

Salvation through Judgement – Habakkuk 3:1-15

Main Idea: Habakkuk closes his book in worship, recalling the splendor and wrath of God and marveling that God saves his people through the very judgment they feared.

I. God's Splendor | Habakkuk 3:1-11

As we enter chapter 3, we see Habakkuk responding to God's judgment with worship. After two chapters of wrestling with God and bringing real questions, he turns to worship and reverence. The chapter is a psalm handed to the choirmaster with stringed instruments (v. 19), and it opens with a declaration of God's mighty works, "O Lord, I have heard the report of you, and your work, O Lord, do I fear" (v. 2). This is not the cowering terror of uncertainty but the awe of a man who knows who he is talking to. It is a Proverbs 9:10 kind of fear, the fear that is the beginning of wisdom (Proverbs 9:10). **A man can't even begin to become wise until he has learned to tremble before God.**

Habakkuk's three petitions reveal what a heart shaped by reverence for God should want. Revive your work, make it known, and in wrath remember mercy (v. 2). He does not pray for rescue from the judgment or for God to consider their spiritual record. They had no spiritual record to bring before God that would have amounted to anything. To ask God to remember their works would have been asking for stronger discipline. So Habakkuk asks for the one thing a guilty people can rightly ask for, mercy. He asks on the basis of who God is, not who they are. **The moment we start negotiating with God on the basis of our merit, we have already lost, because the holy God we are try to bargain with is the same God whose standard exposes us.** The tax collector in Jesus' parable understood this when he would not lift his eyes but beat his breast and cried, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner" (Luke 18:13). He left justified while the confident man left condemned, and the only thing separating them was how they approached God.

When Habakkuk describes God in verses 3 and 4, he remembers God's works at Sinai, where God's glory covered the heavens and rays flashed from his hand (Exodus 19:16-19). What Moses witnessed, as terrifying as it was, was God's veiled glory. Paul expressed this truth, that God dwells "in unapproachable light, whom no one has ever seen or can see" (1 Timothy 6:16). This is important because humans tend to be drawn to a manageable god, one shaped to our preferences and lives. **Many people don't reject God outright; they simply shrink him until he is small enough to control, and there is no hope in a small god.** A deity of our own design cannot secure us in difficulty.

The descriptions of God in Habakkuk's song paint him as mighty and wondrous. Pestilence and plague attend his coming, the eternal mountains scatter, and the everlasting hills sink at his presence (v. 5-7). Creation itself bends at his very command, and he alone is everlasting while everything else is temporary. **The steadiness of your heart in trouble depends on your view of God, because you will only trust God as much as your view of him will allow.** This is why Habakkuk, staring at his nation's coming destruction, fills his song with God's past acts, the parted sea, the writhing mountains, the sun and moon pausing in the sky for the sake of his people (Joshua 10:12-13). **He is not simply reminiscing; he is preaching to himself, anchoring his fear in God's proven faithfulness.**

That kind of remembering is a discipline God commands. He had Israel stack stones from the Jordan precisely so the next generation would ask what they meant and be told what God had done (Joshua 4:1-7). Habakkuk's prayer follows the same concept, given to the choirmaster to be sung by the whole congregation for the praise of God. **Worship is meant to ground all of God's people in who God is.** What we treasure about God we should share with others. The believer who struggles with a small view of God only needs to run to scripture to be reminded of how large God truly is.

To Ponder:

1. What are common ways people try to shrink God down to a manageable size? What are the dangers of doing so?
2. Why is a reverent fear of the Lord called the beginning of wisdom, and how can Christians grow in a proper fear of the Lord?

3. In what areas of your life might you be tempted to try and manage God rather than to remain in proper fear of him? Where have you seen your peace affected when you try to manage God or treat him as small?

II. God's Purpose | Habakkuk 3:12-15

All of God's power and splendor has a purpose. God marches through the earth in fury and threshes the nations in anger, language of judgment, of a farmer beating the harvest to separate grain from chaff. Habakkuk says, God "went out for the salvation of your people, for the salvation of your anointed. You crushed the head of the house of the wicked." God crushes the wicked and brings salvation to his people, which means that judgment and salvation are not always two separate events. This is the resolution to everything Habakkuk has wrestled with since chapter 1. He could not reconcile a holy God judging his own people, nor a holy God wielding wicked Babylon to do it, and the answer was never that God would choose between his justice and his mercy. **God's judgment is not the obstacle to his salvation; it is the instrument of it, you cannot have one without the other.**

This understanding has been wrestled with for generations, the longing for a God who only saves and never judges. But a God who refuses to judge cannot save, because salvation assumes there is something worth being saved from. To strip God of wrath in the name of love is to misunderstand love entirely. **Indifference toward evil is not the opposite of cruelty; it is its own form of it, because a love that will not move against what is evil is not love at all.** God's anger against sin is evidence that he deeply cares for his creation and understands the effects sin has on it. But even his judgment carries restraint, as the long mercy shown to Pharaoh across ten warnings was made plain (Exodus 7-12). So the believer who watches evil go unpunished can have a similar question to Habakkuk's and still rest, because God will one day bring judgement against all sin.

That rest is not a call to passiveness, nor is it permission to avenge sin ourselves. Paul forbids it when he says, "Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God" (Romans 12:19). He then proceeds to encourage believers to feed their enemy and overcome evil with good rather than to be overcome by it (Romans 12:20-21). We can release our grip on vengeance only because we are certain God will not let sin go unanswered. **Entrusting judgment to God is what frees us to love the people who wrong us, because we are no longer responsible for their reckoning.** A people convinced of God's justice become the least bitter and most patient people in the world, free to do good while they wait.

All of this finds its clearest expression at the cross, where judgment and salvation meet in the Lord Jesus Christ. God's saving work came through the crushing of his own Son, pierced for our transgressions and crushed for our iniquities (Isaiah 53:5). The fury that marched through the earth in the prophet's song fell on Christ, so that it would not fall on those who repent and believe. God "did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all" (Romans 8:32), setting him forth as a propitiation to prove his own righteousness, that he might be both just and the justifier of everyone who trusts in Jesus (Romans 3:25-26). **God did not overlook your sin to forgive you; he condemned it in full and poured out the sentence on his Son, which is why your forgiveness costs you nothing but to lay down your life and cost him everything.** So, when God comes to judge the living and the dead, God's judgement will either fall on you or it will have already fallen on Christ in your place.

To Ponder:

4. In Romans, Paul explains that God gave Jesus as a propitiation for our sins, meaning he absorbed the wrath of God that our sin deserved. Why can't God just overlook sin without a sacrifice? And if Christ truly took on judgment in your place, how should that reshape the way you view both your own sin and the sins committed against you?
5. Paul commands believers to feed their enemies and overcome evil with good because God is the one who will avenge all wrongdoing. What would that practically look like in a situation where someone has wronged you?
6. Is there someone in your life you have refused to love or seek peace (Romans 12:18) with someone you feel has wronged you because you feel a desire to make them pay for what they have done?