

In Wrath Remember Mercy

Expositions of Habakkuk

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Bible Text: Habakkuk 3:1-15

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Habakkuk chapter three.

This is a wonderful song Habakkuk sings. It is a prayer. It is a prayer with regard to judgment and salvation. Habakkuk chapter three, we will read the first 15 verses.

A prayer of Habakkuk the prophet, according to Shigionoth.

LORD, I have heard the report about You and I fear.
O LORD, revive Your work in the midst of the years,
In the midst of the years make it known;
In wrath remember mercy.

God comes from Teman,
And the Holy One from Mount Paran. Selah.
His splendor covers the heavens,
And the earth is full of His praise.
His radiance is like the sunlight;
He has rays flashing from His hand,
And there is the hiding of His power.
Before Him goes pestilence,
And plague comes after Him.
He stood and surveyed the earth;
He looked and startled the nations.
Yes, the perpetual mountains were shattered,
The ancient hills collapsed.
His ways are everlasting.
I saw the tents of Cushan under distress,
The tent curtains of the land of Midian were trembling.

Did the LORD rage against the rivers,
Or was Your anger against the rivers,
Or was Your wrath against the sea,
That You rode on Your horses,

On Your chariots of salvation?
Your bow was made bare,
The rods of chastisement were sworn. Selah.
You cleaved the earth with rivers.
The mountains saw You and quaked;
The downpour of waters swept by.
The deep uttered forth its voice,
It lifted high its hands.
Sun and moon stood in their places;
They went away at the light of Your arrows,
At the radiance of Your gleaming spear.
In indignation You marched through the earth;
In anger You trampled the nations.
You went forth for the salvation of Your people,
For the salvation of Your anointed.
You struck the head of the house of the evil
To lay him open from thigh to neck. Selah.
You pierced with his own spears
The head of his throngs.
They stormed in to scatter us;
Their exultation was like those
Who devour the oppressed in secret.
You trampled on the sea with Your horses,
On the surge of many waters.¹

May God be pleased to give us understanding in the reading of this his good Word.

Let's pray together.

Father, again, you are merciful and as we read in this text you come for the salvation of your people. There is judgment mixed with mercy as you come and save your people. Give us a good understanding of this your way of working in the world. And as we look at this text this morning, we pray that you would open our hearts and give us grace and mercy and cause us to look to you as the one who, in the midst of crisis, gives renewal and awakening and revival. Bless us to this end we do ask in the name of Jesus Christ who is the Lord. Amen.

In 1857 there was a financial crisis in America that began in New York. The matter that precipitated the crisis was the collapse of the Ohio Insurance Company's New York branch. Shortly after the collapse of this insurance company, 62 or 63 banks in New York suspended payments and there was a huge credit crunch. Samuel Prime, who was an associate editor of the *New York Observer* at the time and a Christian, wrote an editorial indicating that the financial crisis was a judgment brought against America by God.

¹ Habakkuk 3:1-15.

Our present financial crisis bears many similarities to that which took place in 1857. And what are we to do in the midst of such crises? In the end there is only one thing that Christians and that Christian churches can do and ought to do. Seek the Lord. And this is exactly what Habakkuk was doing in the midst of the crisis in which he found himself. You see this in verse two of chapter three in Habakkuk. “LORD, I have heard the report about You and I fear. O LORD, revive Your work in the midst of the years, In the midst of the years make it known; In wrath remember mercy.”²

And so the posture of Habakkuk in the midst of the crisis in which he found himself was to seek the Lord to revive his work. And this is what you need to do and this is what I need to do in the midst of the crisis in which we find ourselves in this country today. Seek the Lord in the midst of our own moral and economic and political crisis. Seek the Lord in the midst of our own moral and economic and political crisis.

Surely there was a political crisis and a moral crisis that came upon Judah and Jerusalem. Of course this is the background of our text this morning. And as you look at the text you understand, or you should understand, that this song, this poem of Habakkuk, is a highly symbolic and emotional song and poem.

Look at the first verse in Habakkuk chapter three. “A prayer of Habakkuk the prophet, according to Shigionoth.”³ This word, “Shigionoth,” is only found a couple of places in the Bible. Apparently it refers to a highly emotional song, a highly emotional poem. And surely in the midst of the crisis in which Habakkuk found himself, he was crying out to God. And this is part of what he has to say, this song which he gives to the people.

And this song contains highly symbolic language. Let’s look at a couple of the verses here. Look at verse six for example. “He stood and surveyed the earth; He looked and startled the nations. Yes, the perpetual mountains were shattered.”⁴

In the Old Testament, mountains are often symbolic of nations. And you see nations and mountains packed together in two lines of the song. “He looked and startled the nations. Yes, the perpetual mountains were shattered.”⁵

And then look at verse eight. “Did the LORD rage against the rivers, Or was Your anger against the rivers?”⁶ The rivers in the world often form boundaries and God often alters the boundaries of nations. He is the one who is in control of all things. And then the stanza goes on. “Or was Your wrath against the sea?”⁷ No, it wasn’t just against the waters that were in the Mediterranean or the waters that were on the oceans. The seas often represented the tumult of the unbelieving world, the unbelieving populous. The mass of unbelievers in the world are represented by the sea.

² Habakkuk 3:2.

³ Habakkuk 3:1.

⁴ Habakkuk 3:6.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Habakkuk 3:6.

⁷ Ibid.

And then look, if you would, at verse nine.

Your bow was made bare,
The rods of chastisement were sworn.
You cleaved the earth with rivers.
The mountains saw You and quaked⁸

It wasn't just the physical mountains that quaked at the presence of the Lord. It was the nations that quaked and the people of the nations that quaked.

And then look at verse 12. "In indignation You marched through the earth; In anger You trampled the nations."⁹ And then compare with this verse 15. "You trampled on the sea."¹⁰ You have a picture of horses galloping across the sea. "You trampled on the sea with Your horses, On the surge of many waters."¹¹ The surge of the sea is the surge of the unbelieving world and the unbelieving multitudes.

As I mentioned when we read in Revelation chapter 13 you have similar language. Look back there, again, if you would with me at Revelation chapter 13, Revelation chapter 13 beginning with verse one. "And the dragon stood on the sand of the seashore."¹² Here is the picture of the devil, a dragon standing on the edge of the waters. "Then I saw a beast coming up out of the sea, having ten horns and seven heads, and on his horns were ten diadems, and on his heads were blasphemous names."¹³

In the Bible beasts, as well as mountains, often represent nations, rebel nations. You remember in the book of Daniel four different beasts were representative of four different world empires. And so we have an empire, as it were a nation, rising up out of the tumult of the peoples, the sea. And this beast is in the image of the devil.

"And the beast which I saw was like a leopard, and his feet were like those of a bear, and his mouth like the mouth of a lion. And the dragon gave him his power and his throne and great authority."¹⁴ The devil was the power behind this world empire, this nation. And so it is today, friends. If you read in verse seven:

It was also given to him to make war with the saints and to overcome them, and authority over every tribe and people and tongue and nation was given to him. All who dwell on the earth will worship him, everyone whose name has not been written from the foundation of the world in the book of life of the Lamb who has been slain.¹⁵

⁸ Habakkuk 3:9-10.

⁹ Habakkuk 3:12.

¹⁰ Habakkuk 3:13.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Revelation 13:1.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Revelation 13:2.

¹⁵ Revelation 13:7-8.

People today worship government. People today worship world powers. And we see this quite readily in the news in our day.

Turn back, now if you would, to Habakkuk. Here we have this song, this song sung in the midst of economic and moral and political crisis in Israel, in Jerusalem. And the song tells the story of God coming for the purpose of judgment. We see this quite specifically in verses three through seven. Look at them with me.

“God comes from Teman, And the Holy One from Mount Paran.”¹⁶ The picture is of Edom on one hand and the area of Paran, that is the area of Sinai, on the other hand. And God is coming up from Sinai, from this region. He is coming up in judgment. Habakkuk is giving a picture of the coming judgment of Jerusalem using the past and using the imagery of the past. In the past God had arisen from Sinai and he had led the people into the Promised Land. Part of the purpose for his leading those people into the Promised Land was the judgment of the Canaanites who were in that land.

Again, verse three,

God comes from Teman,
And the Holy One from Mount Paran. Selah.
His splendor covers the heavens,
And the earth is full of His praise.¹⁷

When the people stood around Mount Sinai it seemed as though the whole heaven was filled with the splendor of God. He came down upon Mount Sinai and the earth was full of his praise. The Ground itself was rising up in praise. “His radiance is like the sunlight.”¹⁸ When God came down upon the mountain his radiance was great and his glory was great. You cannot look directly at the sun without being blinded. And so it is with God. You cannot look directly into his glory. “His radiance is like the sunlight. He has rays flashing from his hand.”¹⁹ His power comes from his hands. He reaches forth to do his bidding and his radiance and splendor shines forth, as it were, from his hands. “And there is the hiding of his power.”²⁰ Yes, his power can be hidden so that we cannot see it. But then suddenly it flashes forth.

“Before Him goes pestilence, And plague comes after Him.”²¹ So it was when the people were brought up out of Egypt. Plagues came before their being delivered and the plagues that came after as the Egyptians were swamped in the sea. “Before Him goes pestilence, And plague comes after Him.”²²

¹⁶ Habakkuk 3:3.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Habakkuk 3:4.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Habakkuk 3:5.

²² Habakkuk 3:5.

He stood and surveyed the earth; He looked and startled the nations.”²³ You remember when the spies went in to Jericho and talked to Rahab. They received the testimony that the people in Jericho and in the surrounding territories were terrified because of what God had done in bringing Israel up out of Egypt and in conquering the lands on the East side of Jordan.

“Yes, the perpetual mountains were shattered.”²⁴ Here is the picture Habakkuk gives us. The nations were shattered at the thought of God’s greatness.

The ancient hills collapsed.
His ways are everlasting.
I saw the tents of Cushan under distress,
The tent curtains of the land of Midian were trembling.²⁵

The commentators refer us back to Gideon’s triumph over the Midianites and to the wars that were fought against the Canaanites.

Yes, God comes in judgment and Habakkuk uses the pictures of the past to indicate what God is about to do. Jerusalem will be overcome by the Babylonians. But the Babylonians, they too will be judged for their ferocity and their injustices.

And when this judgment comes the text tells us that God will strike at the head of evil. Look at verses 13 and 14.

You went forth for the salvation of Your people,
For the salvation of Your anointed.
You struck the head of the house of the evil
To lay him open from thigh to neck.
You pierced with his own spears
The head of his throngs.
They stormed in to scatter us;
Their exultation was like those Who
devour the oppressed in secret.²⁶

God comes against the head of evil. In the days of Habakkuk, the head of evil was seen in the rise of the Babylonian Empire. The head of Babylon was first seen in that evil monarch, Nebuchadnezzar. And then later the head of evil was seen, as we understand it from the book of Daniel, in Belshazzar, the final emperor, the final king of Babylon. And he was overcome by Cyrus. The Babylonian Empire was crushed by the Persians. And, significantly enough, when you read the history, Cyrus was able to go into Babylon with very little resistance because of her degradation and corruption on one hand and because

²³ Habakkuk 3:5-6.

²⁴ Habakkuk 3:6.

²⁵ Habakkuk 3:6-7.

²⁶ Habakkuk 3:14-15.

of his own tactical prowess on the other hand. The head of evil was struck down. And Habakkuk now tells the people this, indeed, will be the case.

We remember this same idea from the book of Genesis. Genesis chapter three and verse 15. “I will put enmity Between you and the woman,”²⁷ God says to the devil,

I will put enmity
Between you and the woman,
And between your seed and her seed;
He shall bruise you on the head,
And you shall bruise him on the heel.²⁸

The seed of the woman will crush the *head* of the serpent. This is the imagery we get from the book of Genesis. And we know the fulfillment of this promise given to us in Genesis chapter three and verse 15 is Jesus Christ. He strikes the devil and disposes of his power in the cross. And there, as we have said before, we have the conjunction of judgment and of mercy.

But what does this judgment of evil and the striking of the head of evil accomplish? It accomplishes salvation. The Lord’s judgment works salvation. Look at verse eight in our text once again. “Did the LORD rage against the rivers, Or was Your anger against the rivers, Or was Your wrath against the sea?”²⁹ If you understand the imagery of the sea as the multitude of the nations, was there just wrath for the sake of wrath against the nations? Was there vengeance just for the sake of vengeance? This is how we often operate. We strike out against the enemy just so the enemy will be defeated. We simply desire vengeance. But there is greater purpose to what God is doing.

Did the LORD rage against the rivers,
Or was Your anger against the rivers,
Or was Your wrath against the sea,
That You rode on Your horses,
*On Your chariots of salvation?*³⁰

The whole purpose of bringing judgment against the nations was the salvation of his people. Look at verse 13. “You went forth for the salvation of Your people, For the salvation of Your anointed.”³¹ This was the purpose of your judgment. This was your purpose in striking the head of evil. It was to bring about the salvation of your people.

Look again at verse 13, “You went forth for the salvation of Your people, For the salvation of Your anointed.”³² On one hand, the word “anointed” refers very specifically

²⁷ Genesis 3:15.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Habakkuk 3:8.

³⁰ Ibid. Emphasis Added.

³¹ Habakkuk 3:13.

³² Ibid.

to an individual. The word “anointed” is the Hebrew “messiah” which is translated in the New Testament as Christ. It is *the* one, *the* anointed on one hand. But on the other hand there is here what we call a collective singular. It is like the word “seed.” When you go to the hardware store or go to Lowe’s or go to Home Depot and you buy a bag of seed what do you get? Thousands of seeds in that bag. And the word “seed” is a collective singular. This singular word encompasses a huge collective.

And so it may be that we have this same concept in the idea of the anointed. The anointed on one hand is ultimately the Christ. But those of you who are united to Christ are benefactors of the good things that Christ gives to you. You are beneficiaries of the anointing of the Holy Spirit. And so, through the Christ, the anointed become the people of God. And God comes in judgment for what purpose? He comes to rescue his people, his anointed. And we know this is exactly what took place. God in his providence was pleased to bring the people out of captivity from Babylon and bring them back to their own land where they would rebuild their city and rebuild their temple and continue the worship of God in that place. And so, the salvation God brings comes by way of judgment.

And what does this tell us? There is revival in the midst of wrath. There is revival in the midst of judgment. Go back to the beginning of the song once again. Look at verse two.

LORD, I have heard the report about Thee and I fear.
O LORD, revive Thy work in the midst of the years,
In the midst of the years make it known;
In wrath remember mercy.³³

Habakkuk was deeply concerned about the sin in Judah and in Jerusalem. “Why do you not answer the problem of sin, Lord?” God says to Habakkuk, “I will bring the Babylonians as the hand of my judgment against Jerusalem.” Habakkuk responds, “Time out, Lord, time out. Are you going to bring a less righteous nation against Jerusalem?” God gives this assurance. “Fear not, Habakkuk, I will also judge Babylon.” God does so. Then he brings the people out of captivity in the judgment of Babylon.

Look at verse two again. “I have heard the report about Thee and I fear.”³⁴ Yes, Habakkuk is in fear and trembling at the prospect of what will take place, but then he prays. “O LORD, revive Thy work in the midst of the years, In the midst of the years make it known; In wrath remember mercy.”³⁵

“In the midst of years, Lord...” This phrase probably refers to the period of time between the destruction of Jerusalem on one hand and the destruction of Babylon on the other hand. In the midst of this time span, in the midst of these years, bring revival, Lord. Reawaken your people.

³³ Habakkuk 3:2.

³⁴ Habakkuk 3:2.

³⁵ Ibid.

And the biblical history is plain. This, too, is exactly what happened. When in captivity, Daniel was reminded of the words of Jeremiah. The people would be in captivity for 70 years. He realized that this time period was about to elapse. He began to pray earnestly that God would deliver his people and awaken his people.

And Ezekiel, you may remember, in Ezekiel chapter 37, was requested by God in a vision to go out and prophesy to a valley of dry bones. Those bones represented the nation of Israel. “Prophesy, son of man, prophesy. Let the breath come and enter those bones.”³⁶ The nation *was* renewed and revived. It left captivity and returned to Jerusalem to engage in the biblical worship of God.

The Bible indicates that return from captivity was a second exodus. The first exodus was a picture of the deliverance of God’s people from the captivity of sin. And our Lord himself in instituting the Lord’s Supper hearkens back to the passover in Egypt. He calls himself the new covenant. His blood is the blood of the new covenant. And so these releases from captivity foreshadow Jesus Christ and what he has done.

Habakkuk prays in verse two, once again, “Revive Thy work in the midst of the years, In the midst of the years make it known; In wrath remember mercy.”³⁷ Friends, we, too, are in the midst of years. We stand between the judgment of Jerusalem in 70 AD where the sacrifice of Christ was made full and assured to be the only sacrifice for sin. We stand between that time and the final judgment which is to come. We too are in the midst of years. And I say to you this morning, if Habakkuk prayed, “Oh Lord, in the midst of years revive your work. In the midst of years remember mercy in the midst of wrath,” we, too, can pray as Habakkuk prayed. And this is the point that God desires us to get. This is the point for you to get from this text.

We are in crisis in many respects in this country. There is a moral crisis. And all we have to do is look around just a little bit. Where do we find truth? Oh, that there would be truth in the media. Oh, that there would be truth in politics. There is a moral crisis. And there is an economic crisis which has been obvious. And in part, this economic crisis stems from the moral crisis. And there is a political crisis. Politicians desire raw power just for the sake of power. And it doesn’t matter your political persuasion or your party affiliation. When politicians desire raw power for the sake of power they place themselves in opposition to the God of heaven. There is an economic and moral and political crisis. And what are you to do in the midst of this moral and economic and political crisis? You are to follow the example of Habakkuk. You are to pray that God will revive his work in the midst of years, in the midst of this current economic, political, and moral crisis.

At the beginning of the sermon, I mentioned this associate editor of the *New York Observer*, Samuel Prime, who did observe that the crisis in 1857 was a judgment of God. Samuel Prime also wrote a little book called, *The Power of Prayer*. He wrote this book in response to prayer meetings that arose in New York City. They were begun by a

³⁶ See Ezekiel 37:9.

³⁷ Habakkuk 3:2.

fellow that I mentioned when we began this series on Habakkuk, Jeremiah Lamphier. He was a business man and a lay worker in a church. And he began Wednesday morning prayer meetings. At the first prayer meeting six people arrived. And then the next week a few more and in the next week a few more.

And this little book, *The Power of Prayer*, indicates that in a two year period, after these prayer meetings were begun, a million people were converted in New York City. This is the estimate. Imagine what would take place in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, USA if 100,000 people were converted to faith in Christ. Imagine. We would no doubt call that a revival.

There is a crisis, an economic crisis, a moral crisis, a political crisis. What are you to do? What am I to do? Pray. Pray for the renewal of God's Work in the midst of our own moral, economic and political crisis. Look at Habakkuk chapter three and verse two once again.

LORD, I have heard the report about Thee and I fear.
O LORD, revive Thy work in the midst of the years,
In the midst of the years make it known;
In wrath remember mercy.³⁸

Pray, friends, pray in the midst of our own economic, political and moral crisis, pray that God will revive his work in the midst of years.

Let's pray together now.

Lord, how are we to respond to those things which crowd us in the culture, in the media, in the political arena? How are we to respond as Christians? We take our lead this morning, Father, from Habakkuk. Yes, you are about the business of judging evil and you will do so. But why do you do it? We learn that you do it because you are about the business of saving your people. And this gives us good reason to pray, Father, and so we do so. We pray, "In the midst of the years in which we find ourselves today, that you would be pleased to revive your work and that you would extend mercy in the midst of wrath. And we pray, Father, that you would impel us, as your people, to be a people of prayer, a people who would seek your face in the midst of this moral, economic and political crisis. Grant it, we pray, and revive us we ask in the name of Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.

³⁸ Habakkuk 3:2.