

# **HABAKKUK**

Part 4: “How to Worship When Life Hurts”

Habakkuk 3:

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Sunday, March 21, 2021 (Lent)

## **Scripture Reading**

*“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. 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. I saw the tents of Cushan in affliction; the curtains of the land 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; 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 thigh 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 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” (Habakkuk 3:1–19, ESV).*

God, thank you for the gift of your word. Through these spirit-inspired scriptures, shine light into our darkness. Teach us to worship when life is hard; teach how to have hope in all circumstances. We pray this in the glorious name of Jesus our Savior and Messiah, AMEN.

## **Introduction**

Today, we are concluding our journey through the Old Testament book of Habakkuk. Habakkuk is a short book. It's buried in the middle of a collection of prophetic books known as the minor prophets, and for that reason, it is often overlooked and undertaught. But, if you have been along for the ride these last few weeks, I pray you have grown to appreciate the beauty and brilliance of Habakkuk.

By way of review, Habakkuk is essentially the record of a conversation between a prophet and his God. The book begins with a prayer of lamentation. Habakkuk is grieved over the sin that he sees in the kingdom of Judah, and he asks God to do something about it.

God responds by telling the prophet that he will soon judge the sin of his nation by sending the Babylonian armies to invade Judah, destroy Jerusalem, and send the people of God into exile.

This is not the answer Habakkuk wants to hear. He asks God, "How can God judge Judah's wickedness with Babylon, and even more wicked nation?" In response, God gives Habakkuk a vision wherein God promises to bring both judgment and justice. God foretells a day when all injustice and idolatry will be vanquished, and creation will be renewed and restored. It is a sobering vision. But it is a vision by which "the righteous shall live by faith" (Hab 2:4).

In the last few months, I have felt drawn to the book of Habakkuk, and, in prayer, I have felt that this is a timely book for our congregation and our moment in history.

In our own time of pandemic, political extremism, racial division, and increasing secularization, I think we can and should find ourselves asking the same questions as Habakkuk. Like Habakkuk, we might be asking God, "What are you up to in all of this?" Like Habakkuk, we may need to learn how to wrestle with the problem of evil and rest in the power of faith. Like Habakkuk, we may need to be reminded of the biblical vision of a day coming when all evil will be judged, and all creation will be renewed.

When the book of Habakkuk begins, all that the prophet seems to want is a better version of the kingdom of Judah. But God expands Habakkuk's horizons to see something so much more. God's agenda is not limited to the reforming of the kingdom of Judah – God's agenda is the renewal and redemption of all creation!

So too, I believe it is important for us to expand our horizons to know that our ultimate hope is not in a marginally better version of America; our hope is for the day when the kingdom of God comes in fullness and all things are made new.

And that leads us to chapter 3, where all of a sudden, there is a break in the pattern. Instead of question-answer, question-answer, we have a psalm of praise that concludes Habakkuk's book. Look at the first and last verses of this chapter: "*A prayer of*

*Habakkuk the prophet, according to Shigionoth.... To the choirmaster: with stringed instruments” (Hab 3:1; 19b).*

Habakkuk 3 is a *song*. It is a song filled with a distinctive melody and rhythm; it is a song that is meant to be sung, not only with the mind but also with the heart. The book of Habakkuk begins with worry and angst, but it ends with worship and praise. Even this structure is showing us something.

Worship is the ultimate Christian response to the sufferings of life and the mysteries of faith. Worship was the response of Paul and Silas in the Philippian jail (Acts 16). Worship was the response of the early Christians during Roman persecutions. Worship was the response of the black Christian slaves in early America, who yearned for a true and greater freedom. Worship was the response of the modern-day Christian martyrs who were publicly murdered along the beaches of northern Africa in 2015.

There is spiritual power that comes from faith-filled worship. There is power that comes from taking refuge in God in times of pain. So, for the rest of our time today, I want us to look to this final portion of Habakkuk to learn **“How to Worship When Life Hurts.”**

## **Exposition**

### **1. Remember God’s Past Faithfulness**

Pay close attention to the language that Habakkuk is using in this song: **“O LORD, I have heard the report of you, and your work, O LORD, do I fear...God came from Teman, and the Holy One from Mount Paran...Before him went pestilence, and plague followed at his heels” (Habakkuk 3:2–5, ESV).**

Habakkuk begins his song by remembering something that God has already accomplished. He is testifying to “the report” of God’s works from of old. In fact, when the word “God” is used in this passage, it comes from the Hebrew word Eloah (אֱלֹהִים), which is a very rare and ancient word for God.<sup>1</sup> It would be like us talking in King James English. It is clear that Habakkuk is appealing to something very deep in the memory of God’s people.

And although the language is very obscure and poetic, the text does give us hints as to the exact memory that Habakkuk is conjuring. “Teman” was a location in the wilderness between Egypt and the Promised Land. “Mount Paran” is associated Mount Sinai (Dt 32:2). And the reference to “pestilence” and “plague” evokes the famous Ten Plagues of the Exodus (Ex 7-12).

Habakkuk is saying, “Yes, my nation is on the verge of collapse. Yes, my people’s way of life is on the verge of ending. Yes, the sky is dark. But *I remember the Exodus*. I remember the time when God set our people free from slavery. I remember when he led

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<sup>1</sup> Kenneth L. Barker, *Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah*, vol. 20, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1999), 360.

our people through the wilderness. I remember the time when he promised we would be his people and he would be our God!”

And this act of worshipful remembrance is not unique to Habakkuk. All throughout the Bible, there are multiple times in which the Exodus event is rehearsed and recounted, particularly in the Psalms. In fact, if you read through the Psalms, you will notice that the Exodus is directly referred to or alluded to time and time again (cf. Ps 18, 25, 31, 43, 60, 68, 71, 78, 80, 105, 107, 136, 142).

For ancient Israel, the story of their freedom and God’s delivering power was so central to their identity that they needed to remember it through songs. Here’s an example from Psalm 78: *“Give ear, O my people, to my teaching; incline your ears to the words of my mouth! I will open my mouth in a parable; I will utter dark sayings from of old, things that we have heard and known, that our fathers have told us. We will not hide them from their children, but tell to the coming generation the glorious deeds of the LORD, and his might, and the wonders that he has done.... In the sight of their fathers he performed wonders in the land of Egypt, in the fields of Zoan. He divided the sea and let them pass through it, and made the waters stand like a heap”* (Ps 78:1-4; 12-13).

Here's what I want you to see in this: the practice of intentionally remembering the faithfulness of God is one of the most important spiritual disciplines that fuels our worship and strengthens our faith. This is why we don’t only speak about the cross and resurrection of Jesus – we *sing* about it. This is also why many Christian have adopted the habit of journaling about ways God has shown them his goodness.

I’ll openly admit I have not been the best at keeping a journal. But I have journaled, and when I go back to the journal entries I have written, they have always blessed my soul.

So, I want to encourage you, if you at times struggle to see the goodness of God, buy a journal and start writing down the ways that God has been faithful to you in the past. If you are a believer, write down the story how you became a Christian. Write down the story of a time when God answered your prayers or showed you unexplainable grace. Write down a time when God answered a prayer in a different but better way than you expected.

When you don’t have enough time to write something down, take a moment in prayer to rehearse in your mind the ways that God has shown you his goodness.

To speak honestly, I do not think I could have made it in ministry this last season without the practice of intentionally reminding my soul of the faithfulness of God. This Sunday is the anniversary of the first Sunday of an online-only service, and, therefore, the anniversary of, without a doubt, the most challenging year of all the seventeen years I have served in ministry. And it was in those moments when I felt alone or discouraged or criticized or betrayed that I found a unique and precious comfort in remembering all the ways that God has been so good to me in my life, in my family’s life, and in the life of this church.

I remembered that when I became the pastor of this church, I started with less than sixty people in this congregation and zero salary. I remembered how God took a church that was broken to reach people with the gospel and serve our city and plant new churches across the globe. I remember how he protected us provided for us every step of the way. And when I remembered those things, I began to feel a lot more confident that God was capable of guiding us through a pandemic. And now, when I remember 2020, yes, I will remember a hard year. But I will also remember the faithfulness of my God.

When we neglect the practice of remembrance, we will suffer spiritual amnesia and atrophy of faith. But when we remember God's past faithfulness, it will allow us to look to the future with a vision of hope.

## 2. God's Promised Future

While this chapter evokes images of Israel's past, there are also hints that Habakkuk is talking about something that hasn't even happened yet. He is envisioning something *beyond* the Exodus. He is envisioning the future: *"You stripped the sheath from your bow, calling for many arrows... 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 moon stood still in their place at the light of your arrows as they sped, at the flash of your glittering spear"* (Hab 3:9–11).

Here Habakkuk imagines God as a Divine Warrior who has gone forth to defeat the forces of evil on behalf of his people. The rivers are spilt. The mountains writhe and are brought low. The deep waters raise their voice. This is cosmic, apocalyptic imagery. Habakkuk is singing about the "Day of the Lord" – the climax of all human history when God judges evil and makes all things new.

But still, the exodus is in the background. It's almost like Habakkuk has fused the Exodus and the Day of the Lord together in his imagination. It is as if he is saying that, yes, the Exodus was good. But what God is getting ready to do is even better.

And how will this all come about? Again, the text gives us a very subtle hint. Look at verse 13: *"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"* (Hab 3:13).

There are a lot of amazing things happening here. For example, in the phrase "salvation of your anointed" we have the root words for both "Yehsua" (יֵשׁוּעַ), which is where the name *Jesus* comes from; and "meshiach" (מְשִׁיחַ), which is where the title *messiah* comes from. Even more, there is a reference in this same verse about God crushing (נָחַם) "the head of the wicked." This is a reference to prophecy of Genesis 3:15, in which a son of Eve will once and for all crush the head of the serpent. Put altogether, Habakkuk has just made a connection between the true and better Exodus, the messiah, and the day in which Satan will be finally defeated by the power of God.

And this is not the only time in the Bible where there is a connection made between the Exodus and the work of the messiah. Many scholars have noted the parallels between the early part of the book of Exodus and the early part of the book of Matthew. In both stories, both Moses and Jesus are set apart from birth as those destined to bring deliverance to the people of God. In both stories, both Moses and Jesus have their young lives threatened by murderous tyrants. In both stories, both Moses and Jesus are called out of Egypt, they pass through waters, and are led into the wilderness for a period of forty intervals.

None of this is accidental. Matthew is telling his readers and he is telling us, “Jesus is the true and better Moses, who has been sent to lead God’s people into a true and better Exodus! Moses came to deliver the children of Israel from slavery unto Pharaoh and Egypt, but Jesus has come to deliver the people of God from slavery to sin and death!”

In his death and resurrection, Jesus became our true and better Passover lamb. And when he returns, he will lead us into the true and better Promised Land! There is a day that is yet to come, when Jesus will definitively and finally crush the head of Satan. This is God’s promised future for all who believe: *“He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away”* (Rev 21:4).

If we are those who are still yearning for that true and better Exodus to come, there are at least two major implications for us. Firstly, we are those who will never feel truly at home in this world. And secondly, we are those who have access to a truly eternal hope.

If we believe that our true and better Exodus is still to come, we must embrace all that it means to be a sojourner (1 Pt 2:11). We must embrace the identity of elect exiles (1 Pt 1:1). We live in kingdom of man, but our allegiance is to the kingdom of God.

If we believe that our true and better Exodus is still to come, we must not be those who shrink back in fear when times grow challenging and dark (cf. Heb 10:39). Rather, we are those who live with the unflinching hope that the kingdom of God will certainly prevail. We are to live as ambassadors of that future hope (cf. 2 Cor 5:20).

And on that final note, this is where Christians have an opportunity to bear a truly counter-cultural witness. For much of American culture, there is no eternal hope – there is only the here and now. For much of America, there is no hope of heaven – there is only the hope of making earth look like our little version of heaven. That’s why so many treat politics, fame, and wealth like they are the most important things in life. That’s why so many will sacrifice their integrity and their souls for a little more comfort, a little more money, or a little more approval. That’s why so many live for things that will be in a junkyard a hundred years from now.

But if we live as those with eternal hope, we can give the watching world a glimpse of a way of life that is not possible outside of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. We can appreciate the good things of this world without being enslaved to them.

However, such hope takes practice. It requires the discipline of placing this hope before through the prayer, through worship, through the reading of Scripture, and through following after God with like-minded believers who share our pilgrimage to the Heavenly City (cf. Heb 11:16).

### 3. Our Present Hope

Put together, when we remember God's past faithfulness and our God's promised future, we can have hope *in the present moment* despite all circumstances. If we believe the Bible to be true, no matter what hardships we may face, we are a people who know what God has promised. And more importantly, we know that we worship a God who has a well-established track record of keeping his promises.

This is why Habakkuk – a man who is unafraid of hard and honest questions – can end his book in this way: *"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 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"* (Hab 3:16–19a).

He is saying, "God, I know Babylon is coming, but my hope is in you. I know I will walk through the valley of the shadow of death, but I trust in your justice. God, even if I suffer poverty and hunger, you will be my strength, you will be my joy, you will be my hope."

For an ancient Jew, for the fig tree not to blossom, the vine not to bear fruit, and the flock of animals to go barren was pretty much the worse thing imaginable. I wonder what would Habakkuk's song look like in our own situation? And I wonder if we could honestly sing that song?

Could we honestly pray and sing, "God, even if our world becomes darker, I will praise you; God, even if our nation is overrun with wickedness and godlessness, you are my hope; God, even if the economy crashes and I lose my wealth, my comforts, and my world falls apart, I will rejoice in you!"?

And if we cannot pray that prayer honestly, might we ask the Lord to build and cultivate that type of hope in our hearts?

The Apostle Paul had that type of hope. That's why even when he was imprisoned and awaiting execution, he could write a letter like Philippians, which is all about joy. One of the more famous verses of that letter is Philippians 1:21: *"For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain."*

He is saying, "If I live, my life belongs to Christ. The good of my life; the bad of my life; the joy of my life; the sorrow of my life – it all belongs to Christ. But even if the Roman

Empire executes me and takes my life, I still get to be united with Christ in heaven. That is not a loss; in fact, that is infinite gain.”

That kind of hope cannot be conquered by a pandemic or a political election. That kind of hope cannot even be conquered by death.

We do have access to such a hope. Because Jesus has died for our sin, we can plead to God, “Lord, in wrath remember mercy” (Hab 3:2)! Because Jesus rose again and defeated death, we can rejoice no matter the circumstance.

Redeemer Christian Church, may we learn to steward this season in such a way that cultivates our faith. In our pain, may we look to the past where Christ died for us and rose again. May we look to the future when he returns again. And in the present moment, may learn how to worship God and stir our hearts to hope.

AMEN.

### **Discussion Starters for Gospel Community**

- 1.) Read Habakkuk 3. In your own words, how would you summarize this final chapter? In your own words, how would you summarize the message of Habakkuk?
- 2.) Habakkuk is a book that wrestles with hard questions of faith, but its final chapter is a song of praise. Why is worship so important for the Christian life? What songs of worship have you found comforting and edifying in times of struggle?
- 3.) Part of Habakkuk 3 includes poetic allusions to the Exodus, when God delivered Israel from slavery. Why is it so important to remember God’s past acts of salvation and faithfulness? What practices might help you remind your heart of God’s faithfulness to you?
- 4.) In addition to remembering the past, Habakkuk 3 envisions a future day when God will bring final judgment and justice to all creation. What are practical ways that we can stir our hearts to have hope in the future that the Bible envisions? How should God’s future promises (see Rev 21:1-4) bring us living hope in our present circumstances?
- 5.) As we near Holy Week, what are the most important things the Lord has shown or taught you in this season of Lent?