

“The Prayer of Habakkuk” (part 1)

Habakkuk 3:1-19

Take your Bible and turn with me once again to the book of Habakkuk, and this morning we will be in chapter 3. We have been studying the message of this minor prophet over the last few weeks. Habakkuk presents us with a picture of faith and what it looks like in a time of crisis. The prophet’s generation had drifted away from the Lord. The nation of Judah was full of violence and injustice, and the worship of God had become polluted by idolatry and apathy. Barring a move of God, the nation was headed for disaster.

When we are first introduced to him in chapter 1, he is a puzzled prophet. We know that he is faced with some perplexing issues. There are things going on in his world that he doesn’t understand. He is troubled by all that is happening around him. He asks questions relating to God’s timing—How long will it be before the Lord does something? Then, he asks questions relating to what he perceived as God’s tolerance—Why does God seem to tolerate the wicked? And a quick glance at these questions will reveal that they are not entirely unlike the questions we often ask. We too often struggle with why God allows things to happen the way that they do, both in our lives individually as well as in the lives of those we love.

He has his questions, but he entrusts them to a sovereign God. And so Habakkuk cried out to God in the form of complaint, and he wondered just how long it would be before God would do something. God’s answer comes:

1:5—“Look among the nations, and see; wonder and be astounded. For I am doing a work in your days that you would not believe if told.”

The work that God was doing involved raising up Babylon whom He would use as an instrument of judgment against the sin of His people. The Babylonians would come and carry Judah away into captivity. Obviously, this was not the answer that Habakkuk wanted to hear. He now has a double problem on his hands. So once again, he pours out his complaint to God and wrestles with the fact that God is going to use a pagan nation to chastise His people.

The name Habakkuk means to wrestle or to embrace, and that's what we see him doing in these three chapters of the book. We find him wrestling with God in chapter 1 and asking questions. God reveals His plans to the prophet in chapter 2 and reminds him of His sovereignty. And in chapter 3, as we will soon see, Habakkuk embraces God in humility and surrendered faith. The key verse is:

2:4—“The righteous shall live by his faith.”

In chapter 1, we're given a glimpse of Habakkuk's faith as it is being tested. In chapter 2, there's a picture of faith as it is taught. And now in chapter 3, we're able to see a picture of faith that is triumphant, the kind of faith that transcends the circumstances of life and looks to God with confident hope. (read)

If you want a study that will greatly enrich your spiritual life, then take some time and study all of the prayers that you find in Scripture. You'll be amazed by what you find. From Abraham's prayer of intercession for the city of Sodom in Genesis 18, to the prayer of Moses in Exodus 32. From Hannah's prayer in 1 Samuel 2, to many of David's prayers that can be found throughout the Psalms. There's the prayer of Elijah on Mount Carmel, the prayer of Nehemiah over the condition of Jerusalem, and the prayer of Jonah in the belly of the fish. There is Mary's prayer in Luke 1, the Lord's Prayer in Matthew 6, and the High Priestly prayer of

Jesus in John 17. All told, there are some 650 prayers found throughout the Bible.

You will notice that chapter 3 is a prayer that Habakkuk prays. And the prayer of Habakkuk is one of the greatest prayers in all of God's Word. The language is crafted much in the same way that we find in the Psalms. I want to outline the chapter under three headings—responding to God's Word, reflecting on God's work, and rejoicing in God's will. (Requesting, Remembering, Rejoicing)

1—RESPONDING to God's Word (3:1-2)

“A prayer of Habakkuk the prophet, according to Shigionoth. O Lord, I have heard the report of You, and Your work, O Lord, do I fear. In the midst of the years revive it; in the midst of the years make it known; in wrath remember mercy.”

The prophet began in chapter 1 by asking God why He was so slow in answering his prayer for revival in Judah. When the Lord gave Habakkuk an answer, it was not what he had been expecting. How could the One who is of purer eyes than to see evil and cannot look at wrong sit idly by while the wicked swallows up the man more righteous than he? God's Word on the matter comes to Habakkuk in chapter 2 in the form of a vision. God says, “Behold the proud, his soul is not upright within him; but the just shall live by his faith.” In His own time, God would judge the pride of the Babylonians just the same. His judgment is expressed in the form of five ‘woes’ that are pronounced against Babylon in the remainder of the chapter. In the meantime, the one who knows God will live by faith in God. Times may be bad and the future may become worse. But the righteous will live by faith in the One who alone is worthy of that faith.

In the last verse of chapter 2, the vision ends by saying, “But the Lord is in His holy temple; let all the earth keep silence before Him.” Regardless of what might happen around him, all that remained was for Habakkuk to worship this God and lay his burdens down at His feet. And that is what the prophet does. His response to what God had revealed to him is seen here in this third chapter.

His attitude

Verse 1 begins by saying, “A prayer of Habakkuk the prophet, according to Shigionoth.” What does ‘shigionoth’ mean? It’s meaning in Hebrew is uncertain. Some scholars have suggested that it refers to a musical arrangement because the chapter is a hymn or an anthem of praise. The only other time it is used is by David in the title of Psalm 7. It signifies a loud cry of praise in a time of pain. You will notice that the word ‘selah’ is used in verses 3, 9, and 13. The idea is that the prayer of Habakkuk was a hymn used for public worship. You’re really able to see this when you read in verse 19 that it was addressed “to the choirmaster, with stringed instruments.”

And so this is a prayer, an anthem of worship. The tone of Habakkuk in this third chapter is most definitely different than his tone in chapter 1. Someone says, “What is it that has changed?” As far as his circumstances, nothing had changed. Judah was still being disobedient. Babylon was still on the move. Yet the prophet’s tone is vastly different. In chapter 1, he is troubled, he is filled with anxiety, and is demanding an explanation. But not now! How do you account for the change in Habakkuk? Up until now, he’s been looking at Judah, at the Chaldeans, at himself and his own troubles. God had been blurred in the background. But now, things are reversed. God is foremost in his heart, and everything else has shifted into the background.

Habakkuk has been confronted with the sovereign purpose of God. He brings his life into conformity to the truth of God, and submits to God's lordship. He began by asking questions and offering complaints, and demanding an explanation from God. But after having been confronted with a vision and a promise, he is now in a humble position of trust. He's learning some things. The knowledge that he has come to receive is now feeding his faith.

Habakkuk's attitude here is one of humility. The faith that looks to God with a simple, childlike trust is humble. The opposite of faith is human pride, which is why those two attitudes are set side by side in 2:4. Two types of people are described in verse 4. On one hand, there is the one who is described as being 'puffed up' in his soul and is not upright. Then, there is the one who is described as being righteous, one who lives by his faith. There are only two types of people, there are only two different ways of living. One is the way of pride, and the other is the way of faith. One is the way of the sinner, and the other is the way of the righteous. Pride is rooted in unbelief. But faith means that I take the Word of God and act upon it. It means I believe what God has said and base my whole life upon it.

And this is what Habakkuk is doing in this third chapter. He has heard God's Word, and with humility he is placing His faith in the God who has spoken.

James 4:6-8—“But He gives more grace. Therefore He says, ‘God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble.’ Therefore submit to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you. Draw near to God and He will draw near to you.”

God gives more grace when the pressures of life increase, but only to those who are humble.

His approach

Notice the way that Habakkuk begins his prayer in verse 2 as he humbly approaches God in response to His Word. He says, “O Lord, I have heard the report of You, and Your work, O Lord, do I fear.” The word ‘report’ is the Hebrew word ‘shema’ that comes from a word that means to hear or perceive. He is saying, “I have heard Your Word, and I bow before You in worship. I have witnessed Your work, and I submit my life to You in reverential awe.” Let me tell you, that is how you approach God in prayer. There’s no proud demands being made. No more questions.

It reminds me of what we read in the book of Job. He had his questions and complaints and went back and forth with his three friends. Job 38:1 says the Lord then answered Job out of the whirlwind and had some questions of His own. And for the next four straight chapter, God asks Job some questions that he couldn’t answer. The whole point was to remind him of the greatness of God and His ways.

Job 42:1-6—“Then Job answered the Lord and said: ‘I know that You can do all things, and that no purpose of Yours can be thwarted. Who is this that hides counsel without knowledge? Therefore I have uttered what I did not not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know...I had heard of You by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees You; therefore I despise myself, and repent in dust and ashes.’”

Habakkuk has a similar experience. He has heard from God, he has witnessed His work firsthand, and he has now learned something about God’s sovereign purposes. The only proper response is to fall before Him in surrender and obedience. He is saying, “In You, O Lord, I place all of my trust. Your will be

done!” This is the way that Jesus taught His disciples to pray. In the model prayer, He said:

Matthew 6:9-10—“Pray then like this: Our Father in heaven, hallowed be Your name. Your kingdom come, Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.”

Before it is anything else, prayer is worship. It is assuming the posture of obedience and surrender before God. It is acknowledging His supreme worth above everything else. It is rehearsing His attributes so that we have a true and proper understanding of who He is. That is what Habakkuk is doing here as he begins his prayer.

I’m sure that you are familiar with the ‘ACTS’ method of praying. It is a simply acronym to remember the right approach to prayer. Adoration, confession, thanksgiving, and supplication. In our impatience, we often rush into the presence of God with our wish list. We present a list of what we want God to do. Prayer is asking God, but it is asking God for the right things. Before we do any of that, prayer demands that we bow before God in worship and gratitude for who He is and what He has done. As we meditate on the truth of God’s Word and delight ourselves in who He has revealed Himself to be, the Holy Spirit then focuses our minds and hearts. He shows us how we ought to pray and what we ought to pray for. (Rom. 8:26)

Here’s where a lot of us have a problem. Our prayers have very little worship or adoration in them. We may spend a second or two on God’s name and kingdom, but we spend the majority of our time presenting a list of demands. And more often than not, they are concerned with our comfort.

His appeal

Most of Habakkuk's prayer in this chapter is a rehearsal of God's character. He goes back through redemptive history and praises God for His faithfulness to His people. And the only request he makes is found in verse 2. He prays, "In the midst of the years revive it; in the midst of the years make it known; in wrath remember mercy." He basically asks the Lord to revive His work, to reveal His work, and to remember mercy in the midst of wrath.

"Revive" — *to renew and rekindle*

Think about what he is not asking for. He's not asking God to spare Judah from the Babylonians. Neither is he asking for an easy road. He's not asking for personal escape from what was coming. There's none of that. Instead, he is asking God to use it all for His glory and to bring about a revival of His work among His people.

Perhaps in his mind, he recalled the Lord's words to King Solomon at the dedication of the temple:

2 Chronicles 7:13-14—“When I shut up heaven and there is no rain, or command the locusts to devour the land, or send pestilence among My people, if My people who are called by My name will humble themselves, and pray and seek My face, and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin and heal their land.”

The Lord goes on to say, "But if they turn away and forsake My commandments and go and serve other gods, then I will uproot them from My land which I have given them. And this house which I have sanctified for My name I will cast out of My sight, and will make it a proverb and a byword among the peoples."

Habakkuk knew that day had come. Yet even though God was going to give

Judah over to the Babylonians, he knew that God was doing a reviving work and would not cast His people away forever.

Throughout history, there have been spiritual awakenings and times of renewal that have had a powerful effect upon individual lives as well as the church at large. What began in the hearts of God's people even led to great impact in the society around them.

- Evan Roberts and the Welsh Revival
- Jonathan Edwards and the Great Awakening
- Martin Luther and the Reformation

Daniel Henderson — *“Revival means to live in a new way. New power springs from the old paths of New Testament life and leadership. Revival in the church has always been rooted in a personal, organic, heart-to-heart awakening of God’s people. To be awakened is to be roused from sleep, to rise from a drowsy state, to become aware for the first time. God’s people are awakened to the sufficiency and supernatural power of the Holy Spirit. They are awakened to hear and apply the Scriptures, the living Word of God, to their lives with ruthless authenticity. They are awakened to the seriousness of sin, leading to a new and powerful repentance. They are awakened to the beauty and blessing of prevailing prayer. They are awakened to the tragic heartbreak of the lost condition of relatives, friends, neighbors, and work associates. In short, they are awakened to Christ—the supremacy of His power, the obligation of His purposes, the potency of His promises, and His indwelling presence to accomplish all of the above.”*

Habakkuk cries out, “God, would You revive, reveal, and remember!” In the midst of the years, would You come again in power. A sign of a mature faith is when you can look at the problems around you and the difficulties and disappointments of life in a fallen world and say, “God, I’m not concerned about what happens to me. The only thing I want in life is to see You glorified and Your people purified!” That’s the prayer of Habakkuk.

That’s the prayer of Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane. In the hours before His arrest, His trial, and crucifixion, He knew exactly what He was facing. His own comfort was not His focus, however. What was His focus?

Luke 22:42—“Father, if You are willing, remove this cup from Me. Nevertheless, not My will, but Yours be done.”

Have you come to that place in your life as a believer? Is your faith the kind that says, “Not my will, but yours be done O God!” If so, then know that you are well on your way to living with triumphant faith that transcends your circumstances. Such is the faith of the apostle Paul in the Roman jail:

Philippians 4:11-13—“For I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content. I know how to be brought low, and I know how to abound. In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need. I can do all things through Him who strengthens me.”

Habakkuk has one thing in mind as he prays and it is that God be glorified in His work. His number one desire is that things go according to God’s plan, not according to his own personal comfort. He’s not asking for a comfortable, easy life. He wants things to be the way that God wants them, no matter what that

means for himself. That is what it truly means to pray, “Your kingdom come, Your will be done!”

What is your greatest concern right now? What are you worried about more than anything else?

Psalm 73:1-28—“But as for me, my feet had almost stumbled; my steps had nearly slipped. For I was envious of the boastful, when I saw the prosperity of the wicked...Until I went into the sanctuary of God; then I understood their end...But it is good for me to draw near to God; I have put my trust in the Lord God, that I may declare all Your works.”

We want to feel productive. We want to be occupied, to be doing something all of the time. That’s why this stay at home stuff is so hard for us. We are activists by nature. But what if the Lord wants to use this time in your life to teach you how to be a man or a woman of prayer? He’s slowed you down to show you His power and control, to bring you to the place in life where your main concern is His glory rather than your own comfort. Could it be that He wants to do a ‘reviving’ work in your life?

R.A. Torrey was someone who understood the importance of prayer, and he wrote several books that have become classics on the subject. In his book, *The Power of Prayer*, he tells how on one occasion when he was speaking on prayer, someone placed a note in his hand. It read:

“Dear Mr. Torrey, I am in great perplexity. I have been praying for a long time for something that I am confident is according to God’s will, but I do not get it. I have been a member of the Presbyterian church for thirty years, and have tried to be a consistent one all the time. I have been a superintendent in the Sunday School for twenty-five years, and an elder in the church for twenty years; and yet God

does not answer my prayer and I cannot understand it. Can you explain it to me?"

Listen to how R.A. Torrey responded:

"This man thinks that because he has been a consistent church member for thirty years, a faithful Sunday School superintendent for twenty-five years, and an elder in the church for twenty years, that God is under obligation to answer. He is really praying in his own name, and God will not hear our prayers when we approach Him in that way. We must, if we would have God answer our prayers, give up any thought that we have any claims upon God. If we got what we deserved, every last one of us would spend eternity in hell. But Jesus Christ has great claims on God, and we should go to God in our prayers not on the ground of any goodness in ourselves, but on the ground of Jesus Christ's claims."

That's what Jesus said:

John 14:13-14—“Whatever you ask in My name, this I will do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If you ask Me anything in My name, I will do it.”

John 16:23-24—“Truly, truly, I say to you, whatever you ask of the Father in My name, He will give it to you. Until now you have asked nothing in My name. Ask, and you will receive, that your joy may be full.”

When Habakkuk prayed, “In wrath remember mercy,” he didn't realize all that was involved in such a statement. It would be seven hundred years later that God's own Son would be nailed to a cross. Wrath would be poured out upon Him so that mercy could be lavished upon me.

I love the words to this hymn:

*I know not why God's wondrous grace
To me He hath made known,
Nor why, unworthy, Christ in love
Redeemed me for His own.*

*I know not how this saving faith
To me He did impart,
Nor how believing in His word
Wrought peace within my heart.*

*I know not how the Spirit moves,
Convincing men of sin,
Revealing Jesus through the Word,
Creating faith in Him.*

*I know not what of good or ill
May be reserved for me,
Of weary ways or golden days,
Before His face I see.*

*I know not when my Lord may come,
At night or noon-day fair,
Nor if I'll walk the vale with Him,
Or "meet Him in the air."*

*But **I know Whom** I have believed
And am persuaded that He is able
To keep that which I've committed
Unto Him against that day.*

That's the prayer of Habakkuk. I don't know why, how, what, or when—but I know Who! And as I look to Him in faith, all of my problems and all of my

concerns begin to fade away into the periphery. Faith has Christ in its sights no matter the circumstances of life. This is the secret of deep and abiding peace.

Isaiah 26:3-4—“You will keep him at perfect peace whose mind is stayed on You, because he trusts in You. Trust in the Lord forever, for the Lord God is an everlasting rock.”

Not only do we see Habakkuk responding to God’s Word, but notice a second thing:

2—REFLECTING on God’s work (3:3-16)

“God came from Teman, and the Holy One from Mount Paran. Selah. His splendor covered the heavens, and the earth was full of His praise. His brightness was like the light; rays flashed from His hand; and there He veiled His power. Before Him went pestilence, and plague followed at His heels. He stood and measured the earth; He looked and shook the nations; then the eternal mountains were scattered; the everlasting hills sank low. His were the everlasting ways.”

Faced with the fear of an invading nation, the prophet now reminds himself of what he knows. He knows that God is mighty, and he reflects upon the powerful activity of God in the past. He is reminding himself of what God has done. He has focused his mind on the facts of history. He praises God for what is past, which will then free him trust God for what is to come. He is recalling the faithfulness of God that has been seen in several ways:

His presence (v. 3-5)

In verse 3, Habakkuk goes back in redemptive history and reflects upon the way that God had revealed His presence with His people. Throughout these verses

in chapter 3, the prophet seems to tracing Israel's steps from Sinai to the Promised Land. Teman and Paran are mountain ranges on the Sinai peninsula. It is Habakkuk's way of remembering how God appeared on Mount Sinai and revealed His glory to Moses.

His power (v. 6-9)

He has power over nature.

He has power over nations.

His purpose (v. 10-16)

He goes back into history and rehearses the works of God as He has gone out with the purpose of achieving the salvation of His people.

This is why it is important for us to keep our eyes on God's purpose in the world rather than the circumstances we find ourselves in. No matter our circumstances, God's purpose will prevail. He has gone out for the salvation of His people and will continue to until the day Christ appears.

3—REJOICING in God's will (3:17-19)

“Though the fig tree should not blossom, nor fruit be on the vines, the produce of the olive fail and the fields yield no food, the flock be cut off from the fold and there be no herd in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the Lord; I will take joy in the God of my salvation. God, the Lord, is my strength; He makes my feet like the deer's; He makes me tread on my high places. To the choirmaster: with stringed instruments.”