nobody's going to believe you. But I can just imagine the prophet now hyperventilating. God says, I'm going to do something massive in your day.

You will see it. And you can just imagine the prophet saying, what on earth is this going to be? And God tells him, I'm raising up the Babylonians.

Now, that, if you're not familiar with the picture here, you may say, well, he's raising up the Babylonians. What does that mean? Well, the Babylonians were the most violent, cruel, oppressive pagan people you could imagine.

And God was saying, I'm going to answer your prayer and you're going to be invaded by this pagan nation with whom I have no covenant at all and they're going to sweep in and destroy the land.

[10 : 53] If Habakkuk could play tennis and his name was John McEnroe, he'd have said, you can't be serious. So God's answer to the first problem raised was an even bigger one.

And the reason was because of who these Babylonians were. Look at verse 8. Their horses are swifter than leopards, fiercer than wolves at dusk. Their cavalry gallops headlong.

Their horsemen come from afar. They fly like a vulture, swooping to devour. They all come bent on violence. Their hordes advance like a desert wind and gather prisoners like sand. That doesn't sound much like a positive answer to prayer.

But the real reason why it was such a problem to Habakkuk was of what he knew about God. Look at verse 12.

This is Habakkuk's statement of faith. I like a confessional church. A church that has a confession, a statement of faith.

[12 : 01] I think of the great Westminster Confession in England and the 1689 Baptist Confession of Faith and so forth. These are great formulations brought together by godly men and securely based on Scripture.

And so this is Habakkuk's statement of faith. O Lord, are you not from everlasting? My God, my Holy One, we will not die. O Lord, you have appointed them to execute judgment.

O Rock, you have ordained them to punish. Your eyes are too pure to look on evil. You cannot tolerate wrong. Now can you see why it was such a problem to Habakkuk?

If he didn't really know very much about God, God's characteristics, God's attributes, the things that govern everything, that self-govern everything that God did, he would say, well, if that's the way God does things, that's the way God does things.

But just look again at verses 12 and 13. He speaks of God's eternity. You are from everlasting. Of God's holiness, we won't be wiped out.

[13 : 02] Of his faithfulness, we will not die. Of his sovereignty, you have appointed them to execute. Of his justice, to execute justice. O Rock, he speaks of his stability.

Your eyes are too pure to look on evil. He speaks of God's purity. Well, that's great stuff. But it's not the end of the problem.

Biblical doctrine is not like a jigsaw. You get this bit of doctrine and put it in place, and another bit over here, and another bit here, and another bit here. And as you come here Sunday by Sunday and sit under Brother Stone's ministry, you get to the point where you say, my doctrine is now in place.

Now I can fold my arms and breeze through the rest of my Christian life. There are few things more important than having a good, basic theological structure.

Not just a collection of nice texts floating around in your mind. I would urge you to become systematic theologians. That sounds pretty daunting.

[14 : 09] What I mean is, begin to get an overall grasp, and a clear grasp, and an ordered grasp of what the Bible is saying. I heard of a man who once said he had no problems believing what the Bible said in general, until he read a book claiming to solve them all.

And the Bible doesn't do that. The fact is that only believers have Habakkuk's kind of problem. So look at verse 13 again.

Your eyes are too pure to look on evil. You cannot tolerate wrong. Why then do you tolerate the treacherous? That's what made the problem so great for Habakkuk.

He knew that God was a holy God, a pure God, a righteous God, a God who could do no wrong. And this righteous, pure, holy, do-no-wrong God was saying, I'm answering your prayer for my people by sending in a nation with whom I don't even have a covenant, a nation of pagan people, and they're going to wipe the country out.

And you see why he had a problem. I mean, he really did. Well, God's response comes, is developed at the beginning of chapter 2, and the key phrase here is in verse 3.

[15 : 20] It will come at the appointed time. God is never in a hurry, never caught on the hop, never up against a tight schedule. Whenever God does something, it's never a moment too soon or a moment too late.

And this is the message to Habakkuk, of course. In verse 8, I'm doing a work in your days. God is never sitting on his hands. And so, look at verse 4 in particular.

See, he, that is the Babylonian, he is puffed up. His desires are not upright. But, now in that one verse, and I know it may not come across instantly in reading it, now God is speaking, not about the Babylonians, but about his righteous people in Judah.

But, the righteous will live by his faith. In other words, we are called to trust God even when we cannot trace him.

And I put it to you, and this is a purely personal thought, that this has a claim to be the greatest verse in the whole Bible. It is so important.

[16 : 32] I mean, this phrase, the just shall live by faith. So important that it's mentioned three times in the New Testament. Once in Romans, once in Galatians, and once in Hebrews. Now, the Galatians context and feeling is the same as the Romans one.

So, we'll miss that out. So, we're going to turn first to the one in Romans. So, this is where we go from now to the end of the service. We'll look first at the reference in Romans, then at the one in Hebrews, and then we'll come back to the one in Habakkuk.

So, now you know exactly where we are. So, turn with me, please, to Romans chapter 1 and verse 17. And this is the verse that God used to trigger off the great 16th century Reformation, Protestant Reformation, first of all, in Germany.

And here we have it in Romans 1 and verse 17. At the end of the verse, the righteous will live by faith. Do you see it there in your Bibles?

Well, he's quoting Habakkuk. In Germany, in the 16th century, a young man had been wrestling for years with the problem of how to get right with God.

[17 : 50] He was so earnest about it, he joined a group called the Hermits of St. Augustine, the most strict, or one of the strictest orders in the Roman Catholic Church.

He poured himself into study and prayer and meditation and rituals. He said, and I quote, I was a good monk and I kept the rule of my order so strictly that if ever a monk got to heaven by his monkery, it was I.

Unquote. He fasted for days on end, he slept without any blankets, even in the dead of winter, and nearly froze to death.

He was overwhelmed by a sense of two things, God's holiness and his own sin. And this is how it worked out in his mind.

If he was ever going to be forgiven, if he was ever going to be made right with God, he would need to have his sins forgiven, wiped out. If he was going to have his sins forgiven, he would need to confess them.

[18 : 54] And if he was to confess them, he would need to remember them. But what if he couldn't remember them all? And some were left unconfessed and therefore unforgiven.

And the more he turned that around in his mind, the more depressed he got. He went constantly to confession, sometimes up to six hours at a time.

He drove his confessor crazy, who once told him, go away and do something worth confessing. He was in a torment of guilt and fear and despair.

I quote again, I was more than once driven to the very abyss of despair, so that I wished I had never been created. Love God, I hated him. And it was while he was in that mood that the Roman Catholic Church appointed him to lecture in the Bible, on which I make no further comment.

But that's when it happened. And so he started going through Romans 1. And eventually he came to verse 17. 17.

[20 : 06] In the gospel, a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last. And he thought, this is worse than I thought.

That crushed him even further. You see, he read, a righteousness from God means God's righteousness. So in the gospel, this was the bit that bothered him, was this gospel thing.

In the gospel, the righteousness from God is revealed. In other words, it's telling me my death sentence in capital letters. Or as we say in modern, in a larger font. I know that I'm condemned because of my sin.

And what is this gospel? Oh, it tells me about the holiness of God. Well, I already know that. That's half of my problem. My other problem is my own horrible sin.

And then one day, the truth of the verse broke in on him. And he saw this, that the righteousness of God was not a quality of God.

[21 : 10] It was a gift from God granted in the gospel of Jesus Christ who had fulfilled the law in every part by meeting every part of it in his daily life and meeting its penalty in full in his death.

And now this is what he says. When I saw the difference, that the law is one thing and the gospel is another, I broke through. I felt myself to have gone through open doors into paradise.

And the monk's name was Martin Luther. And the rest, as they say, is history. Now this is the key to salvation.

The righteous will live by faith. Jesus has done something that we have not done, any of us. He fulfilled the law of God in every part.

I do always those things that please the Father. He was tempted in every way just as we are, but was without sin.

[22 : 16] He is Jesus Christ, the righteous. So he has fulfilled every demand of the law in terms of his daily life. And then, having done that, and having been without any traction in him for the penalty for sin, he then offered that life.

He gave himself up. And on the cross, he suffered everything that the Bible means by death in his body and spirit. On our behalf, Christ died, the Bible says, the righteous in the place of the unrighteous to bring us to God.

And the one who trusts in him is declared right with God, not on the basis that he's been graded on a curve and he's done fairly well.

He is declared right with God on this basis alone. Jesus fulfilled every demand of the law in his life and paid every penalty of the law in his death.

So the person who trusts, but the person who trusts in Christ has this amazing experience. All of his sin is debited to Christ and all of Christ's righteousness is credited to him.

[23 : 39] So the Christian now stands in God's sight as if he had never sinned. And as one of our old hymn writers put it, my hope is built on nothing less than Jesus' blood and righteousness.

I dare not trust the sweetest frame but wholly lean on Jesus' name. On Christ, the solid rock I stand, all other ground is sinking sand.

Let me ask you this morning, are you there? Have you come to that place? Or are you still just a Southern Baptist? Well, there's nothing wrong with being a Southern Baptist.

Some of them will be in heaven. The pastor agrees, well, he's just nodded, so that's, you can take that as good. But here, be careful, there are many who won't.

That's a heartbreak to your pastor, to me, and to any Baptist pastor who's got a heart for God at all. There are many whose Christianity will be, I'm a Southern Baptist.

[24 : 49] Their Christianity ought to be, Christ died for me and lives in me. I live, yet not I, but Christ lives in me. So it's the key to salvation.

Now turn with me to Hebrews chapter 10 and verse 38. We're doing well, but only just. We will need to hurry.

Hebrews 10 and verse 38. This is written, of course, to Jews, to Hebrews who had been converted, possibly living in Rome, and they were caught between a rock and a hard place.

They were hated by the Jews, you'll find that all over Acts, and they were hated by the Romans, so they had a great deal of suffering. Look at verses 32, 3, and 4. Remember those earlier days after you'd received the light, when you'd stood your ground in a great contest in the face of suffering.

Sometimes you were publicly exposed to insult and persecution, and other times you stood side by side with those who were so treated. You sympathized with those in prison and joyfully accepted the confiscation of your property because you knew that you yourselves had better and lasting possessions.

[26 : 02] So what were they to do? They were now in this terrible mess. The writer goes on, So do not throw away your confidence. It will be richly rewarded. You need to persevere so that when you've done the will of God, you will receive what he has promised.

For in just a very little while, he who is coming will come and will not delay. So they were given these two instructions, these two encouragements.

they were to lay hold upon the fact that what he has promised, what God had promised to them, would be given to them. That is to say, they would go to heaven when they died.

And then in verse 37, they are promised the Lord's return. In just a very little while, he who is coming will come and will not delay. So here they are in a desperate position, being persecuted, having a hard time, between a rock and a hard place.

And the writer says, look, don't give up because God is true to his promises. And when all of this is over, you will be in his glorious presence forever because you've trusted in Christ.

[27 : 12] And secondly, the Lord has promised to return and he will return. It may or may not be during your lifetime, but God is going to return and wrap this whole thing up and bring in the glory of the new heavens and the new earth.

And you could just imagine people reading this for the first time and saying, well then, what should we do in the meantime? And there it is, a quotation from Habakkuk. But in the meantime, my righteous one will live by faith.

There it is in verse 38. Now my friends, you and I in the 21st century, we're in exactly the same position. It's tough being a Christian in today's world.

But we have these two promises. We have the promise of a new heavens and a new earth. And God is going to bring that about. And you'll see a lot of that developed in ways you perhaps have not quite caught before in the book The Hitchhiker's Guide to Heaven.

So there's going to be the new heavens and a new earth. And the second is Jesus will return. Now you go on some so-called Christian television programs on this side of the Atlantic and you would be assured by the practitioners there pretty much that they know exactly when it's going to be.

[28 : 26] And it's going to be soon and it's going to be any day now. I am here to tell you I haven't got a clue when it's going to be. And I don't know when it's going to be. And let me tell you something else.

They don't either. But they need to raise money for their television programs. And of course some of them have been to Heaven and been given an inside track on it and come back as you know.

And if you believe that I've got a second-hand car I'd like to sell you please see me afterwards. But just here's a fundamental principle of the Christian faith. We live by faith not by sight.

We simply don't know how these swirling circumstances fit into God's eternal plan. and we don't need to know. We don't need to know.

And the same is true about our trials and traumas. The only answer that makes natural sense is to get rid of them and to get rid of them soon. We want illness to be cured, our pains to disappear, our financial problems to be solved and we want it to happen immediately.

[29 : 32] And these guys on television are banking on that. But there's another option. Faith has another option. And let me quote and I think it's a brilliant statement by Joni Erickson Tader and I don't need to explain who she is.

When we learn to lean back on sovereignty, fixing and settling our thoughts on that unshakable, unmovable reality, we can experience great inner peace.

Our troubles may not change. our pain may not diminish. Our loss may not be restored. Our problems may not fade with the new dawn.

But the power of those things to harm us is broken as we rest in the fact that God is in control.

and that is the just living by faith. We learn to trust God when we cannot trace Him. Well, quickly back as we close to Habakkuk.

[30 : 38] I hope you haven't lost the place. And we're in Habakkuk chapter 2 and verse 4 and we see that it's the key to understanding history. Now you know the background, you know the story and haven't forgotten it. The Babylonians are going to come.

God is going to execute judgment on a nation that's dishonored His covenant by means of a nation with which He'd never established one. What should believers do in the meantime? And the message from God is live by faith.

Now we live in the in-between time between the second coming of Christ and the between the first coming of Christ and the second coming. The in-between time is tough.

And we see it globally in World War II the Cold War the constant conflict in the Middle East endless sufferings in Africa the crushing of human rights in China persecution of the Christian church in many ways and places almost everywhere moral standards seem to be in free fall and then there are all the heartaches and disappointments and difficulties we experience at a personal level.

And it is natural for us to ask what's going on? And the answer is this God is working out his eternal unchangeable and perfect purposes for the glory of his name and the eternal good of his people.

[32 : 02] Now most of you will be familiar with that great statement in Romans 8 but we know that in all things God works for the good that is the eternal good of those who love him those who are called according to his purpose.

My dad who was a laborer had a hobby of repairing watches and you know they were real watches before the Japanese were invented and you open them at the back and there were wheels and cogs and sprockets and levers going this way and that and it seemed to be totally confusing.

There'd be a big wheel turning this way and three little wheels going the other way and it just looked totally confusing. It just didn't make any sense but watch carefully. When you turned the watch over and looked on the other side you could see that all of those conflicting things apparently were all working to the common good to keeping the perfect time in the watch.

And my friends and of course in a brief visit like this but I hope many of you might want to stay to the second service and hear a sermon on the five most amazing words in scripture and you'll find it easier to find the text because we're going to be in the New Testament.

Some of you may be going through real hardship difficulty trauma bereavement heartache pain sorrow these are just the common things in our lives and you say but it's also confusing this is happening but that's happening that contradicts this watch me carefully when you get to the other side when we get to the other side we will see that even the worst things in this life are contributing to the best things in the life to come and God calls us to have that attitude I close with this illustration of William Cooper William Cooper was a great friend of John Newton wrote a number of hymns that we know quite well but he had periods of depression and that may help some people as a godly man and greatly used man there were times when he was dipping and on one occasion he came to the point where he thought well

[34 : 30] I really want to end it all and so he got hold of his horseman and said I want to go for a drive pitch black middle of the night and the horseman said well where do you want to go oh don't know just anywhere somewhere down near the river the river ooze and so they took off and it was pitch black and after a while the horse the horseman said sir I'm lost I don't know where we are and Cooper said well find a light somewhere and if we see a light shining make for that and then we can orient ourselves and see quite where we are and so the horseman eventually saw a light made for it and found that they were back home and Cooper wrote God moves in a mysterious way his wonders to perform he plants his footsteps in the sea and rides upon the storm ye fearful saints fresh courage take the clouds ye so much dread are big with mercy and will break with blessings on your head his purposes will ripen fast unfolding every hour the bud may have a better taste but sweet will be the flower the just shall live by faith let's pray gracious father we thank you for your word for quietening our hearts speak to us

I pray draw from our hearts the response of repentance and faith and love that you deserve and that we long for in Jesus name amen thank you