

Text: Habakkuk 3:1-19

Title: Mercy, Power, and Faith

Truth: God's people trust in Him because of His mercy and power.

Date/Location: Sundays June 21 and 28, 2020 at FBC

Introduction

Habakkuk's two questions have been answered. God will do something in his days to deal with the injustice and violence in Judah, and He is well aware of the wickedness of the people He will use to carry out judgment against Judah. In fact, they will get their just reward in due time.

Habakkuk has expressed trust in God as the basic foundation upon which he deals with these questions. Life with God is a life of faith from beginning to end. You don't start by faith and then drop the whole matter of faith. You start and continue and continue and continue and finish with faith in God. This faith is how all believing people (all people, period) should respond when troubled by the questions of evil and the prosperity of evil people. Your spiritual maturity is demonstrated when you can trust in God when you face such questions.

Now, the prophet prays in response to all that he has heard.

I. Call for God's Mercy, v. 1-2

A. **Shigionoth** is a Hebrew word with no known exact English equivalent. So, Bible translators spell it with English letters and let the reader deal with it. This is a case where translation cannot completely explain or interpret the original text.

The word is definitely plural, unlike its singular usage in the superscription of Psalm 7, which is the only other use of the word in the Hebrew Bible. It could refer to an instrument (see the end of 3:19). Or, it could refer to the style of the music or form of the verse that is used. It seems to be some kind of musical or worship term that is lost to us.

In the end, we can understand that Habakkuk makes his prayer in conjunction with some kind of music, perhaps to make it more memorable or to highlight the emotion of what he is saying.

- B. The prophet tells the Lord that he fears what is going to happen. He believes that the Lord is going to do something so devastating to his nation that he quakes. Obviously he believes what was said, otherwise he would just laugh it off. He knows this is no laughing matter. This is life and death for the nation of Judah.
- C. His prayer request is expressed in three phrases that communicate a single truth: **please save your people.**
1. Revive your work. The “work” of God toward humanity is a saving work. Habakkuk did not have the benefit of looking back upon the greatest saving work of God done in Jesus Christ like we do. But he could reflect upon the mercy of God at the Garden of Eden; he could think on the salvation of the fledgling Hebrew people who were delivered from famine in Egypt; he could look back on the mighty saving act of God to deliver the people from the iron furnace of Egypt after they had become slaves there; for that matter, he could recall how the Lord delivered all the firstborn from the destroying angel when he passed over them as He judged the Egyptians the final time before Israel left Egypt; he could consider God’s provision of victory over Assyria during the days of Hezekiah (Isaiah 37:36, 2 Kings 19:35); he could recall the victory against the coalition of Ammon, Moab, and Edom against Israel during Jehoshaphat’s reign (2 Chronicles 20). There was no shortage of merciful and saving acts of God. The point of it was that Habakkuk was asking God to “do it again.” Save us again, O Lord, like you did in the past.
 2. Make it known. This reiterates what was just written. To “make known” is to “display” or proclaim for the world to see. Often humans do this about the works of God, but other times God does it Himself, as He did with Pharaoh. See Exodus 9:14, 1 Chronicles 16:8, Psalm 78:5, 89:1, 105:1, 106:8, 145:10-13.
 3. In wrath remember mercy. Habakkuk knew the wrath of God was coming, but he was pleading with God to not forget His

merciful kindness to His people. He would agree with David, who would rather fall into the hands of God than the hands of man, because God is merciful (2 Samuel 24:14).

This is a good text to remember when you are going through a tough time. Pray and cry out to God that He would remember mercy toward you. Just like the man who cried out to God to be merciful (Luke 18:13).

But then we must remember that God has already “made known” the gospel (Eph. 1:9, 3:3, 5, 10), which is His mercy through Christ Jesus. God *has been* merciful to us already in the cross of Christ and from the time He drew us to Himself in salvation (Titus 3:5, 1 Peter 1:3, 2:10). We must accept and embrace that mercy through repentant faith, and that continues every day. We can seek further mercies from God by prayer (Heb. 4:16).

One thing is completely assured: God *will* remember His mercy which will overcome His judging wrath against the sinner who is hidden in Christ.

But we can still ask God to remember mercy toward His creation, even the unsaved creation, in line with a reduction of human suffering and flourishing of human life.

II. Praise of the Unlimited Power of God, v. 3-15

- A. A person or an impotent “god” can show mercy in attitude or empathy toward someone in trouble, but only the true and living God of the universe has the power to *do something about His* empathy. It is this kind of God that Habakkuk tells his runners and readers about.
- B. The middle of the chapter consists of a recounting of the Lord’s powerful acts of judgment and deliverance in years gone by. These remembrances helped the people of Judah to realize that their God was not done with them and would once again raise His hand in favor of them and against their enemies.
- C. The text is highly metaphorical and picturesque. Several key events are expressed in this poetic way.

1. Verse 3a. The Lord appeared from the region of Teman¹ (Judges 5:4; Teman was a grandson of Edom, Gen. 36:11, Obad. 1:9). The Lord also appeared from Paran in the Sinai peninsula (Deut. 33:2). These names do not refer to the same location, but the general idea is that God was operating around these geographical locations on behalf of Israel at the time of the Exodus.
2. Verse 3b-4. The Shekinah glory was displayed to the nation. It was a pillar of fire by night and a special cloud during the daytime (Exodus 13:21). This presented to the nation a glorious brightness, like light and lightning. The power of this is still with our God, though as over the course of most of history, He is pleased to withhold its display from open view.
3. Verse 5's picture is powerful: it reads as if the LORD walks through the place, with pestilence on ahead of him and the dust of His feet leaving fever behind. Pestilence and fever may refer to the Lord's deliverance from Egypt by the plagues. He threatened to use similar treatment against Israel itself after they were disobedient to Him (Num. 14:12), and any time they departed from Him (Deut. 28:21).
4. Verse 6-7. The "startled" nations were those who were conquered when God brought Israel into its promised land. Cushan and Midian were afraid. See for example Numbers 22:3 which is about one of those nations—Moab. Not only that, but the entire creation was shaken before God. See Hag. 2:6 for a future replay of this sort of thing.
5. Verses 8-10. The rivers could be a reference to the Jordan which was opened for the people to enter Israel. The sea seems to refer to the Red Sea which was split for the benefit of the Hebrew people to cross over to the other side as they escaped Egypt. Not even massive natural bodies of water could stop God from acting on behalf of his people. The mountains trembling speaks to the created order's submission to the will of God, as

¹ Teman is infrequently mentioned in the Bible. Besides the verses in the paragraph above, the name occurs in Gen. 36:15, 42; 1 Chron. 1:36, 53; Jer. 49:7, 20; Eze. 25:13; Amos 1:12.

when God came down to Sinai and it shook at His presence (Exodus 19:18).

6. Verse 11 speaks of the sun and moon standing still, as in Joshua 10:12-14. God controls the movements of the earth and all the heavenly bodies just as easily as we could control the movement of a scale model of the solar system. It was the fearsome appearance of God in the spiritual realm with His arrows, spear, and power that caused the creation to express honor for its Creator.
7. Verse 12-15 reiterate some of what was said above, speaking of God anthropomorphically as the divine warrior who trampled the enemy and walked through the sea as if it were nothing. He led the people to victory over the nation-states, cities, and villages of the Promised Land. This “divine warrior” motif is found in other Scriptures (Exodus 15:3). The Lord Jesus fits that role as the Lion of the tribe of Judah, who will conquer the kingdoms of the world (Rev. 19:11). He is also seen by Joshua in 5:13-15.
8. Verse 14’s phrase “they came out like a whirlwind” may speak of the Egyptians who chased the Israelites on their way out of Egypt.
9. All of this was, according to verse 13, for the salvation of the people of God. God took no shortcuts to redeem them from bondage. This parallels God’s future redemption of Israel in the face of coming judgment by Babylon. It also parallels God’s “going forth” for the salvation of the Church in a later age of world history.

III. Steadfast Trust in the Lord, v. 16-19

- A. **I am afraid.** There is a shift from “you” to “I” in verse 16. Habakkuk is now responding to what he has heard of God’s answers (chapters 1-2), coupled with the memory of God’s unlimited power (3:3-15). Initially, he expresses dread because of what he had heard. He did not look forward to what was going to happen to the nation, and perhaps also to faithful believers as collateral damage. He hopes to find rest in the day of trouble, when God invades the

nation with His Babylonian agents. When God shows up to **judge**, look out!

But even when God shows up to **redeem**, there is a place for fear, because of His mighty acts. He does not permit any opposition to His plan and his deliverance will be devastating to the opponents.

B. Despite major problems...The prophet concedes that there will like be very difficult circumstances. These potentially include:

1. No blossoms on the fig tree. If it appears that there will be no future harvest from the fig trees...
2. No fruit on the vines. If the grapes are missing (or melons, tomatoes, or others)...
3. If there are no olives...
4. If the fields yield nothing...
5. If the flock (of sheep) all dies...
6. If the stalls are empty (of cattle)...

These are awful conditions for an agricultural-centered society. Actually they are terrible for any society, but when the vast majority of your economy is ag-based, the challenge is highlighted even further. They would imply financial ruin; poverty; even famine and starvation. It doesn't get much worse than that.

So, **even if I lose everything...**

C. I will rejoice! Despite those bad things, Habakkuk says, he will rejoice in God and have joy in the God of his salvation. In extremely trying times, he affirms that he will not abandon God. He will continue to trust God. He will rejoice no matter what transpires, not because of the bad things that are happening, but because of the God who is sovereign over those bad things and can bring good out of it.

In the context of the book, the bad thing is the Babylonian destruction. The result will not be total annihilation of the nation, but rather correction and purification. Habakkuk trusted God when he wrote that (1:12), and he will continue to do so.

D. I will continue to believe in God...This is essentially the message of verse 19. The prophet leads his people to confess that God is their strength, that He will make them to be strong and survive. We will not be weak and limp and unsteady on our feet. Instead, we will be strong and vigorous in our spirits and sure-footed as we walk this pilgrim pathway.

E. So what about us? When you are in trying times, do you rejoice in the Lord, give thanks for everything, remember the joy of your salvation before the God of all the earth? Do you seek God for strength?

When you are down in the dumps, I would suggest you ponder this passage—Habakkuk 3:17-19. In place of the agricultural losses in verse 17, substitute whatever difficult things may be occurring in your own life. And then follow with this word: “Yet, I will rejoice....”

F. Habakkuk closes with a note that he has written this to the chief musician, indicating that the prophecy should be accompanied by stringed instrumental music.

Conclusion

Lord, lead us to the high hills, out of the valley of shadows that can overtake us in times of trouble. Help us to trust in You, to rejoice in You, to recognize that You are our salvation. Help us to see in Scripture your mercy and power, and not to doubt those things on our behalf. Help us not to expect you to exercise your power when it is inappropriate; but when it is, help us to wait for you until it happens.

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