

Habakkuk's Prayer

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[0 : 00] Just as we have been, I won't preach this at all. We prefer to save this context for more inductive Bible study together.

So we'll treat it like that tonight. So we'll walk through the passage, Habakkuk chapter three, and then at the end, I'll draw some things together, make some points of the main idea, I think, of what's going on here and why it really matters for us.

So we'll do that towards the end of our time. So we won't be long. Habakkuk three, we'll finish tonight. And before we read it, let me review where we are and bring us up to the beginning of chapter three.

This is one of the really unique prophets in all of the prophetic books of the Old Testament because Habakkuk has a conversation with God the entire time.

And we really only see that one other place and it's still not quite that, and that's the book of Jonah, where most of the texts of Jonah is a conversation between Jonah and God. But here, we truly have a conversation between Habakkuk and prayer to God and back and forth the whole time.

[1 : 08] It's different than all the other prophets where the prophets are going out and speaking to the people and telling the people what they need to do, how they need to change, but that it doesn't appear like that. And in chapter one, you'll remember the question that Habakkuk raised to God in prayer was why is there still evil and corruption in the land of Judah?

And we infer that Habakkuk had been praying and praying and praying. When are you going to come down and pull out the rot that was in the present 600s, late 600s, BC that was in Judah, that was ruling Judah, injustices happening all around.

And then remember God responds and he says, I'm going to pull out the rot, I'm going to stop this corruption, I'm sending Babylon. So wicked Babylon who has been coming from the north and the east down through the south, destroying everyone, raiding, it takes over and destroys Assyria just before Israel.

And we know that in 597 and in 602 as well, just before 597, Babylon will come in and attack Jerusalem. And in 597, they will destroy, completely destroy Jerusalem basically in the temple and everything's in it.

So Habakkuk responds and says, okay, well, how can you do that? How can you be just and deal with the corruption of Judah by sending an evil people to deal with injustice?

[2 : 45] It seems like that is heaping injustice on top of injustice over and over again. And so in chapter two, Habakkuk takes his stand on the watchtower as if he is going to look out and take God's place of sorts and then God speaks to him and God says, I'm not going to overlook any evil.

There will be no injustices left at the end of history that aren't met with justice. There will be not a single sin that doesn't get what it deserves is basically the pronouncement God makes.

So he says, don't lose heart if justice is slow to come to Babylon, be patient because I will meet out justice to everybody that deserves it.

And that's his message to Habakkuk. And then we get the very famous line, chapter two, verse four, the righteous live by faith. And so the entire theme really of this book is how to have faith in the midst of injustices, in the midst of seasons that seem like there's no resolution coming.

And perhaps there's not in this life. Perhaps there will never be justice in this life for some evil that's out in front of you. And God says, be patient, the righteous live by faith.

[4 : 16] Now, before we come to chapter three, just a word on faith. Faith is very important, right? We know as Christians, we believe that faith is the instrument of salvation.

What is faith? Faith, the Westminster Confession, the shorter catechism gives you two verbs to think about faith.

Faith is receiving and trusting, right? So faith is receiving whatever God says about himself as true, as right, as good.

And faith is then trusting in that as your hope. And that's specifically, of course, in the object Jesus Christ himself, that's faith. So the righteous shall live by faith.

This book is about what it means to have faith in the midst of injustices. And that faith is receiving whatever God says about what's happening in the world and trusting that he's gonna do something about it in the end, that's the quality of faith that's being talked about.

[5 : 18] So lastly, before we read, God says then I'm bringing five woes to Babylon. Five woes are coming to Babylon, and they will be for their imperialism, their colonialism essentially, their indulgence, how indulgent of a people they are, their injustices, he says, their immorality and their idolatry.

Five reasons that I will destroy Babylon. Now at the very end of chapter two, verse 20, Habakkuk writes, the Lord is in his holy temple and all will be silenced before him.

And so that means Habakkuk is now silenced before God and Babylon will be silenced before God. Jude is about to be silenced before God.

Everybody that has done any injustice will be silenced before the living God. And Habakkuk realizes that and all of a sudden his posture changes and he melts.

He becomes undone, if you will, like Isaiah chapter six. And that's what sets us up for chapter three. He's melted, he's undone.

[6 : 32] And so that brings us to chapter three. Let's read it together. A prayer of Habakkuk, the prophet, according to Shiggy Onoth. Oh Lord, I've heard the report of you in your work.

Oh 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 in the Holy Mount and the Holy one from Mount Peron, say, La.

His splendor covered the heavens and the earth was full of his praise. His brightness was like the light. Raise flash 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 Kushan and affliction. The curtains of the land of Midian did tremble. Was your wrath against the rivers, oh Lord?

[7 : 33] 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, say, La.

You split the earth with rivers. The mountains saw you and writhed. The raging waters swept on. The deep gave forth its voice. It lifted its hands on high. The sun and the 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 thigh to neck, say, La.

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 in my body trembles my lips quiver at the sound. Rottenness enters my bones. My legs tremble beneath me. Yet I will quietly wait for the day of trouble to come upon people who invade us.

[8 : 46] Though the fig trees should not blossom nor fruit be on their vines, the produce of the olive fail in the fields that yield no food. The flock be cut off from the fold and there be no herds and 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 deers. He makes me tread on my high places to the choir master with stringed instruments.

All right, so the very first thing here to mention, and I'm gonna ask a couple of questions and I'll live through the silence. Hopefully somebody will respond to me. But the first thing to notice here, of course, is that he turns and writes a song.

It's a prayer, but it also becomes a song. It's a song that Israel will sing. It's a song that becomes a hymn of Israel. We don't really know what Shigia Noth means, but it's probably somebody that set this to music.

And you see, of course, at the end to the choir master with stringed instruments. So this final prayer, this posture of being melted before the Lord becomes a song, a hymn that Israel is going to sing, that we can sing, I looked to find if this set to music and I did find a couple people that had done it, but it was old and I can't read music, so I didn't really know what it looked like exactly.

[10 : 04] But maybe Don could draw something up for us sometime and we could sing it together. But if you look down just at verse one and two with me, particularly verse two, oh Lord, I've heard the report of you and your work, oh Lord, do I fear, in the midst of the years revive it, in the midst of the years make it known, and wrath remember mercy.

Very simple, but any answer is wonderful. What is his prayer here? That's the question. What is he praying back to God in response to God here?

And I'll give you a sec. Maybe somebody will respond, if not, I'll take it on. What is his prayer?

It's prayer of trust, yeah, certainly. To increase his faith? To increase his faith, yeah, I mean, I think that's definitely a subjective aspect of it, absolutely.

But very concretely, what is he praying back to God? God's told him I'm about to send five woes upon Babylon, but it's gonna take a while, so be patient.

[11 : 22] And what does he say? Yeah, absolutely, there's mercy there. Yeah, and that's a super important point.

I think the most essential aspect of his prayer here is he's turning around to God and saying, okay, do it, do it, do the justice. You say you're going to rain down justice on Babylon, but first you're gonna end the corruption in Judah with Babylon, revive it, make it alive, in other words, do it.

And it's no different than the Lord's prayer, thy will be done. That's exactly what he's saying, that will be done. And you've got two twin aspects of God's will being done here that are very prominent.

One is the administration of justice through judgment, that there is a terrifying aspect to this, that God will administer justice for the sins for which people have accumulated.

And at the same time, like you mentioned, he says, in the midst of that wrath, remember your mercy. And so you've got the terrifying justice of God being poured out and Habakkuk saying, do that.

[12 : 37] Why is he saying that? Because he's melted. He's saying, you're God, I don't get to say. So do the justice that comes from the being of God, who is justice in himself, do that.

But in the midst of it, Lord, remember your mercy. And of course, he's praying that for himself and his people. And who is it that receives the mercy of God? Habakkuk 2 verse 4, the righteous shall live.

And what is it that makes a person righteous? Faith, right? It's not their justice. The whole point of the book is that Judah is not just.

And Babylon is not just. And Assyria is not just. And Scotland's not just. And we're not just. Our actions are not just. We do not get what we deserve.

But the righteous live because they are made righteous by faith, by receiving and trusting in the God who will show mercy. So that's the first and really the essence of the first half of the prayer.

[13 : 44] And then he steps into this really interesting section from three to 15. And this one's a little trickier to answer, but this is one whole section from verse three all the way to 15, really 3B.

His splendor covered the heavens and the earth was full of his praise all the way down to verse 15. And he's doing something very specific here. So let me just highlight a couple of verses and see if you can pick up on it, on what he's doing here.

His brightness was like the light. God's brightness. All right, so notice that these are past tense verbs, right? His brightness was like the light. Raise flash from his hand.

He veiled his power right there where he was. And here verse five might give you some clues. Before him went pestilence, a plague followed at his heels.

Okay, then in verse six, you've got justice language. He measured the earth. He looked and showed, what does it mean to measure the earth? It means it's the picture of a scale.

[14 : 51] He put the deeds of the earth in the scale and measured. And then he determined as the judge who deserved his wrath. Go down to seven.

I saw the tense of Kushan and affliction, midian, trembled. Was your wrath against the river? The river's, oh Lord. Okay, does anybody have a sense yet of what Habakkuk is referring to here?

He's taking us, he's actually praying to God and remembering past events that he was not a part of that he'd never saw but that he's only been told of.

What past event is he thinking of here? The Exodus, yeah, absolutely. He's thinking of God's power and wrath meet it out against Egypt in the Exodus story.

And that's where he goes in this prayer. And what were the plagues that went forth from God's hand in the Exodus? What are those plagues all about? The plagues of the Exodus were specifically plagues that were directed at the Egyptian deities.

[16 : 02] So if you carefully work through the plagues in the book of Exodus, you realize the plague of the frogs, of the Nile, ultimately of blocking out the sun, each of these is responding to one of the deities, principal deities of Egypt.

And ultimately the death of the firstborn son, particularly a Pharaoh, why? Because in Pharaoh's household, Pharaoh is a demigod and the firstborn son of Pharaoh is a demigod by birth.

And so God dishes out justice against the gods of Egypt in the plagues and that's what he's remembering here. He goes all the way down to verse 11 and he switches over to a new piece of history.

The sun and the 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 thrashed the nations in anger.

This one's a little trickier, but what about this? This is not the Exodus. This is a different moment in the history of Israel. What might this be? Yeah, this is the book of Joshua.

[17 : 12] This is when God, when Israel was fighting a battle and God said, well, you need more daylight. I'm going to stop the movement of the earth. The sun will stand still for you. This is what he's referring to here, right?

So he's working through here and talking about the Exodus all the way through to the Joshua conquest and recounting what we call the wonderful works of God.

And the point of it all is verse 13, you went out for the salvation of your people, for the salvation of your anointed, you crushed the heads of the house of the wicked.

In other words, God is the warrior, is a warrior, the warrior of his people. He goes out and administers justice on behalf of his people, not because they deserve it, but because he shows mercy to those who live by faith.

And so he goes forth. And so the question then becomes, why is Habakkuk recounting these great deeds of God in the midst of this prayer?

[18 : 17] What's the point? How does it fit in with the overall picture of the book of what he's recognizing here about God?

What is Habakkuk learning in the midst of this prayer as he's recounting the wonderful deeds of God in judgment? Any thoughts?

Exactly, he's thinking and saying, I know the tales of the past. I've heard what you've done. And I know that as I'm standing here in the midst of a corrupted land, and I'm about to receive the blows of Babylon, that you are the God who has done what you said you were going to do every time, and you have administered justice on the people who tried to crush your people every time.

And how long was Israel in Egypt? Slaves, 400 years, right? And so he's thinking, I've seen this before in the history of your people.

I know that patience is necessary in the midst of deep faith. And so at the very end of this little section, verse 16 is the transition to the main point, and we'll finish with 17 and 19, but the transition, he says, I hear all this.

[19 : 48] I hear what you've done, and I hear what you're saying, and my body trembles. My lips quiver at the sound. Rottenness enters my bones.

What's he talking about here? After just recounting the deeds of God, and he's saying, I know what you've done, I know what you've liked, but I'm trembling and rottenness.

I'm feeling rotten all the way down to my bones. What is he talking about? Why? Why is that his response? His legs are trembling.

He's not the thought, and he's not the thought, what he's done to himself. So I think that there's two things going on here.

One, sort of a double entendre. One, he's melting at the mightiness of God and the mystery of God. Absolutely.

- [20 : 47] So there's a divine oriented posture, but there's also a historical posture he's taking, there's circumstantial posture too. There's another reason his legs are shaking.
- What has God told him? What has to happen before justice can ever come? Who's coming to the doorstep? The Babylonians are coming.
- So he's saying, I've recounted the deeds, and I've seen Israel was in Egypt 400 years, and you came for them, but it was 400 years.
- And you've already told me in this interaction with you that Babylon is coming, and that that is how you will do it. And so he finishes his prayer here and says, I'm shaking.
- I feel rotten down to the core of who I am, because I know what you say is true and good, and that means that I'm about to walk through the fire. Babylon's coming to the doorstep.
- [21 : 52] I'm gonna be here. Babylon's coming. Many, many will die and be imprisoned and become slaves of Babylon. And so you see, we know that that's what he's thinking of because he says at the very end of 16, yet I will quietly wait for the day of trouble to come upon the people who invade us.
- So he's saying, in the midst of my trembling, I will quietly and patiently wait before the Lord for the day that justice will eventually come, even if it's 400 years, even if I observe it from Sheol, perhaps wherever he might be.
- All right, so let's finish with this, verse 17 to 19, because this is really the point of it all, and really the point of the book in some ways.
- So at the very end, ignore the title, Habakkuk rejoices in the Lord. Remember always in Bible study that those are not part of the Bible.
- Those are, cover those up with your hand and squench the text back together so that you don't think of it as too much of a break. This is still the same prayer and the same song, okay?
- [23 : 10] 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 and 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 deers. He makes me tread on high places to the choir master.
- Okay, so this is where he really gets into the nitty gritty of telling you how to deal with evil seasons of life, where an evil is out in front of you, when circumstances are especially evil.
- And by evil, I mean broken, corrupted, not what they should be, not in accordance with the creation order as God intended it. Hard things, suffering, especially that comes about by sin, and sin that happens to you.
- What he's saying here, very simple, is that it is possible to have sustained joy, patient joy in the midst of miserable tribulation, and never see the end of that tribulation.
- [24 : 27] That it's possible to have sustained joy, it's possible. And that's what Habakkuk has moved from, from the beginning of not having that at the beginning of the book, to having it here at the end of the book.
- And it's very specific, of course, here. He's talking about a very specific type of disaster that's about to take place. What is it? No more figs, no more fruit, no more olives, the fields are empty, the flocks are cut off, and there's no more herds.
- Meaning he's talking about utter economic devastation, economic depravity all the way to the bottom. Now we're facing, we're about to, it looks like facing a recession perhaps, certainly the U.S. is, and perhaps here as well, who knows, but we're in the midst of an economic downturn to be sure, right?

And so stuff like this carries more weight in times like that. However, however, this is, he's talking about utter and total economic ruin, starvation, no food for anyone if you survive, Babylon's initial invasion.

And there are people all over the world that do face this. When we read this, we have to remember them and think that there are Christians and non-Christians alike that face total economic ruin to the point of starvation throughout their lifetime in the 21st century and will, like they have in every single century.

[26 : 03] And God is especially preaching and talking to them here, but this is for anybody and everybody as we face seasons of devastation, whether they are economic or emotional, and everything in between, whatever they might, whatever they may be.

And Habakkuk says, it is possible to rejoice, to have patient joy all the way to the point of death in the midst of those seasons.

Now, lastly, last thing I wanna say and we'll stop. You can say, you can read that and you can hear that.

And you can say, especially if you're a believer tonight, if you're a Christian tonight, you can say, look, intellectually, I accept it, right?

I affirm it. I hear it, I see it in the text. This is my authority. Intellectually, I can put that dogmatic truth in a category in my theological system and say yes.

[27 : 06] But existentially, maybe if you're honest with yourself, like when I think about myself, I think, if I sit in this season, will I have any joy?

Can I have any joy? Can I grow into joy? And it seems like the answer is, it feels like no. It feels like it's unlikely to have joy in the midst of such devastation and suffering and misery in life.

And I think the only thing I wanna say, because we're out of time is this. You cannot have it apart from growing into it through the power of the Holy Spirit who is the spirit of Jesus Christ.

And to get there, remember, the righteous live by faith. So what he's talking about here is growing into something, a power through faith, through faith.

He's saying that this is actually only possible. Philippians four calls it a joy that makes no sense. That is beyond understanding because it is a power that is only through the spirit, spiritual power that can get a person to a place like this.

[28 : 33] And of course, in order to receive that spiritual power in faith, you've got to walk through, you've got to walk with the one who is the greater Habakkuk.

Jesus Christ lost everything, verse 17 tells us about. Jesus Christ is the one who saw the fig blossom no longer, who cursed it and it died as a sign.

And he went to the cross, he went to the cross in utter devastation and ruin beyond the ruin that Habakkuk could ever know, beyond it.

He suffered the devastation of the wrath of God. Everything that God says, I will pour out upon Babylon and Judah, he poured it out even more on Jesus Christ, everything.

And Habakkuk stands there and has joy in the Lord in the midst of utter devastation because he looks like Jesus. He's a sign pointing to the one that is to come.

[29 : 48] And it's only through the power of the devastation of the cross that you can have the gift of his resurrected spirit to be enabled to grow in this way, to have something like this.

And I think it's a lifetime of steady, slow, broken, bumpy walking in and by the spirit of Jesus Christ himself.

And remember that when God says that he will destroy Babylon, fully and finally, where do we see it?

Where do we see that? This is my last actually open question to you. One more time. Where do we see the destruction of Babylon?

It's a multi-layered question, isn't it? Calvary, Jesus Christ goes toe to toe with the Babylonian dragon himself, Satan, Christus, Victor, Christ the victor over Babylon in the moment of the cross, right?

[31 : 05] Where else? Doesn't stop there. It takes stages of history, right? Where else do we see the destruction of Babylon?

Revelation 16, 17, 18, what is the entire image of the end of human history is God coming down to defeat Babylon, to destroy Babylon.

See, Habakkuk has always been about something much bigger than this moment. It's about what we see in Revelation 16, 17, and 18. And the destruction of Babylon is the destruction of the serpent of Babylon himself.

Satan, sin, evil, death, drought, the fig leaves, the figs and the grapes growing no longer, that is gone, that is Babylon.

See, Babylon is the image of evil in the whole of the scriptures. And the pathway to a faith that can have joy in the midst of such misery like this is to do what Habakkuk did here.

[32 : 17] He thought about Egypt. He thought about Joshua's conquest, but we get to think about Revelation 16, 17, and 18. Because God has written the future into history for us.

And so that's part of the process of growing in faith and to joy in the Lord, even in the midst of hardship. Okay, I've gone on too long. Let's pray and we'll ask God, we'll ask God the Spirit to do this work in our hearts.

Let's pray, Father, we come now and ask that you would do something that is beyond sense, that is beyond circumstance, that is give us what seems impossible, joy in the midst of utter sorrow.

And so these things feel contradictory at worst and paradoxical at best, but we ask for this because you promise it and you say that it's real.

And so we do ask for everybody's heart here tonight that they would experience a measure of joy in the midst of their sorrows that comes only from you, O God, and that for each of us and for our corporate body at St. Columbus, our church family, that we would be marked off as a people who do well by joying in you and hoping you in the midst of heart things.

[33 : 39] So we ask for these hearts in Christ's name, amen.