

A PRAYER OF HOPE AND FAITH

Habakkuk 3

Two weeks ago we dove into, what I argued, was one of the most applicable Biblical texts we have – Habakkuk. A book of the minor prophets about the people and nation of Judah, the man Habakkuk, and his complaintive dialogue with God. Habakkuk wholeheartedly, and faithfully, declared Yahweh as his Rock, and the Holy One that is beyond everlasting... and yet Habakkuk struggled with God's response to the needs he saw for him and his people. To believers who see injustice and wickedness and justice perverted, to people who believe and affirm that all things are under God's will and desires...it is really hard for us to swallow why God would allow or not allow things to take place. It is really hard for us to see that God is doing something that simply doesn't make sense to us.

And yet through it all...through these opening 2 chapters, God's response to Habakkuk – to you and I – was to simply have faith in him. Have faith that God isn't sitting or watching idly by. Have faith that God is who you believe him to be even when we feel he isn't playing by the rules we want him to play by.

Which brings us to chapter 3. A chapter that is now considered a "prayer" although the other two chapters were most definitely a prayer as well. But what we have is almost a visionary prayer of the past to be played out in the future. What I mean is, Habakkuk is pulling out all the stops in his request for God to be God as understood from the God of Israel's past. He's praying that he does those very things that he said he'd do to the Babylonians in **2:2-20** because of their cruelty and love of self. But the desire that Habakkuk has...isn't for God to orchestrate or send someone to do it for him – he physically wants God to be the judge, jury, and executioner of God's own will. He wants God's presence to step into time, into *his* time, and carry out his will and judgment. And there's a term for this: it's called "theophany" and it's a term that is only used in the Bible and specifically the Old Testament. And in its simplest definition it's God showing himself and *doing* something. It's his presence that is being made visible and revealed. We see this term and use in Deborah's song in **Judges 5:3-5** when she sings that God came out and marched from the land, we see it in the blessings from Moses (**Deut 33:2-3**), as well as in **Psalms 68**. These are verses that portray God in action and doing something. Leading, guiding, protecting, and subduing - MARCHING.

And so what Habakkuk does here is he goes into this very poetic, and yet very real, depiction of hope that is built on the God he declares. A God who acts, and moves, and works to bring judgment and peace. And he declares in verse 2 that he has heard of all that God has done and he wishes him to return and repeat them. And it's a returning from the God of the Exodus whose physical presence stepped in and led his beloved covenantal people out of Egypt. So "*Come God of our past and present and future! Come as you have before and make your wrath and mercy felt. Bring your wrath upon these horrible Babylonians and have your mercy befall your beloved children.*"

That's the opening 2 verses.

The next 13 verses, 3-15, are the images and thoughts of who God is and what he did by bringing his people out of Egypt. It's a poetic prayerful declaration that almost becomes this rising encouragement for Habakkuk as he attempts to verbalize that which he imagines taking place. This is his awe, this is his hope, this is his peace, and this is his future.

The journey the Israelites took with God at the helm came from the area near Teman and Mount Paran – so when Habakkuk states that God came from that place it doesn't mean that God is from there. It simply means that this is the path he took and this is the path they came from as a people. And then from this point on, verses 4-15 are all about God, his work, his presence, his hisness. Image after image, Habakkuk beautifully declares God's glory, might, strength, and work.

We have his glory covering all of creation, and because of that mountains crumble, people go into distress, rivers bend and seas rage – and even the sun and its ray's bow before him. And I love this image of God's splendor being like the sunrise with his hands being like rays and his power hidden. So just as the sun rises and its rays go out all over the earth, touching all things, so too does God's hands. But not only that... the sun is essential to life and yet destructive if you come too close. THAT...is power!

We also have this wonderful question in verse 8 with the river and the sea – an image taken from when God's people crossed the Red Sea and fled to safety while the chariots, horses, and riders, all came to a water death from **Exodus 14**. His question is, "*God – were you angry with the sea and the rivers? Did you take out your anger, your wrath, upon them?*" And the answer is simply no. God wasn't angry with them, but he used them to carry out his will.

But Habakkuk's request isn't just for God to use the things at his disposal to do his bidding, remember – this is a request for God to show up **HIMSELF!** So yes, God created the heavens and the earth, yes God split the earth with rivers and the mountains saw him and writhed at creation, yes the Sun and the Moon are your creation and they all respond to your presence and yes you can use all those things and so much more to do what you desire to do...but God...**SHOW UP YOURSELF!** Let us **SEE** you and not simply the things you are doing.

We know what you can do – we want to see you do it.

Verse 12 and 13 has Habakkuk reminiscing about the stories of old when God strode through the earth and in his anger he “threshed” the other nations and delivered his people. He states that God “*destroyed, trampled, and tore their flesh apart from their bones!*” That he “*crushed the leader of the lands of wickedness.*” Habakkuk isn't using a childish imagination or playtime to creatively tell a story of God's saving work! He isn't reading a children's Bible version of the power of God – this is the factual accounts of the wrath of God! This is what really happened, as God said he would do to the Babylonians in chapter 2 because of how they acted against him and other people. People are stripped, arrows and spears pierce heads and body armor. God goes forth and removes sin, idolatry, those who shed human blood, those who pervert justice, who are greedy, and self-righteous.

This, to me, is one of those really odd prayers that we have in scripture. How often do we find ourselves asking God to pierce the heads of our enemies? How often do we ask God to seek out the hiding and crush leaders? I can't say that I ever have. But we have to realize something here, first...this isn't Kelly's prayer this is Habakkuk's. This reflects not only a prophetic vision and voice but a relationship with God that is Habakkuk's and not mine or yours. Which is why many authors actually consider this a “prophetic psalm”. It's very “psalm-like” in its writing and request. **ESPECIALLY** chapter 3. It's got a declaration at the beginning, a request and questions and hopes in the middle, and it ends with hope and peace. This...is a psalm of hope! But we need to let Habakkuk be Habakkuk and not someone else. Especially in light of all that God had said he would do and has always done.

All that Habakkuk holds dear is falling and dying before him. He knows these ruthless Babylonians are just out of sight. He knows that the Lord brings them to this rampart and

wall that he stands upon. He knows that death and destruction, decay and calamity is at his doorstep and it is killing him – even though he knows that God will deal with them too because of their sins and atrocities...but emotionally, physically, and mentally he is devastated. This is the worst thing he could think of.

Now think about that – because that becomes OUR invitation to understand this text. Think of the worst scenario you could ever find yourself in – how would you pray? What would you ask for?

This is, for me, really really hard. Because I simply cannot fathom this for many reasons. I simply cannot fathom my family being gone, my loved ones ripped from me. I cannot fathom war and invasion within the place I live. But the reality of this is that we see this STILL today! All those things that ISIS is doing? All those things that are creating a refugee crisis around the world today? Those are actually happening to people! Cities are being invaded by outside forces – and it's not because they are on a humanitarian mission to free people from bondage, death, destruction, and corrupt leaders! When we put ourselves in those shoes...Habakkuk's prayer becomes a little more understandable. When we internalize the words...when we understand the devastation and pain that they are in...I think we are a little more inclined to give some leeway to the author and their desire for wrath. Because when we see people we care for abused and beaten – many times our response is, “an eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth” (**Exodus 21:24**).

But for all the destruction we have, for all the desire of God's anger and wrath to pound forth, this prayer is a prayer of hope and peace too. Because Habakkuk seeks mercy from God AND that anger. Habakkuk desires God to come forth and lead his people to peace and hope and rest and goodness. Taking them from slavery and bondage to the Promised Land of goodness, hope, peace, rest, and abundance. He wants God to simply come...and deliver his people – to save his anointed one.

Habakkuk is living in faith and hope amid chaos and destruction...and we really see that here in the final 4 verses that all focus on God. Verse 16 has him reflecting on how his heart is pounding, his lips are quivering, decay has crept into his bones and his legs are trembling. And it's not because of the hope of God coming and dealing with the Babylonians...it's because the Babylonians are coming near. He doesn't know when...but because God said they would come – he knows they will come. God orchestrates it, ordains it, wills it...and brings it.

Then in 17 he does something beautiful and amazing. Should God also ordain that fruit and cattle are not here...he will still choose to rejoice in the Lord. If God should take away all that I hold dear and give me nothing left to give as first fruits or show just how abundant my life is...I will still praise and worship him.

“If the fig tree does not bud and no grapes are on the vines. Should the olive crop fail and produce no food...and should there be no sheep in the pen and cattle in the stalls...I will still praise and worship, rejoice and be joyful in God my savior.”

“With all the chaos and devastation in my world, with all the pain and suffering and destroying that will come...my faith in God will remain and *“I will be joyful in God my Savior.”* (18)

- **Psalm 13:5-6** says, *“But I trust in your unfailing love; my heart rejoices in your salvation. I will sing the Lord’s praise, for he has been good to me.”*

Hope and faith are tethered together in every way possible for the believer. And the true test of our faith is found and seen when all those things around us are failing or falling or withering away. When you have nothing left to give, when you have nothing given unto you that you can see or explain, when your “blessings” are known and felt by God as tangible things – and you have no “tangible things” left – when all that is in this world that has meaning to you is no more...Habakkuk shows us that you still have faith in God. That you still give thanks for the one who still IS even when there isn’t anything left.

This is Habakkuk’s prayer of hope and the faith that he has in God. That even when there is nothing...his faith reminds him that he still has God.

Because our faith and hope aren’t in things...they’re in God. It’s in the promises God has given, the work he has done, and the fact that he does wield his wrath AND his mercy. That he does deliver his people and save his anointed one. That God *IS* our Lord and Savior. And oh if Habakkuk was alive for a few hundred more years (like 600) he would have seen just how real his prayer was, how glorious God’s mercy is, and just how far he went to deliver his people. We should see Jesus Christ written all over this prayer and conversation with God (and we read that in **Matthew 1:21**) – and not only *that* but we should also see the hope Habakkuk has for that ultimate deliverance from the wicked written in the promise **of Christ to come again**.

I told you! Habakkuk is one of the most relevant pieces of scripture we have! Not only in the understandings of the pain and suffering in the world, not only in the squirming's of a faithful believer who is struggling with understanding what in the world God is doing and why he's doing it, but also in the declaration of hope and saving grace that comes by Christ, not only in the fact that all created things (in our cosmos and beyond) bow to his name and voice, not only in the fact that Christ redeemed, saved, and gave mercy to his covenantal people, but also to the fact that God IS our Savior both now and forever!

And that isn't based on our FAITHFULNESS – but is simply based on his love, grace, and mercy. And THAT is the faith we have.

You...me...we are Habakkuk in so many ways. And oh how we long to see God. To see his majesty, to watch his work in restoring his creation to beauty, hope, and peace. And God has told us time and time again that he will. That his final act will be his Son returning and restoring a broken world. And our faith is built, tethered, and held strong because we know that God will. Even when we see so much anger, hate, death, and destruction...yet we will rejoice in the Lord and be joyful in God our Savior.

Amen.