

## When God Shows Up Habakkuk 3

Well, it's been a few weeks since we spent some time with Habakkuk, so perhaps a bit of review is in order. At the beginning of the book, we saw Habakkuk crying out to God, pleading with Him to do something about the violence and oppression, the corruption and wickedness that he saw so clearly in Israelite society. God answered Habakkuk, saying that He would solve the problem by sending the Chaldeans, the soldiers of the Babylonian empire, to destroy the Kingdom of Israel. Habakkuk of course objected to this. He asked God how it could be right for a bunch of wicked pagans to serve as agents of God's holy justice. How could it be right for God to allow the Chaldeans to sweep Israel up into their net, if they were only going to give themselves the credit for their conquest?

And perhaps you've asked similar questions over this last month since we last looked into Habakkuk. After all, we've seen plenty of wickedness in the world, haven't we? Once again, the prospect of international terrorism rears its ugly head as an Egyptian airliner has crashed into the Mediterranean, not too far from where Habakkuk once lived. And there's still violence in the land the Babylonians once ruled, with ISIS thugs slaughtering women and children, wiping out Christian communities that have been established for almost 2000 years. Where's the justice in any of this? Why does God allow such wickedness to go on?

Well, when we look at chapter two of Habakkuk, we find that God simply asserts the certainty of His judgment on all wickedness, regardless of who is doing the sinning. God pronounces woe on all the wicked, on all those violent people who oppress others, on all those greedy people who take what doesn't belong to them by force or trickery, on all those self-centered people who try to glorify themselves by their works, on all those brutal people who humiliate and dehumanize others, on all those who worship the works of their own hands, on all those, in sum, who are proud, whose souls are lifted up instead of bowing themselves down before God.

Today, in chapter 3, we find Habakkuk's response to this sweeping announcement of God's justice. Like the first few verses of the book, this chapter begins with a prayer to God. But unlike the beginning of the book, this time there are no complaints. In the face of certain judgment, Habakkuk makes no attempt to justify himself or his people. No, he has completely abandoned any of the distinctions he previously tried to make between the Israelites and the Babylonians. He has stopped trying to discern subtle degrees of relative wickedness, trying to decide which sinners are more or less worthy of judgment.

Instead, he demonstrates how fully he has understood the lessons of chapters 1 and 2. He turns away from any pride he might have had in his personal righteousness or in his culture's superiority. Oh, in verse two he does ask God to bring revival to His people, to make God's marvelous works known to them once again. But at the same time, he admits that God has every right to be angry with His people, and even to bring the sort of devastating judgment on them that He has foretold. And so Habakkuk simply and completely throws himself on God's mercy and compassion.

How can he do this? In the face of imminent disaster, how can he have such tremendous faith in God? Maybe you would like to have this kind of faith yourself, in turbulent times like these. And maybe in the face of your personal problems, you've had a hard time mustering up such faithful feelings. So, how did Habakkuk do it? What was the fuel for Habakkuk's faith?

The answer, which we begin to see in verse 3, may surprise you. For Habakkuk simply says that God came to him. He saw a vision of God coming from Teman, from Mount Paran. Why is that place so important? It's the area to the south and east of Israel, the same direction from which the Israelites first entered the Promised Land when they came out of slavery in Egypt. Habakkuk's vision thus reminds him not only of the great events of Exodus, but of the way God gave His law to His people on Mount Sinai. In short, his vision of God reminds him of God's relationship with His people. He is comforted, he is satisfied, he has faith in God simply because God shows up.

But why is God's mere presence so satisfying? What is it about this vision of God in His power and glory that is so comforting to Habakkuk? Well I suppose the most obvious answer is that God has promised in chapters 1 and 2 to use His tremendous power to do justice, to bring judgment on His enemies. And in this vision, Habakkuk sees Him doing just that.

And his power is truly awesome, isn't it? In verse 5 Habakkuk sees God bringing pestilence or disease. He is also said to bring flaming coals, and this Hebrew word can also be translated as plagues. In other words, God is in complete command of those devastating sicknesses which are completely beyond our control.

But that's just the smallest sample of God's power. In verse 6, we are reminded that God created the whole world, measuring it the way a surveyor determines boundary lines. And just as God made everything, just as God raised up the mountains, He also brings them crashing down with tremendous earthquakes, such as the one that shook Mt. Sinai when God gave the law to His people, an earthquake that shook even the tents of the nomads in faraway Midian and Cushan. No wonder the nations tremble when God shows up.

And they tremble not in the least because God says He will use all this awesome power to bring judgment on the wicked. For didn't God bring terrible plagues and sicknesses on the Egyptians who refused to release God's people from slavery? And didn't God also send plagues among His people in the wilderness, when they grumbled and complained against Him? For both Jew and Gentile, God used His power to bring justice.

And God wasn't angry with the Red Sea when He parted the waters, when they stood like a wall on the right hand and on the left of His people as they passed through in safety. No, His intent was just as much to save His people as it was to bring judgment on the pursuing Egyptians. The wicked are never a match for God's power, not the Egyptians in the days of Moses, nor the oppressive, corrupt Israelites or the brutal, pagan Chaldeans in the days of Habakkuk. In his vision, Habakkuk saw God saving His people by completely destroying their wicked oppressors, the way a warrior would cut his enemies apart from their feet to their neck.

And the same thing is true today. Whenever we look around at the tremendous problems that surround us, it is easy to fall into despair. We don't know what to do about a lousy local school system that stifles so much of our economic potential. We don't know how to restore fractured family structures, or how to free people from addiction to alcohol and drugs, or how to bring about racial reconciliation. We don't have the ability to balance the Federal budget or keep Egyptian planes from falling out of the sky, or prevent ISIS thugs from killing our Christian brothers and sisters.

But God can. And as Habakkuk saw, God is quite capable of taking His bow out of its sheath, and protecting His people by sending His arrows into His enemies. God can make the sun and moon stand still, as He did on the day that He sent hailstones to destroy Joshua's enemies at Gibeon. God once washed the whole world of wickedness, unleashing all the waters of the deep in the days of Noah – so could any foe be too strong for Him?

So, when we meditate on this mighty God, this powerful God, this just and righteous God, is there any room for fear even in the face of our worst enemies? Are ignorance or addiction or corruption any match for His light, which is as bright as the sun? Are all the forces of radical Islam or race hatred or tyranny any match for God's glittering spear? No, it's no wonder that Habakkuk's vision fueled his faith. For as we lift our eyes from our problems to gaze upon our mighty and glorious Savior, our righteous and just Lord, what room could be left in our lives for fear?

And yet at the same time, in verse 16, we see that Habakkuk is very frightened indeed. His legs tremble and his lips quiver. He was so afraid that his bones felt weak and rotten. What's the matter with him? Is his faith somehow weakening? Is he, in spite of himself, still afraid of the Chaldean army?

Well, that would make sense to us. After all, at the end of verse 16 he acknowledges God's plan to send the Chaldean army to invade and conquer the Kingdom of Israel. And in verse 17, Habakkuk acknowledges what that sort of conquest would mean – destruction or confiscation of all their crops and all their livestock. Along with the rest of the Israelites, Habakkuk would face the very real prospect of starvation, even if he managed to avoid being killed by the enemy soldiers or taken prisoner by them.

And in the same way, we might not always find God's righteous power so comforting. We may look at the sin in our own lives and wonder how long God will put up with it. Or when we look at the broader sins within our culture, perhaps we wonder if we will also be caught up in the consequences of those sins. It certainly seems that Habakkuk had a good reason to be afraid of the Chaldeans, God's chosen agents of His justice.

But then, no, that can't be right. For in the last half of the verse Habakkuk says he will rest in the day of trouble, he will wait quietly for the judgment of God that will come upon His people during the Chaldean invasion. So if he's not afraid of the Chaldeans, why is Habakkuk trembling?

Well, if we look back a verse, we'll see that his fearfulness follows hard on the heels of his vision of God's power and justice. So it is more likely that he is afraid not of the Chaldeans but of God. And this fear of God was not at all uncommon among the Old Testament prophets. When Ezekiel saw the cherubim with four wings and four faces, when he saw the wheels of God's chariot full of eyes, and when he saw the rainbow surrounding the glowing form of God, he fell down on his face. When Daniel saw a similar vision, he turned white as a sheet and passed out on the ground. When he awoke, he was only able to get up on his hands and knees, and he was trembling at that.

But this fear in the presence of God wasn't just for Old Testament times. When John, the Beloved Disciple, saw the vision of Christ that he records in his Revelation, he fell at the feet of Jesus as if he were a dead man. When he saw the unveiled power of God, Jesus had to tell him, "Do not be afraid."

In short, it's not wrong for sinners like us to have a healthy fear of God. For what did Jesus Himself tell us in our responsive reading? "Fear not them which kill the body, but are not able to kill the soul: but rather fear him which is able to destroy both soul and body in hell."

And yet, in spite of the certainty of God's judgment coming upon him and his people, and in spite of his healthy fear of God's awesome power, somehow this vision of God, the fact that God shows up serves as fuel for Habakkuk's faith. Why is that?

Well, let's take a step back and look at the way Habakkuk describes God in his vision: God's glory covers the heavens. His brightness was as the light, and horns, or rays of light flashed from his hands. It had to be an awesome sight, an overwhelming reality.

And why does this boost Habakkuk's faith? Well, compared to the darkness of our greatest confusion, God is the light. Compared to the shabbiness and squalor of our sinful culture, God is glorious – the whole earth is full of His praise.

And perhaps this can help us in the midst of our own difficulties. For instead of dwelling on all the sin, all the corruption, all the weakness, all the oppression that is all around us, shifting our focus to God Himself can bring us great confidence. And that's because faith necessarily involves trusting in someone or something. So, if we want to have faith in God, we need to turn our attention away from ourselves, our wants, our feelings, and our desires. We need to stop dwelling on all the confusing, hurtful, and overwhelming circumstances of our lives. Instead, we need to look at God, in all His splendor, radiance, and power.

And how much more should we Christians draw strength from the presence of God? For we have seen the perfect sacrifice Jesus has offered for us on the cross. So we can have the greatest sort of faith no matter what comes our way. For if the cross inspires our fear of God, clearly showing us the perfect justice of God, a justice that demanded such a terrible sacrifice, the cross also inspires our love for God, as it demonstrates the perfect mercy of God, Who gave that sacrifice so that we might not have to die.

And so if we are trusting in Christ, we can have the sort of confidence Jesus describes in our responsive reading. Regardless of the hostility of the unbelieving world, we can be sure that the Father has numbered every hair on our head, and values us so greatly. We can proclaim the truth of the gospel from the housetops, being sure that God will bring justice to the wicked, revealing every evil secret that is now hidden.

If we are trusting in Christ, we can have the same sort of confidence that Habakkuk had, not in the circumstances of our lives, but in God Himself, no matter what happens. That sort of faith can sustain us, even if like Habakkuk we end up losing everything we have – even if there are no figs, no grapes, no olives, no grain, no sheep, no cattle. Faith in a righteous and loving God can make us surefooted as deer even on the steepest hills, safe even in the midst of the most treacherous of times.

But more than that, such a focus on God's mercy and justice, such surrender to Christ can even bring us joy. As Habakkuk says, even in the face of an invading army, he will rejoice in the Lord, He will take joy in the God of his salvation.

For when you get right down to it, if God comes to us, this God of glory and splendor, this God of might and majesty, why should losing anything else, even our lives matter so much to us? God has come to be with us in the person of Jesus Christ. We have beheld His glory, full of grace and truth. Why should we fear anyone else? And why should we want anything else?