

Wheelersburg Baptist Church 5/3/15
Habakkuk 3:1-19 “A Prayer of Faith in a Desperate Time”^{**1}

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Main Idea: If we are living by faith, it will show up in our prayer lives. In Habakkuk 3 the prophet prayed a prayer of faith in a desperate time, a prayer that exhibited three ingredients.

- I. A prayer of faith involves requests (1-2).
 - A. Habakkuk remembered what God did in the past.
 - B. Habakkuk asked God to do it again in the present.
 - II. A prayer of faith involves reflection (3-15).
 - A. Habakkuk pondered God’s character.
 1. He’s a God of wrath.
 2. He’s a God of mercy.
 - B. Habakkuk pondered God’s acts in history.
 1. The Lord made a covenant with His people (3-4).
 2. The Lord sent plagues (5).
 3. The Lord made nations tremble (6-7).
 4. The Lord fought like a warrior for His people (8-10).
 5. The Lord conquered the Promised Land (11-12).
 6. The Lord defeated the Egyptians at the Red Sea (13-15).
 - III. A prayer of faith involves resolve (16-19).
 - A. Habakkuk’s circumstances didn’t change (16).
 - B. Habakkuk changed (17-18).
 - C. Habakkuk made God his strength (19).
 1. The Lord gives us stability in unstable times.
 2. The Lord gives us mountain-top experiences though we’re living in the valley.
- Make It Personal: Can you sing Habakkuk’s song?

Life is filled with seeing things that create tensions within us.

You’ve probably heard of Jackie Robinson. He broke the color barrier in Major League baseball in 1947, and later became a Hall of Famer.

Ever heard of Mack Robinson? He won the silver medal in the 1936 Berlin Olympics behind Jesse Owens. Mack was Jackie Robinson’s brother, as I learned last week listening to the audio biography of Jackie Robinson entitled *Opening Day*, by Jonathan Eig.

I learned that Mack Robinson won America’s applause as he dispelled Hitler’s boast of Arian supremacy. I also learned that when Mack returned home from the Olympics, he couldn’t find anyone who would offer him a decent job. He was an African American living in a whites only world. Eventually he took work as a street sweeper. The biographer said he wore his Olympic jacket as he swept the streets.

Things happen in the world that just don’t make sense. And that’s not just 1936. That’s certainly true today as well.

In recent days we’ve heard about thousands killed by an earthquake in Nepal, rioting in Baltimore, and our Supreme Court ruling on same sex marriage.

What’s happening in the world today? What should we think about it? What does God think about it?

Millions of Americans are appalled at the deterioration of moral values in our country. Furthermore, many are grieved over the spiritual apathy that has led to this moral decline. And they’re doing something about it. They’re falling on their knees before Almighty God, pleading with Him to do something about the spread of

^{**}Note: This is an unedited manuscript of a message preached at Wheelersburg Baptist Church. It is provided to prompt your continued reflection on the practical truths of the Word of God.

¹ For an earlier development of this text, see the Habakkuk series at WBC in 2002.

godlessness and the flagrant violation of His holy Law. Perhaps you've joined this throng before the throne of grace. If so, good.

But suppose this morning God sent a message to us and said, "I've heard your prayers. And I'm going to do something about the immense wickedness of America. I'm going to judge America. There will be a fatal invasion by a hostile foreign military. It's coming soon. I'm going to wipe out godlessness in America by wiping out America.

How would you respond to God if you heard that?

That's actually the scenario that faced a man named Habakkuk six hundred years before Christ. Habakkuk was a prophet of God who lived in Judah. Things were desperate in Habakkuk's day. As the seventh century B.C. came to a close, his nation was in a moral free-fall. He couldn't stand to see God's chosen nation living in such godless ways, so he asked God to do something (1:2-4).

To which God responded, "I already am. I am at this very moment raising up the Babylonians to come and destroy the nation of Judah (1:5-11)."

To which Habakkuk responded, "You can't do *that*, Lord! You can't use the Babylonians to judge us. They're more wicked than we are (1:12-2:1)!" And Habakkuk wasn't kidding. From a human perspective the Babylonians were violent and blasphemous.

But Habakkuk had the same problem we have. Tunnel vision. He couldn't see the whole picture as God can. Which is what God told him in chapter 2. We learned three timeless truths from Habakkuk 2 last time.

#1: God's people are to live by faith, even though they don't have all the answers (2-5).

#2: God will judge the wicked (6-19).

#3: God expects all people to respond to His holiness (20).

Though it was true that God was going to use Babylon to judge Judah, that didn't mean God excused Babylon. He certainly didn't. Indeed, as He told Habakkuk in chapter two, He was going to judge and destroy the Babylonians, too, as He will all who refuse to obey Him.

Yes, God does things we may not understand at the time. He sees the whole picture.

How should we respond when God works in ways we don't understand? The same way Habakkuk did. In the third and final chapter of Habakkuk's book, we find a prayer that Habakkuk wrote.

As verse 1 indicates, "A prayer of Habakkuk the prophet. On *shigionoth*." If you'll notice the last verse of the chapter you'll notice he intended for this prayer to be sung. Verse 19—"For the director of music. On my stringed instruments."

So Habakkuk 3 is a prayer-song. In fact, the word "prayer" in verse 1 could be translated "psalm," for it's the same Hebrew term used as the title of the Book of Psalms. Habakkuk 3 is similar to the biblical psalms. It has a title verse (1). It uses poetic structure. It uses musical notation ("*shigionoth*" in verse 1 and "*selah*" in verses 3, 9, & 13). Its language is highly personal and worshipful. And notably, it was designed to be sung, perhaps in both individual and corporate worship.

What should you do when you're in a situation in which God's ways don't make sense? Here's something very practical. Pray.

You say, "But that's my problem. I don't know *what* to pray." Habakkuk can help us.

If we are people of faith, it will show up in our prayer lives. In Habakkuk 3 the prophet prayed a prayer of faith in a desperate time, a prayer that exhibited three ingredients.

I. A prayer of faith involves requests (1-2).

Notice verse 1 again, “A prayer of Habakkuk the prophet.” That phrase indicates two things about this man. First, he spoke *for* God (he was a prophet). And secondly, He spoke *to* God (he prayed). His prayer in chapter 3 is quite interesting. If you notice the pronouns you’ll see four movements in this prayer.

The first part (verse 2) is in the first person—“Lord, **I** have heard of your fame.” He talks *to* God. In the second movement, he shifts to the third person and talks *about* God (verses 3-7, notice the pronoun **His**). In the third part of his prayer, Habakkuk shifts to the second person (verses 8-15, using the term **You**), as he once again speaks *to* God. In the fourth movement (verses 16-19) he prays in the first person again (notice the pronouns **I** and **my**), as he talks *about* God.

Spontaneous prayers are fine. But there’s nothing wrong with thinking about what you’re going to say to God and preparing yourself to say it. I don’t think this prayer was a spontaneous one. True, it came from his heart, but as will become clearer as we study it, this prayer is filled with wonderful language that depicts truth about God.

And Habakkuk begins with requests in verse 2, “LORD, I have heard of your fame; I stand in awe of your deeds, O LORD. Renew them in our day, in our time make them known; in wrath remember mercy.” In bringing his petition to God Habakkuk does two things.

A. Habakkuk remembered what God did in the past. “I have heard of your fame,” he says to God. That reminds me of what Job said to God after coming through his trial, “My ears had heard of you but now my eyes have seen you. Therefore I despise myself in dust and ashes (Job 42:5-6).” Times of despair can do that for us. They can make God more real to us.

Habakkuk said he had heard about God’s “fame.” In the verses that follow we’ll see what “fame” he had in mind, namely, what God had done to rescue the Israelites from another foreign foe, not Babylon but Egypt, not in the 7th century B.C. but in the 15th century B.C. Habakkuk remembered what God did in the past, and then...

B. Habakkuk asked God to do it again in the present. “I stand in awe of your deeds, O LORD. Renew them in *our* day, in *our* time make them known.” In other words, “Do today what You’ve done in the past, Lord! Do it again!” That’s my request.

And that’s a fitting request for us these days, as well. *Lord, please do it again! Make Your presence real, as You did when You brought this nation into existence. Make Your presence real, as You did when you saved me.*

A prayer of faith involves requests. When times get perilous, some run from God. People of faith run *to* God, bringing Him their petitions.

There’s a second ingredient of a prayer of faith. Notice Habakkuk again...

II. A prayer of faith involves reflection (3-15).

In fact, the majority of Habakkuk’s prayer is devoted to reflection. In verses 3-15 the prophet pondered two things pertaining to God.

A. Habakkuk pondered God's character. In other words, in his prayer Habakkuk reflected on what God is like. He mentioned two attributes of God in verse 2 and then continued to meditate on those attributes throughout his prayer. Notice the last part of his request again, "In wrath remember mercy."

What's true of God? Habakkuk thinks about two things...

1. *He's a God of wrath.* Habakkuk mentions the wrath of God three times in this prayer (verses 2, 8, 12). Habakkuk knew what we tend to forget. God cannot tolerate evil. In the very beginning God made it clear that there is a severe penalty for sin. Because God is holy, there must be the demonstration of wrath. Where there's sin, there will be the wrath of God.

That's why God raised up Babylon, to be His instrument of wrath against apostate Judah. And that's why God said He was next going to judge wicked Babylon. To be consistent with His nature, He must deal with sin. He is a God of *wrath*.

Thankfully, He's not only a God of wrath. What else is true of God?

2. *He's a God of mercy.* "In wrath remember *mercy*." That's the prophet's plea. "Lord, I know You are a God of wrath. You must judge sin, and rightfully so. But please do this. As you exercise Your wrath, remember *mercy*." Habakkuk casts himself upon the mercy of God. Praise God that He does not deal with sinners as they deserve! He is merciful. And a person of faith will cling to His mercy.

Beloved, it's because of His mercy that we woke up this morning. It's because of His mercy that your heart just took another beat. It was because of His mercy that, instead of pouring out His wrath on us, God sent His Son to take our place—He poured out His wrath on *Him*.

Oh, look at Calvary's cross, dear friend. It's there we see both the wrath of God and the mercy of God. On the cross Jesus became a sin-bearer. He took upon Himself the sin of every person who would ever trust in Him. And in the place of those hell-deserving people, He took the wrath of God. God demonstrated His wrath towards His anointed Son so that He might demonstrate His mercy towards those who would believe in Him.

It's true. You entered this world under God's wrath—everyone does. But the moment you believe in Jesus Christ God pours out His mercy on you. That's the kind of God He is! And when we pray we need to ponder His character, as did Habakkuk.

B. Habakkuk pondered God's acts in history. Just what was it that God did in the past that gave Habakkuk such hope in the present crisis? Habakkuk scans the pages of Israel's history book in his mind. God's mercy rings from every page. In his prayer, Habakkuk refers to six historical accomplishments of God in verses 3-15.

1. *The Lord made a covenant with His people (3-4).* "God came from Teman [that's the district in northwest Edom], the Holy One from Mount Paran [that's the hilly region on the western border of the Gulf of Acaba]. Selah. His glory covered the heavens and his praise filled the earth. ⁴His splendor was like the sunrise; rays flashed from his hand, where his power was hidden."

Habakkuk is remembering a time long ago when God came from the east to meet His chosen people at Mount Sinai. He rescued them from bondage, took them through the wilderness, and met them at the mountain. There He entered a covenant relationship with them, giving them the Law and the privilege of seeing His brilliant glory. At Sinai, He became their God and they became His people.

It all started with Him, as Habakkuk recalls. The Lord made the covenant with His people.

Then another event came to Habakkuk's mind.

2. *The Lord sent plagues (5)*. "Plague went before him; pestilence followed his steps." As you may recall, Pharaoh didn't want to let the Hebrews go. So God did a little persuasion work. How? He sent the plagues (Ex 7-12), the plague of blood, the frogs, the gnats, the flies, the boils, and so forth. By the time He was done, the Egyptians were begging the Hebrews to leave. What a great victory for God!

As Habakkuk continues to reminisce he comes to another event, the time when...

3. *The Lord made nations tremble (6-7)*. "He stood, and shook the earth; he looked, and made the nations tremble. The ancient mountains crumbled and the age-old hills collapsed. His ways are eternal.⁷ I saw the tents of Cushan in distress, the dwellings of Midian in anguish."

Cushan and Midian refer to Arab tribes living near Edom. When God defeated the Egyptians and miraculously provided for two million Hebrews in the desert, these nations heard about it. And trembled. They knew they were no match for the God of the Jews!

But there's more, says Habakkuk in his prayer.

4. *The Lord fought like a warrior for His people (8-10)*. "Were you angry with the rivers, O LORD? Was your wrath against the streams? Did you rage against the sea when you rode with your horses and your victorious chariots?⁹ You uncovered your bow, you called for many arrows. *Selah*. 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."

Here Habakkuk seems to have in mind again the miracle at the Red Sea. Yet notice something. He took three verses to describe in poetic fashion what he could have said in eight words, "Lord, You beat them at the Red Sea." So why the poetry? Why the vivid description and repetition?

For starters, it's more conducive to singing—and that's what they're going to do with this prayer. But beyond that, poetry prompts reflection. Prose doesn't. "You beat them at the Red Sea" doesn't bring a picture to mind nearly like this does, "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."

Remember, Habakkuk isn't giving God information. God knows what He did! Habakkuk is pondering as he prays. He's praising God for what He did in the past. He's reflecting.

Most of us don't know how to reflect very well. If we've got thirty minutes to kill, we turn on the television or radio or reach for a magazine. We live in an information age. We get in the car and what do we do? Stop and reflect on God and His ways? Probably not. Usually we hit the radio dial. We're bored by silence.

I'll make it personal. It's hard for me to just stop and reflect, to take time to think about what God is like, what God has done, and about what He is doing in my life. I've got to be *doing something*.

Please notice something about Habakkuk 3. There's hardly any new information in this chapter. It doesn't add to what Habakkuk has already told us in the first two chapters. Why is it included then? Remember, Habakkuk wrote this for the director of music. The goal isn't *information*, but *meditation*. In other words, there are times when

we don't need more information. We need to meditate on the truth we already possess. We need to appropriate what we already know.

Don't let that word "meditation" throw you. I'm not talking about TM which is based on the eastern (unbiblical) concept of meditation where you shift your mind into neutral. Biblical meditation involves the active use of our minds to go over and over and over the truth of God's Word. Joshua 1:8 says if you want to be successful you must learn to meditate on God's Word.

So this week, let's devote some time to reflect on what God has done. I suggest two times. One, when you first get up. And two, when you're driving. For the next week, don't turn on your computer, or television, or radio, or anything else while you're getting ready in the morning or driving in the car. Try some silence. It will feel very awkward at first. But it will also give you time to reflect. Reflect on what you're hearing today from Habakkuk, what God did in the past. And then talk to God about what He did.

Habakkuk continues his reflection...

5. *The Lord conquered the Promised Land (11-12)*. "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."

Now Habakkuk is thinking about the day God caused the sun to stand still in the sky. When was that? In the conquest, when the Jews took over Gibeon. That's what we need You to do again, Lord. And Habakkuk knew that's what God would do again, too. The day was coming when He would overthrow the Babylonians just as He had the inhabitants of Canaan.

6. *The Lord defeated the Egyptians at the Red Sea (13-15)*. "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. *Selah* 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."

Habakkuk doesn't seem to be thinking chronologically in this prayer. He mentions how God established the covenant at Sinai, then sent the plagues, and caused the Trans-Jordan nations to tremble. Then he goes back to how God brought victory at the Red Sea, conquered the Promised Land, and returns again to the Red Sea victory. What's Habakkuk doing?

Think carefully now. What do these six historical events have in common? They all have to do with what God did to form His people, the *exodus*. Throughout the Old Testament when God's people prayed they looked back to the exodus. That was their day of redemption, their birthday if you will. When they got in trouble, they looked back to the exodus. When they faced an identity crisis, they looked back to the exodus. When they faced overwhelming challenges, they remembered what God did in the exodus.

We look to another day, don't we? When we pray we look back to a historical event that occurred outside of Jerusalem around 30 A.D. Our hope is anchored in the cross. That's why we pray *in Jesus' name*. Every time we come to God we come with the cross in mind, for the cross is the climax of God's work in history.

Brothers and sisters, when we're in perilous times we need to look back. Our God has a track record for delivering sinners. We can trust Him in the present because of what He's done in the past.

Hudson Taylor knew what complete trust in God's faithfulness is all about. In his journal this great missionary to China wrote: "Our heavenly Father is a very experienced One. He knows very well that His children wake up with a good appetite every morning...He sustained 3 million Israelites in the wilderness for 40 years. We do not expect He will send 3 million missionaries to China; but if He did, He would have ample means to sustain them all...Depend on it, God's work done in God's way will never lack God's supply."²

A prayer of faith involves requests, reflection, and a third ingredient...

III. A prayer of faith involves resolve (16-19).

Listen to Habakkuk's resolve beginning in verse 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."

Two things strike me about Habakkuk's resolve...

A. Habakkuk's circumstances didn't change (16). Two terrible things were still true.

1. *Judah was still rebellious.* And...

2. *Babylon was still coming.* The two things that upset Habakkuk in chapter one were still in place. His circumstances hadn't changed one bit. But something did change.

B. Habakkuk changed (17-18). Habakkuk's perspective changed. Listen to his realistic assessment of his situation in verse 17, followed by his resolve in verse 18: "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."

Someone once said, "If you were riding a bike into the wind, then stopped and turned around, you might think that the wind changed because it went from hindering you to helping you. In actuality it didn't change, you did."

That's what happened to Habakkuk. Life was still hard for him—and it was about to get even harder once the Babylonian army arrived. In verse 17 Habakkuk gives us a description of an "as bad as it can get" situation for an agrarian society. No buds on the fig trees means no food for today and no prospect of food for next year either. Habakkuk knew that was coming. Once the Babylonians raped the land there would be no grapes on the vines, no olive crop, and no food from the fields.

He also anticipates the day when there won't be any sheep in the pen and cattle in the stalls. Sheep and cattle were the source of meat, clothing, and income. For us that's like saying, "Even if I'm unemployed with no unemployment check, no groceries in the kitchen, and no clothing in the closets."

He wasn't being pessimistic. He was just stating the facts. He says even if life gets as bad as it can get, here's what I will do. Here's my resolve. I'm going to rejoice in the Lord. I'm going to be joyful in God my Savior.

You mean you can experience joy when life is crumbling all around you? Yes. We learn two important lessons about joy from Habakkuk.

1. *Joy doesn't depend on circumstances.* Rather...

² *Our Daily Bread*, May 16, 1992.

2. *Joy depends on the Lord.* Habakkuk rejoiced in the Lord. Not in his circumstances (which hadn't changed). Not even in what the Lord had done for him. He rejoiced in *the Lord* Himself.

Yes, Habakkuk changed in this book. He begins the book with a cry, "How long, O LORD, must I call for help, but you do not listen?" Habakkuk ends the book saying, in essence, "It doesn't matter how long. That's up to God. He knows what He's doing. I will rejoice in Him."

What made the difference? Think again about the flow of this book. In chapter 1 Habakkuk took his problem to the Lord rather than run from Him. But it's not enough merely to pour out your heart to God. Prayer isn't enough. If all we do is talk to God about our problems, we'll be like a car stuck in the snow, the spinning wheels digging deeper and deeper as we hit the accelerator.

Talking to God is good, but we need something else. It's what Habakkuk got in chapter 2. In chapter 2 God spoke and Habakkuk listened. Habakkuk gave attention to God's Word and gained God's perspective on his confusion. Then in chapter 3 Habakkuk submitted to God's purposes, saying in essence...

Have Thine own way, Lord, have Thine own way;

Thou art the Potter, I am the clay.

Notice that it's not enough merely to understand God's purpose. We must *accept* it, not with reluctance ("I don't like it God, but O well...") but with rejoicing ("I will rejoice in the Lord"). In fact, Habakkuk's resolve went a step further...

C. Habakkuk made God his strength (19). "The Sovereign LORD is my strength; he makes my feet like the feet of a deer, he enables me to go on the heights."

End of book. Habakkuk puts his pen down with this resolve. No matter how bad things are nor will become, I will rejoice in the Lord. And the reason I will rejoice in Him is because of two things—who God is (He is *my strength*) and what God does. There are two wonderful things the Lord does for His people, according to Habakkuk.

1. *The Lord gives us stability in unstable times.* "He makes my feet like the feet of a deer." Deer are beautiful creatures. They're fast as lightning, quick, and nimble-footed. A deer had to be sure-footed to survive in the rugged land of Judah. There were rocks everywhere threatening to turn an ankle, but a deer could prance across the countryside as if it were a playground.

That's what God does for us, Habakkuk says. He gives us stability as we face the potholes of life. That's not all.

2. *The Lord gives us mountain-top experiences though we're living in the valley.* "He enables me to go on the heights."

I can't overemphasize this. Habakkuk's situation hadn't changed. He was still living in the valley (the pits really) when he wrote verse 19. Yet he said God enabled him to go on the heights.

Let that sink in. When God is our strength we can experience the mountain-top while living in the valley.

"But how?" you ask. I think Habakkuk gives us a helpful insight in the closing words of his book. "For the director of music. On my stringed instruments." Habakkuk knew the importance of singing. He wrote this to be sung, not only by him but by his people.

There's a vital lesson here. We need to fill our minds with songs that reflect on God's character and ways. Habakkuk looked back to the exodus. We look back to the *cross*.

So there's what you do with the silence during the mornings and commute times this week. Sing. I urge you to fill your mind with, and then sing songs about God's victory at the cross. Use a hymnbook if necessary. Eventually, sing from memory. In fact, I urge some of you to write songs about the cross.

Will this singing make your problems go away? No. But it will surely do for you what it did for Habakkuk, give you a mountain-top perspective though you're living in the valley.

In light of Habakkuk's example, I think we need to ask ourselves a probing question. Would you serve God if there weren't any material blessings?

C. S. Lewis once said, "He who has God and many other things has no more than he who has God alone." Do you agree? Habakkuk did. He looked at life as it was, difficulties and all, and made this resolve. I'm going to rejoice in the Lord. Though the fig tree doesn't bud, though the grape vines are empty, though the olive crop fails, though the fields produce no food, though there are no sheep and cattle in the barn, though my bank account is depleted, though my health fails, though my friends forsake me, *I will rejoice in the Lord*.

God told Habakkuk in Habakkuk 2:4, "The righteous will live by his faith." And that's what Habakkuk resolved to do. Habakkuk began his book with a complaint but ended it with an affirmation. This is what living by faith is all about, rejoicing in God regardless of circumstances.

Will you, by God's grace, do the same today? Let's make it personal...

Make It Personal: Can you sing Habakkuk's song?

I want us to finish by affirming two wonderful truths. One, we can know God personally. And two, we can experience God presently.

1. *We can know God personally.* That's why He sent His Son into the world, and why His Son died in our place, for our sins, and then conquered death. So we can know God personally.

Habakkuk knew God personally, by faith. "I will be joyful in God my Savior." That can be our testimony too, by faith.

If Habakkuk's song says anything to us, it's this. We can know God *personally*. But that's not all.

2. *We can experience God presently.* Habakkuk ends his book on a very experiential note. "For the director of music. On my stringed instruments." He wrote this because he wanted his people to experience God, and do it presently.

This is what God offers us as well. To experience Him presently. In His grace, this is what God offers us. Not just something in the future, but something in the present. Himself.

What needs to change so that we're experiencing God in the present? There are barriers to this experience. The refusal to forgive someone. Unconfessed sin. Mixed up priorities. A cluttered life. Too little time in the Word and prayer.

By His grace, let's make the changes necessary to know God personally, yes, and experience God presently.