

Habakkuk's Hymn

Habakkuk 3:1-19

July 14, 2024

This summer, as a church we've been working through a section of the Old Testament called *The Minor Prophets*. We began back in June with the book of Jonah. And for the past two weeks, we've been exploring the book of Habakkuk together.

So far, this brief book has been a back-and-forth dialog between the prophet Habakkuk and the LORD God. The conversation began with Habakkuk's lament over God's apparent inactivity in the face of Israel's injustice and violence. Habakkuk had been praying, but it didn't seem like the LORD was listening.

Maybe you can relate to Habakkuk's frustration. You pray and pray. You ask God for help. You ask him to intervene in a difficult situation. You ask the Lord to act in a way only he can. But God doesn't seem to answer.

But in Habakkuk's case, Scripture says that God was listening. The LORD was already at work. However, God's answer would not take the form Habakkuk hoped for. The LORD revealed to his prophet that he planned to use the wicked nation of Babylon to judge unrighteous Israel. God told Habakkuk,

“Look at the nations and watch— and be utterly amazed. For I am going to do something in your days that you would not believe, even if you were told. I am raising up the Babylonians, that ruthless and impetuous people” (Hab. 1:5-6a, NIV).

That didn't sit well with God's prophet. So Habakkuk came back with a second lament:

“Your eyes are too pure to look on evil; you cannot tolerate wrongdoing. Why then do you tolerate the treacherous? Why are you silent while the wicked swallow up those more righteous than themselves?” (Hab. 1:13, NIV).

Did it make sense for God to use the Butchers of Babylon to judge the people of Judah? How could God allow his people to experience such evil? Is the LORD God a just God? God answered his lament, but Habakkuk still had questions. All he could do was watch and wait for God to answer.

“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” (Hab 2:1, NIV).

God did answer. His second reply was much longer than his first. In his response to Habakkuk's second lament, God assured his prophet that he would judge the wicked nation of Babylon, but that judgment would come according to God's timetable. In the meantime, God's people were to live by faith and rest in the LORD's sovereign plan.

That brings us to Habakkuk 3. We might expect the pattern to continue: one more lament from the prophet and another response from the LORD. But in Habakkuk 3 we don't find a third prayer of lament. Instead, we discover a prayer of praise.

If you're following along on the insert in your bulletin, you'll notice I've titled this sermon *Habakkuk's Hymn*. Our English word *hymn* comes from a Greek word meaning *a song of praise*. You won't find the word *hymn* in this passage, but you will find in verse 1 an unfamiliar term: *shigionoth*. Bible scholars aren't sure what this word means (I'm not sure how to pronounce it), but they believe it was a musical term.

Notice also at the very end of this passage there is another reference to music:

“For the director of music. On my stringed instruments” (Hab. 3:19, NIV).

What we've got in Chapter 3 is a song of praise. It's a song for God's people to sing together in worship. What we have is a hymn. The tune is lost to history, but the message has been preserved under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

Habakkuk's Hymn can be broken down into four sections. First, in verses 1-2, we have **Habakkuk's petition**. In this entire prayer, this is the only place the prophet asks God to do something. Second, in the longest section of this passage, verses 3-15, we have **Habakkuk's reflection**. We'll see when we come to these verses how the prophet reflects on God's majesty and might.

In the third section of this hymn, we have **Habakkuk's reaction**. After pondering God's majesty and might, in verse 16 we get Habakkuk's reaction stemming from his reflection. Finally, at the end of the passage we hear **Habakkuk's profession**. This is probably the chapter's most well-known portion. Habakkuk's hymn ends with a joyful profession of faith.

Let's take these four sections of Habakkuk's Hymn one at a time beginning with verses 1-2: **Habakkuk's petition**.

“A prayer of Habakkuk the prophet. On *shigionoth*. 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” (3:1-2).

Have you ever seen someone famous in person? In June 2014, my daughter Evelyn and I drove to Dyersville, Iowa for the 25th Anniversary celebration of the movie *Field of Dreams*. We saw the farmhouse, the baseball diamond, and the cornfields as shown in the movie. That night, we sat in the outfield and watched the film projected on a giant movie screen. But we also got to see some of the stars of the movie, Dwier Brown, Timothy Busfield, and, of course, Kevin Costner. Some lucky fan got to play catch with Kevin Costner on the Field of Dreams. Talk about nostalgia!

What does this have to do with Habakkuk? Look at verse 2. There the prophet speaks of LORD's fame. What does it mean when Scripture refers to God's fame? When Habakkuk says, "LORD, I have heard of your fame," he wasn't speaking of God's celebrity status. We think about authors, actors, and athletes as being famous and we discuss their awesome accomplishments. But does their work truly inspire awe?

Habakkuk says,

"LORD, I have heard of your fame; I stand in awe of your deeds, LORD" (3:2a).

When Scripture refers to God's fame, it is an invitation for God's people to consider the awesome work of God in the past. And when I say "awesome" I *literally* mean *awesome*, as in awe-inspiring. You remember the old Rich Mullins tune, don't you?

*Our God is an awesome God,
He reigns from heaven above,
With wisdom, power, and love.
Our God is an awesome God.*

Unfortunately, God's people are often underwhelmed by God's fame. When we stop and think of how God has worked in the past, are we truly left in awe?

Do you know what contributes to a small view of God? An overinflated view of the world. God doesn't seem all that omnipotent when we ascribe great power to our heroes, politicians, and people of influence. God doesn't seem all that omniscient when we're convinced that our hearts know better than anyone else what's best for us. God hardly seems omnipresent when we falsely believe that what we do in private goes unseen and remains hidden.

When God's people don't stand in awe of God, they won't pray Habakkuk's petition. Habakkuk goes on in verse 2 and prays,

"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" (3:2).

Do you understand what Habakkuk was saying here? God's prophet says, "LORD when I think about how you've worked in the past and when I consider what only you can do as Almighty God, I stand in awe of you. You, LORD, are truly awesome! So I ask, Awesome God, do it again! Work your wonders today the way I've read about how you've worked in the past. If you did it then, you can do it now."

Do we pray like this? Do we petition the Lord the way Habakkuk does? If not, could it be that our view of God is too small and our view of the world is too big? If that's the case, how do we correct our misshaped view of God? We do what Habakkuk does next.

Following Habakkuk's petition in verses 1-2, in verses 3-15 we're given **Habakkuk's reflection**. This is the longest section of the chapter and I won't take the time to work through every verse this morning. What Habakkuk describes here is something Bible scholars refer to as a *theophany*. You don't need to remember this term but know that it refers to occasions in Scripture where God's people encountered God's presence.

Here's a helpful definition I found on The Gospel Coalition website:

“A theophany is an appearance of God, an intense manifestation of the presence of God that is accompanied by an extraordinary visual display.”¹

When you read verses 3-15 you see that Habakkuk had some of the major events of the Old Testament in mind. Perhaps he was reflecting on God's power manifested in the ten plagues of Egypt as described in the book of Exodus. Habakkuk may also have been thinking about the awesome display of God's power at Mount Sinai when the LORD revealed his law to Moses. Read through this section and you may be reminded of other Old Testament examples of God's power at work.

But lest we think that these displays of God's power only occur in the Old Testament, consider this familiar Christmas passage:

“And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.” Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests”” (Luke 2:8-14, NIV).

I'd say that fits the definition of “an intense manifestation of the presence of God... accompanied by an extraordinary visual display,” don't you?

¹ *Theophany: An Essay* by Vern Poythress,
<https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/essay/theophany/>

Here's what's even more amazing. Not only was the announcement of Jesus's birth a display of God's glory, but it's fair to say that Jesus *himself* is the theophany of all theophanies. John 1:14 says of Jesus,

“The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth” (John 1:14, NIV).

If we want to pray Habakkuk's petition, then let's model Habakkuk's reflection. Let's consistently reflect on the majesty and might of God. Psalm 34:3 says,

“Oh, magnify the LORD with me, and let us exalt his name together!” (Psa. 34:3, ESV).

We magnify the Lord together by helping one another reflect on the majesty and might of God.

The Apostle Paul addressed the church in Colossians 3:16 by saying,

“Let the message of Christ dwell among you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom through psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit, singing to God with gratitude in your hearts” (Col. 3:16, NIV).

This is one of the reasons why we as a church emphasize the importance of gathering in person for corporate worship and corporate prayer.

Can you magnify the Lord by playing your favorite worship music in your car and singing along? Absolutely! Is God glorified when you come to him in private prayer? Yes, he is! But when we gather together for worship and prayer, and we magnify the Lord and exalt his name together, we help one another to leave behind that small view of God and turn our gaze toward the majesty and might of an awesome God.

Look with me at what happens next when God's people behold the majesty and might of an awesome God. Following Habakkuk's petition and his reflection, in verse 16 we come to **Habakkuk's reaction**.

The best word I can come up with to describe Habakkuk's reaction to God's majesty and might is that it was *visceral*. Describing an action as visceral means that it is felt deep within a person. The reaction is so intense that it affects not only the mind and emotions but the physical body as well. Habakkuk describes his reaction in verse 16.

“I heard and my heart pounded, my lips quivered at the sound; decay crept into my bones, and my legs trembled” (3:16a).

His heart pounded. His lips quivered. His legs trembled.

Let me ask you, what tends to evoke that kind of reaction in you? What do you fear? What steals your breath and buckles your knees?

It would have been reasonable for Habakkuk to worry that the big bad Babylonians were coming to town. They had a nasty reputation among the peoples of the ancient Near East. Even God said back in 1:7 that the Babylonians were “a feared and dreaded people” (1:7).

But here in Habakkuk 3:16, it wasn't foreign invaders that caused God's prophet to tremble. Habakkuk's visceral reaction was the result of the fear of the LORD.

I'm a huge fan of Bible teacher and author Jen Wilkin. I'll read anything I can get my hands on she's written. A book of hers I read a few years back is called *None Like Him: 10 Ways God Is Different from Us (and why that's a good thing)*. Listen to what she has to say about the fear of God.

“When we fear the Lord rightly, we do so not as those who are terrified of him. Christ, our Mediator, assures us that we may approach the throne of God with confidence. We do not tremble as the demons do; they rightly fear the wrath of God. Rather, we tremble as those who understand that God's wrath toward us is satisfied at the cross. When we fear God rightly, we recognize him for who he truly is: a God of no limits, and therefore, utterly unlike anyone or anything we know.”²

How did you spend your week last week? What did you read? What did you listen to? What did you watch? What did you talk about with other people? What did you scroll through online?

As you reflect on the inputs from this past week, how did these various sources affect your fear? What contributed to a healthy, reverent fear of God, and what contributed to an ever-increasing anxiety and fear of man? How much time did you give to voices leading you to freak out about the big bad Babylonians and how much time did you invest in resources that deepened your devotion to Jesus?

Let's retrace our steps through Habakkuk's hymn as we come to the final section. We started with Habakkuk's *petition*: “Awesome God, repeat your mighty works in our day!” That led to Habakkuk's *reflection*: “LORD, how great is your majesty and might. There is no one like you.” Habakkuk's reflection brought about Habakkuk's *reaction*. His heart pounded. His lips quivered. His legs trembled.

Listen now with me listen to **Habakkuk's profession** in verses 16–19.

² Jen Wilkin, *None Like Him: 10 Ways God Is Different from Us (and why that's a good thing)*, 2016, Crossway, 12–13.

“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. 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, yet I will rejoice in the LORD, I will be joyful in God my Savior. The Sovereign LORD is my strength; he makes my feet like the feet of a deer, he enables me to tread on the heights” (3:16-19).

Habakkuk ends his hymn by inviting God’s people to joyfully profess their faith in a Sovereign God. At the end of verse 16, Habakkuk says, “I will wait patiently” for God to deal with Judah’s invaders. In verse 18 he declares, “I will rejoice in the LORD, I will be joyful in God my Savior” (3:18).

I will wait patiently. I will rejoice in the LORD.

Let’s understand what that means. Remember, the Babylonian invasion hadn’t happened yet. As we saw from Chapter 1, God would raise up Babylon in the days to come as a means of judging Judah. Things were bad in Judah; they were about to get much worse. How bad? The invasion was going to lead to economic collapse. That’s what Habakkuk foresees in verse 17.

There’s a harsh reality to living in a broken and fallen world. Sometimes in our suffering, things go from bad to worse. A long-term relationship comes to an end for no good reason. An unwanted career change comes out of nowhere. Then a scary diagnosis is revealed without much warning. Life plans are ruined due to unexpected circumstances. When things go from bad to worse what can keep us from despair?

Habakkuk says in verse 18, LORD, even if I lose everything,

“yet I will rejoice in the LORD, I will be joyful in God my Savior” (3:18).

Many years ago, a well-traveled missionary wrote to his supporters to let them know about his predicament. In his prayer letter, the missionary revealed that he had been sent to prison for preaching the gospel. It wasn’t his first rodeo, but there was reason to believe it could be his last.

In those days before email and the internet, news traveled slowly between the mission field and those who were financially supporting and praying for gospel workers. In fact, much communication had to be carried back and forth by short-term missions teams checking in on long-term missionaries.

The missionary wrote his supporters not to ask them for more money. He had everything he needed to carry out his mission. He wrote not for his own sake, but to encourage his supporters. Here's a snippet of what he wrote.

“I rejoiced greatly in the Lord that at last you renewed your concern for me. Indeed, you were concerned, but you had no opportunity to show it. I am not saying this because I am in need, for I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do all this through him who gives me strength” (Phil. 4:10-13, NIV).

Paul's letter to the Philippians sounds a lot like Habakkuk's profession, doesn't it? Paul wrote Philippians from prison, and yet one of the most frequently repeated words in the entire letter is the word *joy*.

What kind of person can say “I will rejoice!” when the world around them is going from bad to worse? Paul said it. Habakkuk could say it. Can you say it? You can if you model your hope on Habakkuk's profession.

“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, yet I will rejoice in the LORD, I will be joyful in God my Savior. The Sovereign LORD is my strength” (3:17-19a).

Let's pray.