

VI. Habakkuk in Biblical Perspective
A Prophet and His Conversation with God
“A Psalm of Praise and Prayer, Part 2”

Habakkuk 3

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August 26, 2018 • Evening Sermon

This will be our concluding study in the book of Habakkuk. There are two things about Habakkuk that are abundantly clear. In the opening study of the laments that Habakkuk brings before God in conversation with Him, Habakkuk is consumed with the glory of God and God’s people in their current spiritual state were not bringing glory to God but bringing disrepute upon God. That was a burden to Habakkuk so much so that he was wondering where God was at this point – why have You not visited Your people, not with condemning judgment for You’re a covenant keeping God who is merciful, but with disciplinary judgment? Habakkuk was also desperately concerned about the spiritual condition of God’s people.

He began asking God ‘are You disconnected, distracted or divorced Yourself from them? God, where are You in dealing with Your people?’ God’s people were facing false teachers, entertaining pagan idols within the temple mount even the child-sacrificing idol of Molech and they had not learned any lessons from God’s judgments upon the ten tribes in the previous century. They were going down the same death spiral of spiritual declination and depravity. Habakkuk desperately wanted to know when God would intervene. I think the lessons we will learn from Habakkuk will be helpful to us all as we come to this concluding chapter. I know the pastors on our staff are concerned about the spiritual condition of God’s people as well.

As we come to this concluding chapter I will read it in three sections and make three focused comments on it. Let’s start by looking in Habakkuk 3:1–2 which says *[1] A prayer of Habakkuk the prophet, according to Shigionoth.*

[2] 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. This is the first section.

Basically what we know about Habakkuk is right in the Bible for there are no other references we can call upon. There are some hints within Habakkuk that give us an idea about him and his very name means ‘to grapple with God,’ but there is a thought that in some way this prophet was attached to temple service and perhaps was engaged in the choral, musical ministries around the temple. One of the reasons for this thought was how this last chapter of Habakkuk opens.

First of all is it a prayer and we will see that this prayer is actually a psalm of praise and petition. It is shaped as a psalm and it has one of those identifying marks of a psalm which is this word Shigionoth. This word is only mentioned two times in the Bible which is here and one time in the Psalms but no one really knows what this word means. However where it’s placed and how it’s placed probably has something to do with the musicality of a song with a rhythmic use of an instrument. Even that is speculation but with its presence we know we’re in trafficking ground of a psalm, something that is being designed to be sung as a prayer. You know you’re in ‘psalm’ land when you see the word Selah or Shigionoth.

The petition for revival comes in this opening prayer and I’ve been in this prayer many times. We have a ministry called Embers to a Flame that is focused on assisting churches with the Biblical paradigm of church revitalization. Psalm 85 and Habakkuk 3 are dear to us in that

ministry. The petition is that God would revive His work among His covenant people. Habakkuk 1 begins with a complaint before God and why He is not intervening in the lives of His people for what they are doing to bring disciplinary judgment upon them. From your vantage point, don't read into this as to why God isn't intervening in a nation that has gone into the death spiral of depravity. Israel would be much more reflective in asking God why He is not dealing with an apostate church. These are God's covenant people.

God tells Habakkuk that he needs to look at Israel's history, what I do with My people and look all around you. God basically tells Habakkuk how He has been dealing with His people through history by using other nations to bring judgment upon them. Everything that has been happening is not an accident for God is the Lord of history. Then God gives this picture of the Chaldeans leading God's people away as someone would lead a captive away with a line and a hook in their mouth which literally was done in the three visits of the Babylonians upon Israel. During the last visit they destroyed Jerusalem and God said 'that's what I'm doing and Habakkuk you won't believe what I'm doing' and sure enough Habakkuk doesn't believe it.

Habakkuk responds by saying 'God, how can You use evil people like that who are worse than Your people to discipline Your people?' It's that age old question of 'God if You're God and You're good and powerful how can this evil even be here, much less how can You use evil and draw straight lines with crooked sticks like that?' God responds by telling him how He can use even those who rebel against Him for His glory, for the wellbeing of His people and how He has done it throughout history. God gives Habakkuk example after example of how His arm is not shortened and even though man rises up to meaning to do evil against God, God can take that evil and use it for the good of His people, like he did with Joseph, a patriarch, as he spoke to his brothers, 'what you meant for evil God meant for good' (Genesis 50:20).

Then God begins to lay His power, might and majesty before Habakkuk. As He does this Habakkuk repents of his sins, condemns the idol making of God's people and says 'there is none like You.' People have asked me a number of times why we are so prone to make idols. I think it's because of one simple reason. We worship idols in their muteness, impotency and in that irrationality of idolatry because we control the idols. It is through idolatry that we really declare the worship of our sovereign self. So why do men worship what they make instead of the God who made them? It is the rebellion of the heart where we don't want to be just like God, made in His image, we want to be God and we believe we're God when we make the gods we worship. Habakkuk sees that and bows down before the Lord as he condemns the speechless idols and proclaims the majesty of God.

This is where Habakkuk 3 comes in for Habakkuk calls upon God in a glorious way. Notice his language. It's not so much a tip of the hat toward his desire toward God but he begins his prayer with an affirmation of God's glory. "Lord, I have heard the report of You and I tremble!" This doesn't mean I'm not going to talk to You but I now talk to You not only with intimacy but with reverence. I no longer tell You how to do it because I know You are going to do it but I do tell You, bring Your reviving work O Lord whom I call upon with respect, awe, honor and fear because of who You are. Please do it now so I may see what You will do. As You come bringing Your wrath bring Your mercy and grace. You have the ability to use judgment, not for condemnation, but revival. Bring that reviving work, O Lord!

Interestingly, one of the ways my barber loves to do evangelism is when I go to get my haircut he tells everyone in the shop, 'Hey here's my pastor and he's got something to tell you.' I am grateful for that opportunity but I also love the time when he and I are talking and we get to talk about some theological issues of the day. I also like the way he introduces me because he

says ‘I want you to meet my new pastor’ and yet I’ve been going there 19 years now. He will say ‘but you’re kinda still new to me.’

As I was thinking about the 19 years I have been the pastor here at Briarwood, part of my saying ‘no’ when first asked to come here was the awesome challenge following a man whom I love, respect and admire so much, Dr. Frank Barker and taking on the responsibility of this congregation as well as some other issues. But some of those things were legacy ministries, like World Missions, stewardship and all the things that God has blessed this congregation with. I told the Lord I felt so utterly incapable of doing this pastorate and He said ‘well, that’s a good start.’ But one of the legacies we always share here was the green chair story and how God used intercessory prayer in the life of this congregation.

We actually believe that God means something when He says ‘you have not because you ask not.’ We don’t theologize vacuum that out and say then that must mean God is dependent on my prayers. No, God is not dependent on my prayers and if I don’t pray that doesn’t mean God isn’t going to get His purposes done. It just means that I don’t get to be a part of it but there is something about what God does in His sovereign decrees that is entwined with His ordained means of prayer. I can’t go any further than this. God works through prayer period. When we don’t pray God doesn’t work through us but when we do pray God chooses to work through praying people. You have not because you ask not and then when you do ask you ask wrongly (James 4:2–3) which means you have to learn how to pray Biblically. All of this is somehow entwined.

I don’t know how God uses someone as incompetent as me in preaching His Word and Jesus Himself will speak to the hearts of His people. His sheep know His voice and they follow Him (John 10:27). We just have a great God and what we do is follow those means of preaching, fellowship, sacrifice, prayer and all those things. One of the things I love to talk about is that prayer is absolutely essential to the moving of God’s hand among a people through a people and that’s why when Habakkuk gets right with the Lord through all of this process, the first thing he does is right a psalm of prayer to be sung. He knows that is where you start for he heard the Word and he’s going to pray as we see in these opening verses of Habakkuk 3 – prayer and the Word, the Word and prayer. They are inseparably tied together.

Prayer does not get God lined up with my will, ultimately prayer gets me lined up with God’s will. The giveaway is in the prayer of Jesus that He taught us. Matthew 6:9–10 says [9] *Pray then like this: “Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. [10] Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.”* I’m making my will known but I want His will to be done. There is also the prayer of Jesus in the garden. Matthew 26:39 says [39] *And going a little farther he fell on his face and prayed, saying, “My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, **not as I will, but as you will.**”* The Incarnate Christ in His humanity is showing us how to pray, as we make all of our hearts desires known to Him boldly and confidently yet with reverence and submission – not my will but Thy will be done.

My dear friend Kent Hughes has the best explanation for this that I know of. He gives a picture of a ship that comes into a dock. As the ship comes in the men at the bow throw a rope to the dock and they fasten off and begin to pull the rope. Is the dock being pulled to the ship with the rope or is the ship being pulled to the dock with the rope? The ship is being pulled to the dock and it’s the best illustration since I’m dealing with the vastness of the infinite. When I lay hold of the rope of prayer into the throne room of God I’m am drawing near to God and He is drawing near to me but I am the one who ends up being wrapped in the glorious attributes of my

God – grace and mercy. I feel like I am pulling Him to me but in reality I’m being drawn to Him.

This is why I unashamedly tell you today I have now been a minister of the Gospel for 40 plus years and I still use something I learned early in my Christian life. Someone sat down with me and said ‘Harry this is a good way to pray’ and they wrote the word A.C.T.S. – adoration, confession, thanksgiving, supplication (requests). It’s not wrong to have things like this for Calvin had little things like this to help him in his devotional life. Just learn not to treat these helps like checking a box. They are there to guide you into a God-centered, Bible-framed, real live conversation with God as we have watched Habakkuk being matured in his prayer life, all the way to a psalm of praise with his concluding conversation with God. Consider this deeply in your devotional life.

Here are five things for effective prayer and then I’ll move to the last part of this study. Number one, an effective prayer such as this prayer of Habakkuk, reveals an intolerable burden. I confess I’m indebted to my dear friend Al Baker who has affirmed this element of prayer, of an intolerable burden. It is so heavy upon us and deep within us. Effective prayer is brought by people who have burdens of the Lord, from the Lord and to the Lord that are absolutely rooted in the words of the Apostle Peter. Lord, this is what is before me and I am not capable. I can’t handle this and I repent of thinking I can handle this but this needs to be handled, addressed. I can’t bring revival or my own growth. I can attach myself to the means but I can’t make them effective. God without You I can do nothing.

Secondly, this intolerable burden is then joined by an unshakeable confidence. There is no one like Him. You have an unshakeable confidence in the Lord whom you are calling upon. Habakkuk says ‘I have heard the report about You’ for You are not one of these speechless idols. You are the God who made the men who make the idols. There is none like You.

Thirdly, you pray with a non-negotiable dependence on the Lord. I love how Peter responds to Jesus in John 6:66–69 which says [66] *After this many of his disciples turned back and no longer walked with him.* [67] *So Jesus said to the twelve, “Do you want to go away as well?”* [68] *Simon Peter answered him, “Lord, to whom shall we go? **You have the words of eternal life,*** [69] *and we have believed, and have come to know, that you are the Holy One of God.”*

Number four, you pray with courageous conviction. This phrase came to me from our BCS president. Do our prayer requests reflect courageous conviction, and not only for the need but also to the Lord to whom we’re praying?

Finally, are my prayers filled with a God-exalting objective? I’m not saying we don’t pray about our personal needs and concerns for Jesus taught us to pray for our groceries – Lord, give me this day, our daily bread. As you go through the 17 prayers of the Apostle Paul it is clear that he is telling us to pray for anything and everything and I love A.W. Pink’s book Gleanings From Paul; Prayers from the Apostle Paul. Philippians 4:6 says [6] *do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.* But in Paul’s recorded prayers I don’t see him consumed with the things that I’m consumed with.

I’m walking with a cane, due to recent knee surgery, and I get up in the middle of the night. My right foot hits my cane and I break my right little toe in the second week of my rehab. So I had knee replacement on my left knee and now a broken toe on the right foot. I reached down, shoved it back into place, wrapped it and hoping it’s going to be okay. I remember praying right after that “Lord, this Sunday will be my first Sunday back in the pulpit can You

please do something about this?" and I think it's right to pray about that and that God wants me to pray about that. But I don't hear any prayers from Paul about broken toes in the Apostle's prayers. I believe Paul would pray about that because he wouldn't tell us to pray about anything and everything if he didn't. I am saying that the predominant prayers of the Apostle Paul are the eternal, the spiritual or the matters of where his hearers are going to spend eternity and how they are going to live for the Lord on the way to eternity. I'm pointing this out to show you the weight of God-exalting objectives.

Now let's look at how Habakkuk recounts the majesty of this God. Habakkuk begins to site some of these reports from how they were delivered from the exodus, were brought into the Promised Land, how God sustained them in the days of the judges and he goes through this cherry picking some of the things in this glorious, poetic language of the mighty hand of God on behalf of His people.

Habakkuk 3:3–16 says [3] *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.*

[4] *His brightness was like the light;
rays flashed from his hand;
and there he veiled his power.*

[5] *Before him went pestilence,
and plague followed at his heels.*

[6] *He stood and measured the earth;
he looked and shook the nations;*

*then the eternal mountains (Hebrew for foundations) were scattered;
the everlasting hills sank low (probably an echo of the flood).*

His were the everlasting ways.

[7] *I saw the tents of Cushan in affliction;
the curtains of the land of Midian did tremble.*

[8] *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? (No, those were God's instruments to manifest His power)*

[9] *You stripped the sheath from your bow,
calling for many arrows. Selah
You split the earth with rivers.*

[10] *The mountains saw you and writhed;
the raging waters swept on;
the deep gave forth its voice;
it lifted its hands on high.*

[11] *The sun and moon stood still in their place (referring to the days of Joshua)
at the light of your arrows as they sped,
at the flash of your glittering spear.*

[12] *You marched through the earth in fury;
you threshed the nations in anger.*

[13] *You went out for the salvation of your people,
for the salvation of your anointed (probably referring to the Davidic line, fulfilled in Jesus).
You crushed the head of the house of the wicked,
laying him bare from thigh to neck. Selah*

[14] *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.*

[15] *You trampled the sea with your horses,
the surging of mighty waters (the Red Sea covering the Egyptian army).*

[16] *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 (the day the Lord will intervene)
to come upon people who invade us.*

Remember that Habakkuk asked earlier that when God intervenes to bring judgment he asks that in His wrath for Him to bring mercy. No longer does Habakkuk question God using the Chaldeans, but that as God uses them Habakkuk will wait for God to deal with them as He did in the past. Here Habakkuk gives this glorious declaration. Then he gets to something interesting.

One of our evangelical fathers, not noted for his evangelical Christianity, likely was a deist although he was a member of a church that preached the evangelical church in Philadelphia, was Benjamin Franklin. He was assigned as an emissary to Paris after the founding of our country (America). He tends to be a little bit of a contrarian. Here he'd like to tweak the noses of Christians even though one of his best friends was George Whitfield. When he got to Paris he loved to tweak the noses of the anarchists, those with liberty defined as anarchy. He loved to quote the Bible to them. Some of these accounts are absolutely astounding. Jim Boyce writes about some of these.

One day after being ridiculed for quoting the Bible, Franklin was in a court of Parisians and this is what he read to them. He didn't tell them to turn in their Bibles to Habakkuk 3, he just read this to the court.

Habakkuk 3:17–19 says [17] *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,*

[18] *yet I will rejoice in the LORD;
I will take joy in the God of my salvation.*

[19] *GOD, the Lord, is my strength;
he makes my feet like the deer's (stable, secure nibble);
he makes me tread on my high places.*

To the choirmaster: with stringed instruments.

What a glorious piece of Biblical poetry! I love this ending. Sometimes I'm wondering 'what if?' After he read that and none of them knew this was in the Bible, they said 'that's the most fantastic piece of poetry.' Then he said to them "That's in the Bible that you have been ridiculing."

I would like to read this again but I want you to see it this way. Hear all what Habakkuk has said as he recounts all of who God is. What if the fig tree doesn't blossom? What if the fruit is not on the vine? What if the produce of the olive fail? What if the fields yield no food? What if the flock is cut off from the fold? What if there is no herd in the stall? Then if that happens, I will rejoice in the Lord. I will still take joy in the God of my salvation. For my joy is in the God of my salvation. God the Lord is my strength, not His answers and He makes my feet like the deer as I tread on the high places.

When I was in college and the Lord called me to the ministry I started as a youth pastor. Because I couldn't find a Presbyterian Church in Greenville, South Carolina I ended up in a Freewill Baptist Church as their youth director. I learned so much in the context of those dear folks, then went onto Covenant College and on into ministry preparation. There were ten women who came to the senior pastor, Al Davis, at this church and told him their husbands didn't know the Lord. Al said 'let's begin to pray, for it's only the Lord who can convert them.' I didn't take the time to talk with him about the theological implications of that statement but how I rejoiced in his call to prayer. We prayed. I had to leave within two months to go to Covenant College but in those two months seven of those ten men came to Christ out that circle of women praying.

What if they hadn't prayed or the Lord said 'no, not yet'? Will our joy be in the Lord or is our joy just in the answers? Our joy is in the Lord for He is the One and His will is our joy in our life. Probably no one went through that more than a man named William Cowper. William Cowper was converted while picking up a Bible while he was in an insane asylum. I do commend to you John Piper's biography on Cowper but as I read about his life, it's very clear that he may have had some sort of spiritual depression or manic depression, I'm not sure. He was born in 1731 and went through all kinds of issues. In 1764 he was placed in this insane asylum and was converted by reading a Bible he found.

Then he fell in among evangelical believers through the Great Awakening. Then he came under the ministry of John Newton and moved to where Newton was pastoring. The two of them began to write hymns. Newton wrote about 180 hymns and I think Cowper wrote about 60 something hymns but in the midst of it he wrote one hymn that ended up in the only hymnal. In that hymn are the verses I just read which is what he wrote. That laid the ground work for another hymn and it can be found in the Trinity Hymnal. As I end the study on the book of Habakkuk I end it this way, reading this verse from William Cowper's hymn as he struggled with the Lord all of his life as he moved from depression to joy to exhilaration. His rope stayed tied to the docks and his confidence was in the Lord.

I pray that as you call upon the Lord in your life that His answers will become your delight, whether He says 'no,' 'yes,' or 'keep praying.' Why?

- 1. God moves in a mysterious way
His wonders to perform;
He plants His footsteps in the sea
And rides upon the storm.*
- 2. Deep in unfathomable mines
Of never failing skill
He treasures up His bright designs
And works His sov'reign will.*
- 3. Oh fearful saints, fresh courage take;
The clouds that you so much dread*

*Are actually big with mercy and soon to break
In blessings on your head.*

4. *Judge not the Lord by feeble sense,
But trust Him for His grace;
Behind a frowning providence
He is hiding a smiling face.*
5. *His purposes will ripen fast,
Unfolding every hour;
The bud may have a bitter taste,
But sweet will be the flow'r.*
6. *Blind unbelief is sure to err
For you will scan His work in vain;
God is His own interpreter,
And to you He will make it plain.*

God Moves in Mysterious Ways (hymn) by William Cowper

Prayer:

Father, thank You for this time to be together in Your Word. May our delight and joy be in Your answers no matter what they may be for I pray this in Jesus' Name, Amen.