

Habakkuk's Prayer (Part 1)

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[0 : 00] Let's remind ourselves what we've seen so far in the first two chapters of Habakkuk.

! In the first set of questions that Habakkuk asked God, Habakkuk wondered why the wicked prosper! while the righteous suffer. God answered that he would be raising up the Chaldeans to be God's instrument of judgment. That led to a second set of questions where Habakkuk struggled with the idea that a nation worse than Judah would be used to judge Judah. God answered that second set of questions in two parts. The first part of the answer came at the end of Habakkuk 2.4 when God said the righteous shall live by his faith. And this means being loyal to God and obedient to God's law even when outward circumstances make it difficult as they did in Habakkuk's day. The second part of that answer came in verses 6 through 20 of chapter 2 where God told Habakkuk essentially that the wicked will reap what they sow. After getting those answers, Habakkuk said something that we all should remember in verse 20. He said, but the Lord is in his holy temple. Let all the earth keep silence before him. Habakkuk has realized that for those who trust in God, the best response is to worship.

This brings us to chapter 3 and the section of scripture that we'll begin studying tonight. Chapter 3 is a prayer designed to be sung, so we could call it a psalm, and it closes out the book.

We'll only make it through the first seven verses of Habakkuk's psalm tonight, but we'll go ahead and read the entire chapter so that you hear the whole thing. So here is chapter 3 of Habakkuk. It says, A prayer of Habakkuk the prophet according to Shigianoth. 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. 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. Rage 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. I saw the tents of cushion in affliction. The curtains of Midian did tremble. Was your wrath against the rivers, O Lord? Was your anger against the rivers, or your indignation against the sea, when you rode on your horses, on your chariot of salvation? You stripped the sheath from your bow, calling for many arrows. Selah. You split the earth with rivers. The mountains saw you and writhed.

[3 : 05] The raging waters swept on. The deep gave forth its voice. It lifted its hands on high. The sun and moon stood still in their place at the light of your arrows as they sped, at the flash of your glittering spear. You marched through the earth in fury. You threshed the nations in anger. You went out for the salvation of your people, for the salvation of your anointed. You crushed the head of the house of the wicked, laying him bare from thry to neck. Selah. You pierced with his own arrows the heads of his warriors, who came like a whirlwind to scatter me, rejoicing as if to devour the poor in secret.

You trampled the sea with your horses, the surging of mighty waters. I hear and my body trembles. My lips quiver at the sound. Rottenness enters into my bones. My legs tremble beneath me. Yet I will quietly wait for the day of trouble to come upon people who invade us. Though the fig tree should not blossom, nor fruit be on the vines, the produce of the olive fail, and 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 choir master with stringed instruments. Habakkuk's problems begin with what he saw happening around him in his own nation and on the international scene as well. How could God permit the violent and the corrupt to prosper? How could God use

the arrogant and evil Babylonians as the instruments through whom he would chastise his people? The answer he was given assured him of God's intention to intervene, but counseled him that the outworking of the divine purposes would occur on God's timetable, which might seem to involve delay.

What the faithful have to do in the meantime is to continue to trust in God, confident that in accordance with God's promise, he will bring judgment on the wicked. Now Habakkuk responds to that revelation as someone whose eyes have been lifted up from the earth to heaven. His faith is no longer perplexed by the problems that he sees around him. He looks at them from below initially.

[5 : 31] He looks at them from the standpoint of human understanding, but the triumph of faith is to look at difficulties from above from the perspective of heaven. Confident in the Lord's saving intervention, Habakkuk then engages in worship and prays for the realization of God's promises.

He also makes provision that other believers can join with him in his confident praise. We're going to cover the first seven verses of his psalm tonight, and we'll cover it in two sections. And in verses one and two, we see the plea for mercy. The plea for mercy is your first fill-in section.

We'll look at that plea for mercy one more time here. Here are the verses. It says, a prayer of Habakkuk the prophet, according to Shigeonoth. 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. God came from Teman and the Holy One from Mount Paran.

Selah. The first verse of the chapter parallels the opening prophecy of Habakkuk, all the way back in verse one, chapter one. Both the first verse of this chapter and the first verse of the book identify the author as Habakkuk the prophet. The first section of the book contains the oracle or burden of the prophet, while the last section contains the prayer of the prophet. The title of prayer is an expression that occurs mainly in Psalms of Lament, where a request is made for divine intervention and vindication against oppression or injustice. It's attributed to five psalms of lament or petition in the book of Psalms, and it may also be a general name for a song of worship or for a hymn of praise. Habakkuk uses his official title of prophet. What he's experienced and the response he's about to give pertain to more people than just him alone. Habakkuk expresses the response that is appropriate for all those who wait on God in times of darkness and confusion. You notice it says, according to

Shigianoth there, and nobody is exactly sure what that means, but it's probably a literary or a musical term. A similar term is found in the superscription to Psalm 7, and both words come from a root that means to err, and then to reel to and fro. So the most plausible suggestion regarding its meaning is that it should be sung to a tune that conveys great excitement or perhaps rapid changes of emotion.

[8 : 19] In setting such a title to a song, Habakkuk was not just using the Psalms as a model for expressing his thoughts. He was composing a psalm for Israel to use in her worship. The type of song was played on a stringed instrument, possibly a harp, and it was led by a professional musician. So look at verse 2 again.

He says, 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.

Of the entire chapter, only this verse takes on the form of a request for God to do something. The remainder of the prayer describes God's greatness in the past, and it also expresses Habakkuk's quiet confidence in the work of God. Notice there in verse 2, Habakkuk says, I have heard the report of you. That probably refers back to the first two chapters where God answers Habakkuk's confusion and announces his judgments against both Israel and Babylon.

What Habakkuk has heard fills him not with the terror of the godless, but with the childlike and reverential fear of God and God's amazing work. God's work there points back to the working of God's sovereign power at times such as the exodus from Egypt and the destruction of Israel's enemies in Canaan. And it also looks forward to the judgment that is to engulf first Israel and then Babylonia. Israel based its religion on the work of God rather than mystical experience.

And the prophet based both his confidence and his petition on the work of God in the past. God's leading the people out of Israel and out of Egypt provided hope and instilled confidence that God would continue to work in the future. Seeing the Egyptians dead on the seashore provided conclusive evidence of the protection of God. Israel could never have escaped from Egypt without God's intervention, so they knew it was only God's intervention that saved them. Habakkuk doesn't present a desire to return to the good old days, though. He's saying that based on God's answers to

his questions, he's confident that better days are ahead for Israel. Habakkuk wants God's purpose to be fulfilled, God's work on earth to be done, and God's actions to be seen clearly by faith in all the passages of history. The prophet concentrates on God and not on humans. Let's look now at each of

[10 : 58] Habakkuk's three requests in more detail. The first there in verse two is, in the midst of the years, revive it. And when he's talking about it there, he's talking about God's work. Based upon the past work of God, Habakkuk called on God to revive his deeds in the present day. In the midst of years is a reference to the prophet's time period. So, in other words, Habakkuk asked God to act soon. In other words, to act in his lifetime. In a sense, Habakkuk meant for God to work a new redemption from the tyranny of Babylon as he delivered Israel from the tyranny of Egypt. The prophet really showed his in-depth knowledge of the ways of God. He knew that the Lord is a God who acts on behalf of his people. The second request in verse two is, in the midst of years, make it known. Habakkuk wants the Lord to make clear to believers his program and purpose in this world. If you think back to Job, Job agonized in his lack of understanding when he was suffering. So did Habakkuk until God gave him the revelation that we've looked at earlier. And Habakkuk's model prayer here was designed to sustain faith in the face of terrible national calamity. And he now calls upon the Lord to make it clear to all believers what God had already revealed to Habakkuk. The third request is, in wrath, remember mercy. The word translated wrath connotes agitation or disturbance. Judah faced a time when the very foundations of her faith in God would be shaken. Jerusalem would be destroyed, the temple would be burned, and the citizens carried away into captivity if they weren't killed. In such a time as that, Habakkuk asked for divine mercy.

And only assurance of God's compassion will be able to sustain his people through that terrible national ordeal. Notice here, like we said earlier, that Habakkuk focuses only on God here. He makes no attempt to convince God that the people deserve God's favor. Instead, he appeals to God's mercy.

Listen to how Matthew Henry puts it in the Old English, and you also have this in your handout. Matthew Henry said, Even those that are under the tokens of God's wrath must not despair of his mercy. And mercy, mere mercy, is that which we must flee to for refuge and rely upon as our only plea. He does not say, Remember our merit, but Lord, remember thy own mercy. That's a good thing for all of us to remember today. We should plead to God for mercy, not anything on the basis of our own merit. So from the plea for mercy, we now move to the second section of the lesson, and that is the praise for majesty. The praise for majesty covers the rest of the verses that we will look at today. The introduction to Habakkuk's prayer had mentioned the past, and it also mentioned his own day. The same division is reflected in the structure of the main part of the prayer, too. What's to occur in Habakkuk's own time is in verses 16 through 19 of chapter 3. Before that, Habakkuk sets out in greater detail his meditation on God's past intervention on behalf of his people. And we'll see that in verses 3 through 15, although we won't get all the way through it tonight. The section about the past is also in two parts. And in the first part, Habakkuk speaks about God's past actions. And in the second, he talks to the Lord directly. The second, the section where Habakkuk speaks about God's past actions comes in verses 3 through 7.

So let's read those verses again now. It says, 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.

[15 : 20] 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. I saw the tents of cushion in affliction. The curtains of the land of Midian did tremble. When we read a passage like this one, it becomes more obvious to us of the time difference between our age and that of Habakkuk. It's easy to sympathize with Habakkuk as he struggles with the question of why God is doing certain things or why God is not doing certain things. But when he talks to God about coming from Teman or trampling the sea with his horses, we realize we don't usually talk that way. And we don't usually think that way either.

But once we've understood the references here, we can really begin to appreciate the message of this section. Habakkuk's portrayal of what the Lord did is full of intensity and grandeur.

His description alludes to many earlier portions of scripture, particularly Exodus 15, Deuteronomy 33, and Psalms 18, 68, and 77. And he uses references to all those passages to build up a picture of the splendor and majesty with which the Lord revealed his power. God came, and that is expressed in such a way as to suggest that the description of ancient events has come alive for Habakkuk. So really what Habakkuk had here is a theophany, that is, a way in which God makes his presence known on the earth by an external phenomena. The particular events that Habakkuk describes are those that are associated with the Lord's appearance to his people at Sinai. Exodus 19, verses 16 through 20 describes those events.

So let's look at those verses. Again, it's Exodus 19, verses 16 through 20. They say, On the morning of the third day, there were thunders and lightnings, and a thick cloud on the mountain, and a very loud trumpet blast, so that all the people in the camp trembled. Then Moses brought the people out of the camp to meet God, and they took their stand at the foot of the mountain.

Now Mount Sinai was wrapped in smoke, because the Lord had descended on it in fire. The smoke of it went up like the smoke of a kiln, and the whole mountain trembled greatly. And as the sound of the trumpet grew louder and louder, Moses spoke, and God answered him in thunder. The Lord came down on Mount Sinai to the top of the mountain, and the Lord called Moses to the top of the mountain, and Moses went up. The fact that everyone in the camp trembled reflects more than the combination of impressive sights and sounds, but also the realization of God's impending presence, and the dangers associated with it for sinful people. God is said to have come from the direction of Teman and Mount Perrin. And Teman is associated with Edom. You can learn more about that in Obadiah 9, if you would like to. And Perrin designates the vast desert of the Sinai Peninsula on the southern border of Judah. So these geographical terms then mark the route by which God brought his people from

[18:46] Sinai to Canaan in the days of Moses. Then God came with Israel to dispossess the Canaanites. Now he was coming to bring judgment to dislodge Israel from that same land.

The glory of the approaching Holy One blankets the heavens. His praise, or more likely the attributes of God which are worthy of praise, fill the earth. So this is not the glory of God as it's reflected in creation, but the greater glory of God which is displayed in his grand acts of deliverance.

In all acts of past salvation, God revealed his glory to his people. The ultimate display of divine glory will accompany the return of Jesus in his role as judge of the wicked and deliverer of his people.

Verse 4 continues the description of God's glory and splendor. It says, His brightness was like the light. Rays flashed from his hand, and there he veiled his power.

Habakkuk uses light to depict the intervention of God. Rays of light come forth from his hand. The concentration of light in the hand of God signals God's readiness to act on behalf of his people.

[20:03] God has the power to deliver the faithful from the clutches of the oppressors. The picture here is of God dwelling in and as he drew near, being surrounded by a glorious and unapproachable light. Verse 5 says, Plague and pestilence often accompanied war.

And the verse means that God commanded all the forces of nature and he used them to demonstrate his mighty power. People of the ancient world would recognize the destructive power signified by these words. You know that plagues are often mentioned in the Old Testament as a weapon that the Lord used against his enemies. Pestilence is also another weapon that God used against his enemies.

Diseases were thought of as one of the accompaniments of war, and the Lord was often pictured as punishing his enemies with disease or saving his own people from that disease. The word translated plague is originally a darting flame and it can be used of lightning. Fever, the disease which makes people feel hot, was thought to be caused by such flames. Verse 6 tells us, 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. Habakkuk continued his prayer with the picture of the triumphant God overthrowing his enemies.

The main questions concern how Habakkuk used this picture of the Lord and whether Habakkuk saw a picture from the past or a vision for the future. The answer to that latter question is disputed, but you probably already know what interpretation I am taking here because the interpretation that seems to fit better is that Habakkuk saw a picture from the past. In other words, Habakkuk saw in a past event the work of God, and God's power and majesty were the answers to Habakkuk's needs.

So having seen that the awesome God led his people from the south into the land of promise, Habakkuk then knew that God could deal with the sin of Judah and with the arrogance of Babylon. It talks about God measuring the earth in this verse, So notice that measuring in the earth is not confined to Judah, but it's extended to the whole world.

[22 : 39] To measure the earth is what properly belongs to the sovereign king, and it's done so that he can assign to each his portion. Habakkuk saw the Lord standing and shaking the earth, and these descriptions are standard for theophanies. The descriptions and those which follow suggested to the prophet that the Lord is a powerful God who can withstand the onslaughts of his enemies and overcome evil with little more than just a glance. The mountains and the hills are symbols of grandeur, permanence, and security in the earth, but they too are revealed as frail and temporary when God is present. Those everlasting hills were known as the domain of the Baals and Ashtoreth, Canaanite gods and goddesses widely worshipped, even in Israel in that day, for the prosperity and fertility that they were supposed to bring. They were household gods that had shrines on the hilltops near every village. Habakkuk follows the description of these crumbling age-old hills with the counterpoint, His ways are eternal. We see that in verse 6 as well.

False worship on the hills may be old, but the maker is both before and after. In other words, God is forever. The hills themselves acknowledge God's presence, bowing down. When the creator or warrior walks on his eternal pathway, the whole earth dramatically responds. Especially in exile, faith in the eternal creator who shook the earth will need to be remembered by God's people. This passage then makes a deliberate contrast between the destruction of the eternal hills and the execution of God's eternal program. In the past, God had demonstrated His wrath against the enemies of His people again and again. A few examples are Egypt, Philistia, Assyria, and Babylon, and they all, and others, were demolished in God's judgment. Habakkuk sees the Lord coming again to smash His enemies and rescue His faithful one from their oppression. We know, of course, that the nations did not then melt away, nor were the mountains demolished, nor the hills bowed down.

But Habakkuk simply means that God's power then appeared, and He showed that He was capable of shaking the whole world. Verse 7 continues that theme of God shaking the whole world. That's where Habakkuk says, I saw the tents of Cushion in affliction. The curtains of the land of Midian did tremble.

I denotes that the prophet is now the speaker. He saw not with his eyes, but with his mind, and he understood a prophetic vision of the tents of Cushion in distress. By tents, Habakkuk is pointing to the Bedouin nomads who lived in them rather than to the tents themselves. Habakkuk reports that he saw the inhabitants of Cushion and Midian trembling as the Lord passed by. Cushion is probably an abbreviation for Cushion Restium, the first foreign invader to punish Israel during the period of the judges. The Midianites also were foreign oppressors during that period. The point is that after bringing judgment upon wayward Israel, these famous foreign oppressors were themselves going to be smashed by God.

[26 : 06] The figure there of trembling tents suggests how vulnerable these supposedly powerful people were to the actions of God. Habakkuk had learned through Revelation that the Chaldeans were about to unleash a disciplinary invasion of Israel, but the Chaldeans' fate would ultimately be that of Cushion and Midian.

So let's think about what we can learn from this section, more appropriately what we can remind ourselves of. And the first thing is that God's mercy in the past is proof of his mercy in the future. God's mercy in the past is proof of his mercy in the future. Mercy refers to deeply felt love and compassion. It's a sovereign attribute of God.

Listen to what God told Moses in Exodus 33, 19. God said, I will make all my goodness pass before you and will proclaim before you my name, the Lord.

And I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and I will show mercy on whom I will show mercy. Believers today have received even a greater example of God's mercy than what Israel did, because God has sent Jesus to pay the penalty for our sins.

[27 : 29] Remember Romans 3, verses 23 through 25. There Paul wrote, Continuing the quote from Paul, let's look at how he expressed it in Titus 3, verses 4 through 7.

Titus 3, verses 4 through 7 say, Because of Christ's sacrifice, believers can now approach the throne of God to obtain even more mercy.

And we know that from Hebrews 4, 16. That's where the writer of Hebrews says, Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

So even before the New Testament was written, we saw how Habakkuk knew that he needed grace and not anything by his own merit.

And of course, we have even more examples of that today. The second thing we can learn from this passage, or we can remind ourselves of, is that God's deliverances in the past are proof of his deliverances in the future.

[29 : 24] You might notice a pattern with the blanks here. But again, God's deliverances in the past are his proof of his deliverances in the future.

Memory of the past always plays a vital role in the ongoing life of the church. That's not just because God's past goodness provided reason for continuing thankfulness.

God's unchanging in his covenant commitment. What he has done in the past is a promise of what he will do again. The constancy of his power, control, and committed love underwrites the certainty of what faith waits for.

And that's why we can be confident that his deliverances in the past are proof of what he will do in the future. The third thing it can remind us of is that God's judgments in the past are proof of his judgments in the future.

The present era is still one in which God chastens and purifies his own by judgment. The church continues to experience times of spiritual coldness rather than vitality.

[30 : 33] Habakkuk's prayer provides an appropriate model for approaching God, confessing our sins, and pleading for God's mercy. In our weaknesses and helplessness, we know our own need for immediate help both to sustain us through times of difficulty and to restore the church to what it ought to be, alive and striving to establish God's kingdom on earth as we wait for the return of the king.

The present judgment is a preview of the future judgment to come. Listen to how Paul described God's future judgment in Acts 17, verses 30 and 31.

Acts 17, 30 and 31 say, The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead.

And of course we know that the man whom God has appointed for future judgment is Jesus. So here are a couple of questions to think about as you reflect on the study.

The first one is, Considering that this is a prayer designed for Israel to use in their worship, what role should be given to corporate as distinct from individual prayer?

[31 : 57] What role should be given to corporate separate from individual prayer? The second one is, How is God's mercy made known to us?

We already looked at a few scripture references of that, but you have some other scripture references there too. And there are other references throughout the Bible, of course.

Considering how much our country and the world have turned away from God's teaching, and have violated God's commandments, the opening words of Habakkuk's prayer fit well with our society today.

Listen to Habakkuk 3, 2 one more time. That's where Habakkuk said, In wrath, remember mercy.

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