

Part 3: A Song of Hope for Hard Times

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While Habakkuk 3 is not the quintessential Mother's Day passage—the book of Habakkuk does display a reality that most mothers and wives can relate to. How many mothers have witnessed their husbands examining a broken window blind or a leaky pipe and say, "Give me fifteen minutes, and I'll get this fixed," only to find that for your husband, like God himself in 2 Peter 3:8, fifteen minutes is like fifteen thousand years.

While many men are able to handle such tasks, when it comes to projects like that I quickly find myself punching above my weight class. Web searches go from, "How to fix a pipe," to "how to replace drywall," to "plumbers near me." As Mike Tyson famously said, "Everyone has a plan until they get punched in the face."

In our previous two Sundays, in this Old Testament book, we've seen the prophet Habakkuk identify what he thought was a significant, but simple problem: Why is Israel acting wickedly and when will God fix it?

But as God began to answer him, Habakkuk quickly realized, that the problems were bigger than he thought. In chapter 1, he says, "God do you care about Israel's sin?" And God said, "Yes! And I'm sending Babylon to wipe it out!" Habakkuk then, responded with his second question saying "But God, don't you care about Babylon's sin?" And God said in chapter 2, "Yes! I will purify Israel, and I will purify Babylon, but the righteous shall live by faith."

The problem of evil was bigger than Habakkuk thought and the solution weightier than he imagined. Whether you are a Christian or not, we don't need a degree in philosophy or theology to notice that our world has a problem of injustice, violence, oppression, abuse, and evil.

But when we begin to see the problem is out there, the Bible shows us the problem is also in here.

To use our plumbing analogy again, Habakkuk though he had a leaky pipe and he expected God to come and gently open up the wall, fix the issue, restore it back to normal and go on his way. But God instead said, "The entire plumbing system of your house is broken, everything is corrupt." And to fix it God wasn't not sending a plumber, he was sending the plundering nation of Babylon who will tear open their walls, gather their copper pipes, and sell them to further their terror.

In this way, the broken pipes would be replaced, but not in the way he initially thought. But, because sin has so pervaded our world and our hearts, this total make-over-plunderer edition is what is needed to finally remove the issue.

The challenge for Israel then is the challenge for us: what hope is there if to be delivered from evil, evil must be judged—including us? Well here is God's message: God will deliver his people through judgement. Judgement will come, it will purify, it will wipe out evil and corruption, **Habakkuk 1:5**, "Look, among the nations and see; wonder and be astounded. For I am doing a work in your days that you would not believe if told." But, as we saw in **Habakkuk 2:4**, "The righteous shall live by faith."

That's the basic outline of the book. It's hard for us to discern the dividing line between God's judgment on sin, and God's salvation of sinners but the line is clear: righteousness by faith.

In this way our lives are more like algebra than arithmetic. Everyone knows the solution to our world's issues! We need evil removed! We know the answer. What we need help to see is how we get that answer while not being swept up in that removal ourselves.

We need to find what "X" is. We need to find the certainty of hope that while evil will be destroyed, we will not.

This is our main point today. The solution is this: **God never forgets his mercy and Christians never forget their God.**

While an appeal to algebra might not be the best way to give you hope, we should first notice that Habakkuk's conclusion is actually a song! That's what we see in **3:1**, "A prayer of Habakkuk the prophet, according to Shigionoth."

This prayer is a prayer for hard times, but it's also a song for hard times. It's meant to be the soothing lullaby of the afflicted heart. As his song goes on, he builds to a climax, he teaches as he sings. This song has essentially three verses. Verse 1: He asks God to **Revive the Work**, Verse 2: He teaches us to **Rehearse the Work**, and in verse 3 he crescendos calling us to **Rest in the Work**.

Let's examine the first verse of this song together. Habakkuk begins saying this: (**Hab. 3:1**), "O LORD, I have heard the report of you, and your work, O LORD, do I fear. In the midst of the years, revive it; in the midst of years make it known; in wrath remember mercy."

Here's our first point this morning as he calls God to **Revive the Work of God**.

There are some famous songs which make use of imperative statements: Elton John reminds us, "Don't go breaking my heart." Or as the Beatles more famously implored, "Hey Jude, don't be afraid...take a sad song and make it better."

I'm not sure I know who Jude is, or what it means to make a sad song better. But we do know who Habakkuk is talking to: the LORD, Yahweh, the covenant keeping God of Israel. And what does Habakkuk want the Lord to do? Revive his work.

Now you'll notice that the tune of this song is a different tune than the opening lines of his complaint in chapter one. He opens saying, (**Hab. 1:2**) "O LORD, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not hear..." But by chapter 3 he sings, "O LORD, I have heard."

We could end the sermon and the song here and have a sort of resolution. What do we need if we want to make sense of difficult times? What do we need when it seems God is ignoring us, indifferent to us, or inappropriate with us? We need to hear the Lord.

The summary of the Christian hope is, "O LORD, I have heard." We've already talked about the New Testament writers' favorite verse from Habakkuk, 2:4, "the righteous shall live by faith." But notice how

Paul says we come to such a peaceful life: **Romans 10:17**, "So faith comes from hearing and hearing through the word of Christ."

Faith in difficult times doesn't merely hear of Jesus, but hears the word of Jesus. Faith that organizes life is faith that assumes God works, and God has told us of his works, and God has proven his works in the gospel of Jesus. Though the death, burial and resurrection is the great proof of a working and speaking God, Habakkuk, writing long before, assumes the same formula: "I have heard of you and of your work, O Lord."

But do you see the tension from a human perspective in this this song? What is the emotional response to this God and his work? Fear! But despite that fear, what is his hope? That God would revive that work.

While the work of the Lord seems terrible in a sense to Habakkuk, what's more terrible for him to consider is the work left undone. Imagine you had a large tumor or cancer in your abdomen that needed to be cut out. It is a fearful and weighty reality to think of going, "under the knife." But what do you think would be more terrible, the surgery starting or the surgery starting and never being completed?

What if having removed the tumor, the doctor woke up you and sent you on your way without finishing the surgery, stopping the bleeding, restoring the tissue, and sowing up the wound. This is the sense in which Habakkuk is pleading—resume the work! Make it known that you have not forgotten.

What is the work? For Habakkuk to find peace, for Habakkuk to know that evil, oppression, and sin will be dealt with what does he need to see happen? What is the work of God? Well the rest of this song and the whole of this book answers it: judgement. God must judge sin.

A doctor must remove the cancer. A terminator must kill the bugs. Bleach must erase the stain. And God must remove sin.

Which is why the ending of this opening chorus is so important: **Habakkuk 3:2**, "In wrath, remember mercy."

The book of Habakkuk is a book about judgement and wrath. For us as modern people, we cringe at that, but we shouldn't. In fact remember, Habakkuk isn't complaining because God is wrathful--he's complaining because it seems God is not being wrathful towards violent and wicked Israel. He opened saying, "Why do you do nothing about sin? Why do you sit on your hands when evil increases?"

Habakkuk wanted God's wrath. He just wanted it on others. We too, want that. Generally speaking we show our modern confusion when we cringe at the wrath of God, but celebrate the wrath of our own choosing. I was able to witness the crown jewel of self-righteousness the other night. Driving home late from the airport, a motorcycle flew past me and I was enraged! But then it happened...out of the darkness, light! A police car was driving the other way, he flipped around and my heart sang.

We love wrath, when it's in our favor. We want our political opponents silenced. We want our kid's disrespect to be answered. We want the slackers on our group project to feel the abject punishment of their sloth. History has shown us that the problem is not wrath and justice, but weak wrath and justice. The good wrath of a human father defending his family doesn't eliminate evil. The Supreme Court's

judgement against injustice hasn't solved anything. Cancel culture loses ground as quickly as it erases critics.

Worldly justice and wrath is not only weak, but it is inherently imperfect. Our wrath is often petulant, fickle, and disproportional. But God's justice is always measured, always consistent, always fitting. Wrath is natural to us, but also naturally imperfect. Wrath is natural to God, but perfectly, justly, and righteously so.

Habakkuk realizes that for the world to be free, judgement is needed. But he also realizes for the individual to have hope, mercy is needed. But this is the nature of the Biblical God. In wrath, remember mercy.

Drive down Reserve Street at 5:00 p.m. and tell me what naturally flows from your heart? Wrath? Or mercy? Wrath seems most natural for us, and mercy secondarily forced. But for God, justice and mercy are just as natural in accord with his own character.

God's first full introduction of himself is in **Exodus 34:6-7** when he says to Moses, I am the Lord, "a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness...but who will by no means clear the guilty."

Habakkuk understands that our God is just and merciful his character. And being supremely perfect he can uphold wrath (what we deserve) and mercy (what we do not deserve).

When we think God has forgotten to work, when all we see is the chaos and pain of our own world and our own heart—God calls us to remember him. Remember he is capable to death with all of it, and his work will be accomplished. Remember the God who in wrath, remembers mercy and saves sinners by his grace.

While this tension is hard for us to understand even this side of the cross, it's even harder for Habakkuk and Israel. A real nation is coming in to judge them, it seems so difficult to fathom that those who trust in him faithfully will be safe in any way. But this is where Habakkuk begins his second verse where he reminds of what God has already done and what God will do.

And in the second verse of the song, he transitions to remind us of this work. Here is our second point this morning: **Rehearsing the Work of God.**

This second part goes from 3:3-3:15. The big picture of these verses affirms the first two chapters of the book: Israel will be purged by Babylon, and Babylon will be judged.

But it does so in a uniquely prophetic and poetic way. These verses portray things that God has done, but they also speak in the past tense of things God has not yet done. There's a sort of prophetic confidence in this text which speaks of past events as hope for present, while also speaking of future events so certain that he speaks of them as already having happened.

At staff meeting this week I called this passage, the "It's a Small World" ride of the Bible. For those who have never been on this Disney Land ride, you enter on a river and go into a dark castle where the ride bobs, weaves, swerves throughout different cultures and time frames. And apart from knowing you're on the ride, you have no clear sense of where you are in history or in time. But at the end of it, you emerge back out in present day yet having a greater picture of the whole world.

This divine time-machine in Habakkuk 3 takes three important stops, all of which illustrate a God who in wrath remembers mercy.

First we see ***Perfection Gone Wrong***.

Hab. 3:3, "God came from Teman, and the Holy One from Mount Paran. His splendor covered the heavens and the earth was full of his praise."

So here we have God presented as coming from the south west, to look on what is perhaps the Promised Land of Israel. Israel, was meant to be symbolic of God's new garden, the new place of God's perfect recreation.

In creation, the earth and heavens were covered with his splendor and full of his praise. Last week we saw God predicting something like this in future: **Hab. 2:14**, "For the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord as the waters cover the sea."

In this way God is communicated the perfection of creation. But something went wrong. Both in creation, where Adam and Eve sinned, and in bringing Israel into the Promised Land—God's perfection was infected with sinful rebellion.

So what was once clearly perceived in the presence of God's infinite glory was now veiled by his required acts of justice. **Hab. 3:4-7**, "His brightness was like the light; rays flashed from his hand, there he veiled his power. Before him went pestilence and plague followed him at his heels. He stood and measured the earth; he looked and shook the nations; then the eternal mountains were scattered; the everlasting hills sank low. His were everlasting ways. I saw the tents of Cushan in affliction; the curtains of the land of Midan did tremble."

The perfect splendor of God was veiled, veiled by what? His judgement. That's why Isaiah calls God's wrath in judgement "a strange work" (Is. 28:21). It's often hard for us to discern God in the midst of the evil of man and the judgement of God. And the Bible expects that tension.

God's judgement on wrath does reveal his character. It reveals his righteous justice. But it does cloud a bit the fuller picture of who God is. It's a strange work because God's heart doesn't exist in a wrathful disposition. He's not in heaven angry, or petulant. But because of God's justice, sin stirs up his wrath as a natural and good response to what is evil. In this way one theologian said (Alexander Maclaren), "It is foreign to his heart but not to his nature."

Being a good and perfect and glorious God, he then moved to judge sinful people. This is the second stop on the bus: ***Judgement Gone Right***.

Notice the language of judgement God uses here: **Hab. 3:8-15**, "Was your wrath against the rivers, O Lord? Was your anger against the rivers, or your indignation against the sea, when you rode on your horses on your chariot of salvation? You stripped the sheath from your bow, calling for many arrows. You split the earth with rivers. The mountains saw you and writhed; the raging waters swept on; the deep gave forth its voice; it lifted its hands on high. The sun and the moon stood still in their place at the light of your arrows as they sped, at the flash of your glittering spear. You marched through the earth with fury; you threshed the nations. You went out for the salvation of your people, for the salvation of

your anointed. You crushed the head of the wicked laying him bear from thigh to neck. You pierced with his own arrows the heads of his warriors, who came like a whirlwind to scatter me, rejoicing as to devour the poor in secret. You trampled the sea with your horses, the surging of mighty waters.”

You’ll notice that God’s chosen means of judging the earth was water. If you were doing Bible study on this, I’d have you circle all the times water, rivers, or sea show up—the answer is eight times in these seven verses.

Habakkuk makes it clear that these waters are the tool of the Lord. They are called his horse, his chariot, his bow and arrow.

And in redemptive history we have seen two events which should pop into our mind which prove this. The first is God’s specific judgement upon Pharaoh’s army at the Red Sea. But more central to the imagery in this text is the universal flood of Genesis 7 where God opened the fountains of the deep, covered the highest mountains, and judged all sinful flesh. All the nations were subjected to God’s judgement.

But we also see that Babylon here is spoken of as the sea, the arrows by which Israel will be judged. The wicked who are coming to crush Habakkuk in verse 14, are called the sea and mighty waters in verse 15. Just as God said the Chaldeans would march through the earth in Habakkuk 1:6, here the waters of judgement march through the earth.

But this is why those rhetorical questions in verse 8 are so important. Was God mad at the sea when he judged Pharaoh’s army? No! He was mad at rebellious Egypt. Was God angry at the waters when he sent the flood? No! He was wrathful towards wicked mankind.

But notice what happens to the sea which will sweep through Israel, the mighty nation of Babylon: **Hab. 3:15**, “You trampled the sea with your horses, the surging of many waters.” Is God mad at the sea which will sweep through Israel? Yes! Though God uses it as his tool, they will be judged for their wickedness. The trampler will be trampled.

God punishes all sin, everywhere. No one escapes it. Evil never gets the last laugh. That’s the beauty and hope of God’s judgement.

But in the midst of all this we see the final pit stop on this tour: ***Salvation Come Near***.

Amidst the seas that sweep, and the sweeper who is himself swept away, did you notice the plan and purpose of God: **Hab. 3:13**, “You went out for the salvation of your people, for the salvation of your anointed.”

The judgement of God was the grace of God. The wrath of God was the mercy of God. The sweeping of God was the salvation of God. God was going to deliver Israel from their sin by judging them. And he was going to deliver them from their judges by judging the very waters of Babylon.

And even though Babylon has yet to invade, Israel has yet to be purged, and Babylon has yet to be judged God reminds Habakkuk that even while he waits, he is working on this work. That’s what he said in 1:5, “I am doing a work in your day which you would not believe if told...”

But like Habakkuk who lived between the prophecy and the event, we too live between the cross indicating perfect judgement and mercy, and the return of Jesus where it is finally accomplished. So how then are we to live in the meantime? This is his final verse as he commends us to: **Rest in the Work of God.**

Notice his response: **Habakkuk 3:16**, "I hear and my body trembles; my lips quiver at the sound; rottenness enters into my bones; my legs tremble beneath me. Yet I will wait quietly for the day of trouble to come upon the people who invade us."

Now did you hear what Habakkuk said? I wonder what you heard. Maybe, like I did the first couple times I read it, "I will wait quietly for the day of trouble to come upon us."

But that's not what he said! What he said was, "I will wait quietly for the day of trouble to come upon the people who invade us."

Judgement was coming, but it was not a day of trouble for God's faithful. A day of trial. Yes. A day of tumult. Yes. A day of fear. Yes. But a day of trouble. No. Remember the Red Sea, it swept up Pharaoh but what of God's people? They passed safely through while their enemies did not.

What of the flood? Didn't the whole earth die! Yes, except for Noah, the one righteous man and his family. And the very water which came down on the wicked, lifted up the ark and delivered them safely through judgement.

All evil demands judgement. You know it. I know it. We know it. But remember our God who remembers mercy.

We saw the pattern for Noah, we saw the pattern for the Exodus, and today we are readying the pattern of delivering mercy for Israel in Habakkuk's day. But how will you be delivered by judgement and through mercy?

Habakkuk 1:5, "The righteous shall live by faith." Or as Paul puts it in **Romans 1:16-17**, "For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith and for faith, as it is written, 'The righteous shall live by faith.'"

We will endure, when our sins are purged. And how might our sins be purged and we not die ourselves? When Christ takes them in himself. When he dies our death and carries away our iniquity on the streams of divine mercy. Our judgement is the cross, but so is our mercy.

And if we have such a hope, how then shall we live? Consider the concluding lines of Habakkuk: Habakkuk closes saying this: **Hab. 3:17-19**, "Though the fig tree should not blossom, nor fruit be on the vines, the produce of the olive fail and the fields yield no food, the flock be cut off from the fold and there be no herd in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the LORD, I will take joy in the God of my salvation. God the Lord is my strength; he make my feet like the deer's he makes me tread on my high places. To the choirmaster; with stringed instruments."

We will all have to face evil in this world, we will have to face evil in our hearts. We will have seasons of failing produce, empty vines, and dying sheep. But if our righteousness is by faith in Jesus Christ the final

day of judgment will be no trouble for us. Therefore when all else seems to fail—rejoice in the God who doesn't. Take joy in the God of your salvation.

He is your strength. He makes your feet like the deer's he sets you on high places.

While our world tries to solve everything, in every which way—as the drywall continues to open up and our attempts to fix what's wrong only reveal the infinite reality of what is wrong—remember the God who in wrath remembers mercy.