

Message: Habakkuk 3

Preface:

Last week we talked about the way our trust or faith in the faithfulness of Jesus is what makes us right with God, and how Paul, in particular, lifted up Habakkuk 2 to prove that this was always the way God has considered His people faithful to him, set upright, when it comes to His relationship with us. It was a lot to talk about in a little bit of time, so today, I figured we'd talk about a little for a really, really long time. Sound good?

I'm kidding. Today's passage, though, is not anything like last week's in terms of, oh, its foundational importance in Christian theology.

Today we're looking at the last chapter of Habakkuk. It's a psalm, a poem-prayer.

Fit:

And remember, from a rhetorical perspective, today's passage makes a LOT of sense. Scholars argue whether or not Habakkuk himself is behind today's psalm, or if Habakkuk actually ends at 2:20, in the great call for silence that Habakkuk proclaims. They wonder if today's passage was just tacked on by someone along the way. And if it was, fine; I don't care. We have Habakkuk as we have it.

But I think it fits really well.

Remember, Habakkuk's outline is easy. Habakkuk asks God what He's going to do to deal with Judah's sin; God says He'll use Babylon to destroy Jerusalem. Habakkuk is dismayed, and asks God to explain Himself. God doesn't, but just notes that Babylon will be judged, too, even as His own glory fills the earth. Habakkuk has nothing to say to that.

There's something deeply unsatisfying about that ending. It could end there, I guess. But to go on from there, and offer praise after silence, and a recognition of God's power, capacity, and, oh, right to deserve praise fits so well that if Habakkuk didn't declare this psalm, I see why someone else said it needed to go here.

We'll talk about the psalm Habakkuk declares, how it fits with what we've seen, and how God might use what we read for our own increase in trust and faithfulness, even this far away from Habakkuk and the situation God's People faced.

Let's pray.

Prayer:

Hymn of Praise Ending in a Call to Persevere:

Technically, today's "prayer of Habakkuk," as it's titled, falls into a category of psalms called "hymns of praise," which are

just that: songs, poems, about how good God is. They recognize God as the creator of everything and as the nurturer and sustainer of Israel, God's People. They're born out of both this fundamental truth, and the goodness the particular psalmist--a psalm writer--is experiencing at the moment.

These psalms recite what God has done for God's People or for the particular author. Some of them are about Israel's king, some about Mt. Zion and Jerusalem, some about personal rescue, some definitely written for use during special festivals, the same way we only sing Christmas Carols at Christmastime (Cf. Kraus 1993, 38ff.).

Most Psalms end with a call--whether to everyone around, or just to the author's own heart--to trust in God because whatever the circumstances, God is trustworthy. These "hymns of praise," don't just end that way, they're full of that stuff. Today's "hymn of praise," though, ends especially with a call for perseverance.

It fits perfectly with all Habakkuk has said before this. Let's walk through it. And keep in mind that while it's written with "me" and "I" all over the place, it was very likely meant to be sung by the worshipping community, together.

Habakkuk's Psalm: Intro

We read this, first:

3 A prayer of Habakkuk the prophet. On shigionoth.[a]

Don't ask me what "shigionoth" is. Nobody knows. It's probably a musical term, some direction for whoever is going to lead the group singing of this psalm. It could have been a tune that everyone knew. Except this is the only place we see the word in the Old Testament. So it was almost certainly technical. Many psalms, Habakkuk's too, have the word "selah" in them. This is another word we don't know, but was probably also worship direction: either a call to reflect on what was just said, or a sign that there was going to be some sort of musical interlude for awhile. We aren't sure.

But after this mysterious heading, Habakkuk dives in:

Habakkuk's Psalm: v2:

***2 Lord, I have heard of your fame;
I stand in awe of your deeds, Lord.
Repeat them in our day,
in our time make them known;
in wrath remember mercy.***

This makes sense, right? Good King Josiah is dead, Jehoiakim is reigning, and nothing good is happening in the life of Israel at all. "Do it again! Be good to us again!" is the prayer of anybody who wants to be faithful and doesn't see God doing

much. Habakkuk prays it. To pray “in wrath, remember mercy,” makes sense, too. We see, particularly in Romans, how the “wrath of the Lord” takes the shape of letting us have what we want. Judah has what it wants, by and by and large. Its society is driven by those who don’t care about God, and all the blessings that were meant to come with their special covenant relationship with God have been lost. Habakkuk is asking God to keep them from the effects of their own sin, and be merciful. It’s another prayer of anybody who wants to live for God. It’s Jesus, prayer: “Forgive them, they don’t know what they do.”

Habakkuk’s Psalm: vv3-4: Boilerplate

And like any good Hymn of Praise, Habakkuk is going to remind us who God is by presenting him as God over all creation, a God who is on the move for His People and full of power.

He starts with a mention of Teman, and Mount Paran, places in the Bible that show up here and there, often, it seems, when people start talking about God’s greatness. So Habakkuk is just sort of on theme here, you know?

***3 God came from Teman,
the Holy One from Mount Paran.[b]
His glory covered the heavens
and his praise filled the earth.***

***4 His splendor was like the sunrise;
rays flashed from his hand,
where his power was hidden.***

This is boiler-plate, “God is powerful” stuff, you know? But then Habakkuk takes a turn that is a little, oh, weird to our ears:

Habakkuk’s Psalm: vv5-7: God’s History of Protection

***5 Plague went before him;
pestilence followed his steps.***

***6 He stood, and shook the earth;
he looked, and made the nations tremble.***

***The ancient mountains crumbled
and the age-old hills collapsed—
but he marches on forever.***

***7 I saw the tents of Cushan in distress,
the dwellings of Midian in anguish.***

But what Habakkuk is doing here is recalling times God has protected Israel. He’s referencing the plagues and pestilences that coaxed Egypt into releasing the Israelites from their 400 years of slavery. He’s recalling Exodus. In talking about the “tents of Cushan” he’s probably referencing a time we can read about in judges 3, when Israel needed saving and God saved them through a younger son of the famously faithful spy, Caleb. When he talks about the

“dwellings of Midian” he’s referencing Judges 6, and how God used Gideon to save Israel. This is just a recitation of God’s power to save His People, and Habakkuk is remembering it for us all as we sing with him.

Habakkuk’s Psalm: vv8-15: Two Things!

And Habakkuk turns back to Exodus, again, remembering when God saved His People from Pharaoh who was washed away when the Sea of Reeds closed in on him. Habakkuk sings about how God is God over all creation, and uses His power for His People’s protection.

And Habakkuk is leaning into cultural traditions of the Ancient World in these next verses. Earlier, when he talked about how “rays flashed from God’s hands,” he was probably making a reference to lightning. And what Habakkuk is doing is presenting God as God over not just creation, but especially over storms.

Storms were impressive, powerful, terrible--they still are, right? Storms reshape the world, cause intense devastation. They’re outside our control. And while we’re scared of them, when a storm is reasonable, is low-key, that rain that comes gives life, we depend on it. Especially if we’re living in an agricultural society.

So in the Ancient Near East, the ancient world, people were in awe of the stormy weather, that they loved and feared it

at the same time. And an incredibly popular ancient pagan God was the Storm God, ba'al. Every time we've seen a minor prophet rail against idolatry, most of those times the prophets have been railing against the worship of ba'al, which Israel always seemed tempted to engage in alongside their neighbors.

So Habakkuk, in what he's about to do, is emphasizing that ba'al isn't the god of storms; Yahweh is the God of Storms, the God of all creation, in fact.

So it's clever, really. In just a few verses that I'll read in a second, Habakkuk is doing two things: He's reminding those who sing with him that God is the one who saved them from Pharaoh and will save them again, and that God is the *real* Storm God, not ba'al, who they might be tempted to worship if they start to panic or feel anxious about Babylon destroying Judah and all Israel going into exile.

Notice this, as I read: God took out Pharaoh, and will protect them again, and He can, because He's the "real" Storm God, not ba'al.

***8 Were you angry with the rivers, Lord?
Was your wrath against the streams?
Did you rage against the sea
when you rode your horses
and your chariots to victory?***

**9 You uncovered your bow,
you called for many arrows.
You split the earth with rivers;
10 the mountains saw you and writhed.
Torrents of water swept by;
the deep roared
and lifted its waves on high.
11 Sun and moon stood still in the heavens
at the glint of your flying arrows,
at the lightning of your flashing spear.
12 In wrath you strode through the earth
and in anger you threshed the nations.
13 You came out to deliver your people,
to save your anointed one.
You crushed the leader of the land of wickedness,
you stripped him from head to foot.
14 With his own spear you pierced his head
when his warriors stormed out to scatter us,
gloating as though about to devour
the wretched who were in hiding.
15 You trampled the sea with your horses,
churning the great waters.**

That would be really powerful to sing if we didn't have to explain it first, you know? And notice, this: All this is an echo of what Habakkuk already said: It's the righteous who will live by their faith.

Those who are right with God will survive Babylon's destruction by staying faithful. If they turn to some pagan, false god, then they'll lose out on the saving power of the God who has already saved Israel in the past from Pharaoh, and who will save them again.

Habakkuk's Psalm: v16: Response at the News

After this, Habakkuk says something that can be hard to figure out. We read:

***16 I heard and my heart pounded,
my lips quivered at the sound;
decay crept into my bones,
and my legs trembled.***

***Yet I will wait patiently for the day of calamity
to come on the nation invading us.***

Here's what I think is happening here. Remember, all this is Habakkuk's prayer, right? Regardless of if we've been invited to sing it with him. And remember, Habakkuk, in 2:1, demanded that God answer how he dare use Babylon. He said, there:

***I will stand at my watch
and station myself on the ramparts;
I will look to see what he will say to me,
and what answer I am to give to this complaint.[a]***

So God answered him. And Habakkuk called for silence, then sang the Psalm we're reading now. In v16 of chapter three, he's sharing with us, authentically and transparently, what his personal response to God's answer was.

***16 I heard and my heart pounded,
my lips quivered at the sound;
decay crept into my bones,
and my legs trembled.
Yet I will wait patiently for the day of calamity
to come on the nation invading us.***

This is what was going through Habakkuk's head when he said "Let all the earth be silent." And so, so importantly, we realize that Habakkuk really does trust that God will bring on Babylon what they've been sowing.

***Yet I will wait patiently for the day of calamity
to come on the nation invading us.***

He'll wait. As far as we know, he died waiting. It didn't happen for 60 some years, after all. But if we keep reading, we realize that he was going to wait patiently no matter how much patience he needed. He heard God when God said what we read last week: "though it linger, wait for it." "It" being, of course, Babylon's destruction. We see this commitment to wait for it, to keep trusting God, no matter.

Habakkuk's Psalm: vv17-19: Commitment to Trust

***17 Though the fig tree does not bud
and there are no grapes on the vines,
though the olive crop fails
and the fields produce no food,
though there are no sheep in the pen
and no cattle in the stalls,
18 yet I will rejoice in the Lord,
I will be joyful in God my Savior.
19 The Sovereign Lord is my strength;
he makes my feet like the feet of a deer,
he enables me to tread on the heights.***

Habakkuk is going to trust God no matter what. He's living up to God's reminder to him that "the righteous will live by their faithfulness." It's Habakkuk's faithfulness, the trust he lives with as someone right with God, that will help him survive whatever comes his way. God is his strength, God is what gives him courage and persistence and support, even if everything he has come to expect about the world fails. God, who keeps His promises, will be what Habakkuk takes joy in, even if God's promise to give to Babylon what they've been dishing out lingers for much longer than Habakkuk wants it to. And you get the sense from his prophecy and his psalm that he knows it's going to come later than he'd like.

Habakkuk is completely oriented toward God: His hope is in who God has been and who God promises to be. His strength is in God's protection of him as the God over all creation. His joy is in God who is for him and His people, and who God is, above all else, is faithful to them, no matter how faithless they are.

Habakkuk's Psalm: Musical Directions

And we actually read the note Habakkuk leaves along with the psalm:

For the director of music. On my stringed instruments.

And what I love about this is that Habakkuk knew this would be passed along, this psalm of his. Knew it would need some direction, need cues whose meanings we've since lost, but which Habakkuk's first readers probably knew. He knew, basically, that this would become worship.

And worship drives us rehearse and remember and replay the messages behind scripture again and again and again. When we gather like we are right now we're positioned to locate ourselves back in the story of how God is working out creation's redemption. Israel took this Psalm with them when they went into exile. They had it for the 60-some years they were in Babylon until Assyria freed them and allowed them to return to, and rebuild, Jerusalem.

And Habakkuk left them with a song that, every time they sang it, would remind them to stay faithful so they would survive. His words, full of “me” and “I” at the end became their words, recited together, became a sort of living reminder to keep the faith until God’s promise to give back to Babylon the “day of calamity” that they had been causing everyone else would come true.

(And we, a little bit, we who still wait for “the glory of the knowledge of the Lord” to fill the earth, we’re still waiting on the smallest bit of what Habakkuk’s first audience was waiting on.)

There are so many lessons we could take away from this.

Conclusions: Reading Closely

We could say, simply, that we have to read biblical books closely. Habakkuk’s Psalm may have been written later on, well after Habakkuk prophesied, but if it was...man, did the author do a *great job* connecting it to what Habakkuk said before. We have to at least aspire to read scripture as closely as that imagined author did. And yet, without Habakkuk 1 & 2, Habakkuk 3 would make very little sense. It’s part of a whole. I think it belongs here, and Habakkuk’s hand was in it. This Psalm, which can feel “tacked on,” isn’t. And yet, if we don’t read closely we’ll miss all the things that connect it with what has gone before. Habakkuk 3 makes sense because of Habakkuk 1 and 2.

How closely do we read the Bible? Do we read it all?

Conclusions: Locating Ourselves

And when it comes to making sense, we have to do what Habakkuk models here, which is keep God in mind. He's positioning those who come after him, and he's remembering himself, that God is central to their lives. That's a good message when things are good; it's a necessary message when things are falling apart around them. And for those Israelites who are going into exile they have to live with the same focus on God that Habakkuk models. They have to.

They are going to be tempted, for multiple generations, to give into the society they are surrounded in. They'll be in Babylon, tempted to worship ba'al, tempted to forget God. As exiles, their very existence will be proof for haters that Yahweh is powerless. After all, if God was so great, would they be exiled? Would Jerusalem be dirt?

And yet Habakkuk's Psalm drives home this main point: What God has done for His People God will do again. They have to stay His People, they have to keep faith with God, they have to reject ba'al along with all the scoffers who want them to give up on waiting for this prophecy of Habakkuk to come true.

We aren't under the same pressure, by and large. I mean,

Christians have it pretty good in our society, you know? We really do. We're inconvenienced now and then, because we had it even better 50 years ago, but it's not like we're not on top when it comes to religious privilege in the world. We've got enormous privilege. And yet, for that very reason, somehow, it can be hard to keep faith with God because, honestly, now Christianity falls into the category of lifestyle choice, not core identity for many people. We're vegetarians, cross-fit enthusiasts, dog-lovers, Christians. We're not pinched, pressured, tempted to give up God the way Habakkuk's grandchildren would be.

And ironically, because we are not forced to defend our faithfulness all the time, we are more likely to forget that our faithfulness needs to be protected. We lose Jesus through slow erosion, gently rising waters, not tsunamis and hurricanes.

Habakkuk's children and grandchildren needed to remember God had been faithful to them and would be faithful to them. They needed to remember that God was really God, was in control, and the claims made by those around them about who was really in charge--ba'al, in their case--were lies.

And they needed this because, you know, Jerusalem was gone, their king was dead, and they had been exiled. The tangible proof in front of them was that God, at worst, was gone, was powerless, had never existed to begin with, and at

best, was...away, inactive.

When Habakkuk promises to himself, “I will wait patiently,” and his grandchildren sing this song after him, it is a song of defiance. It is a claim that they will not give up their faithfulness, they will live, survive, on account of it, and their God’s glory will cover the earth. They reject what’s in front of their eyes:

***17 Though the fig tree does not bud
and there are no grapes on the vines,
though the olive crop fails
and the fields produce no food,
though there are no sheep in the pen
and no cattle in the stalls,
18 yet I will rejoice in the Lord,
I will be joyful in God my Savior.
19 The Sovereign Lord is my strength;
he makes my feet like the feet of a deer,
he enables me to tread on the heights.***

This is defiant trust. A claim about what’s true when all the facts speak otherwise. This is what sustains an entire culture for generations.

If, right now, you need sustained, if you need to remember that “the Sovereign Lord” is your strength,” that God is the one who makes you quick and sure-footed, and all joy is his gift, then, please, do what Habakkuk did:

Remember what God has done. Remember who God is. We orbit God, God doesn't orbit us. Our place is in Him, not the other way around. Lean into your record of all God's providence to you and to us, God's People around you.

And if a slow erosion is happening in your relationship with God, a withering on the vine, then return to Him, double-your efforts at keeping Jesus in mind, pray that the Spirit would interrupt you, and hedge your losses, and rebuild your trust. Its only in that trust that we can survive what life itself, full of sharp and dull troubles, brings our way until Easter comes everywhere, and death in all its forms dies away.