

Introduction:

- A. There are times, I'm certain, when you have wondered, "What will become of me?" Were you standing, bewildered, outside of your boss's office door? Sitting in your car after the doctor's appointment? Alone after your spouse walked out? Holding a rejection letter from grad school? I remember thinking that on the night of my 40th birthday when the U.S. started Operation Desert Storm against Iraq and Saddam Hussein declared, *"The great showdown has begun! The mother of all battles is underway."* We thought he might well use chemical weapons. That day an Iraqi Scud missile struck Israel and many of us wondered, *"What will become of us?"* What about 9/11? Or I remember the fall morning we gathered here after the markets had crashed and the looks on some of your faces said that: *"What will become of us?"* We live in a precarious world; not merely unpredictable, but shot through with wickedness, ruled by the ruthless, undermined by the unscrupulous. *What will become of us?*
- B. As believers, those are times when we pray. But if you're like me, our prayers often seem flimsy. They don't seem to move us nearer God or have a strong enough grip to lay hold of God's help. How do you pray when your terrified about the future?
- C. The ancient Jewish prophet Habakkuk knew how to pray in such times and today he teaches us. Turn to **Hab 3** (p.700) As we've seen the last few Sundays, Habakkuk lived in a terrifying time, 600 years before Christ, when by God's design Babylon was poised to utterly crush the Jews—and Habakkuk with them. **Ch 3** is his prayer and as well as an anthem. **Here is a timeless, soul-nourishing, faith-orienting prayer for those times we all face when things seem out of control.** We learn a *pattern* of prayer here, as well as words which will serve us as they did Habakkuk.

I. WHEN WE FEAR WHAT WILL BECOME OF US PRAY OUT OF A VIVID MEMORY OF HOW GOD HAS DELIVERED HIS PEOPLE IN THE PAST (3:1-15)

Vv.1-2... By “your deeds,” Habakkuk means the stories of how God delivered Israel in the past. That’s evident from what follows. His prayer is, “*Do it again, Lord. Do it again for us!*”

A. “In wrath remember mercy.” This is a book dark and heavy with the wrath of God—something we don’t think much about. God’s anger over Judah’s violence and injustice is why he raises up the Babylonians to overwhelm them. His wrath over the Babylonian’s arrogance and brutality will, in turn, bring about their demise.

God’s wrath is hard for people to grasp. They think an angry God is a primitive idea unworthy of enlightened people. But God’s anger in Scripture never rises out of pettiness or pique. God’s wrath is the absolutely necessary expression of his righteousness, goodness, and love. He is too good to let the wicked win, and as the sovereign God he is responsible to put a stop to it. Sin, especially proud, violent injustice, infuriates him—as it should us! That is the kind of wrath in view here.

Habakkuk knows God must demonstrate his wrath against both Judah and Babylon, but for the sake of God’s covenant with his people, Habakkuk also pleads for God to show his saving mercy.

B. What Habakkuk prays next, in vv.3-15, is stunning. He has evidently been thinking deeply about God’s deliverance of his Israel from Egypt and the way God brought them triumphantly into the land he had promised them. Here he prays back that story to God, imagining what it was like if God himself had been visible—if the curtain had been drawn back. Let me read these verses, interrupting myself to help you grasp the eye-popping, knee-buckling scenes.

God in all his glory makes his entrance out of the desert to the southeast of Israel, between the capital city of Edom and the great mountain facing it.

³ *God came from Teman,
the Holy One from Mount Paran.
His glory covered the heavens
and his praise filled the earth.*

⁴ *His splendor was like the sunrise;
rays flashed from his hand,
where his power was hidden.*

There is terrible power surging from the closed fist of God which he unleashed on Egypt through the plagues: rivers turned to blood, frogs and gnats and flies, livestock dying, people pocked with boils, hail pounding their crops, locusts eating what remained, and then deep darkness—night and day. Finally, when none of these brought Pharaoh to his knees, the angel of death passed over and every firstborn son and animal in all Egypt died.

⁵ *Plague went before him;
pestilence followed his steps.*

Now God stops, and the earth can't bear it.

⁶ *He stood, and shook the earth;
he looked, and made the nations tremble.
The ancient mountains crumbled
and the age-old hills collapsed—
but he marches on forever.*

God was so terrifying that it was as if the ageless mountains fell to their knees. And the enemies of Israel were so frightened that their very tents shook:

⁷ *I saw the tents of Cushan in distress,
the dwellings of Midian in anguish.*

Now he looks at the Red Sea and the Jordan River, both which parted to let God's people pass through. They parted, Habakkuk sees, because the angry God stormed through them.

⁸ *Were you angry with the rivers, LORD?
Was your wrath against the streams?*

*Did you rage against the sea
when you rode your horses
and your chariots to victory?*

No! God was angry with his enemies, and the sea stood in his way.

⁹ *You uncovered your bow,
you called for many arrows.*

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.

It is a picture of the waves of the Red Sea, all piled up in fear of God and his people, raising their hands to implore the mercy of the Almighty! Then Habakkuk remembers a battle Israel fought under Joshua:

¹¹ *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.*

What a picture! God mowing down the nations like a harvester with a scythe! And why?

¹³ *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.*

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.*

That was where God's people were when he saved them—wretched and terrified—not just in Egypt, but

in other times as well. God came out to deliver his people and crush the wicked in his anger in the stories of Joshua and Gideon, David and Jehoshaphat. So when Babylon comes, remember this!

¹⁵ *You trampled the sea with your horses,
churning the great waters.*

- C. Can you imagine praying like that?! I think the prophet pondered the same stories we read in Exodus and, with the help of God's Spirit, pictured what God was like. It was like he pondered God's great deeds and then filled his mind and heart with what those stories said about our great God. That's exactly what we can do. Scripture helps us. The Bible *gives* us these pictures and poetry if we will fill our hearts with them when fear pounds on our doors.
- D. And remember this: we know a story of God's deliverance that far surpasses the Exodus! To bolster our faith when we are afraid, pray deep into the triumph of Christ. **Start with this:** that the wrath of God against sin, which we have just seen, was poured out on Christ on the cross, so that we might never have to face it ourselves. **Or this:** that the astonishing power of God that made the waters of the sea flee before Israel was but a whisper of the power that carries us safely through the walls of death, and opens the gates of heaven that we might go in. **Or this:** that "*the leader of the land of wickedness*" is Satan, the enemy of our souls, and that God will cast him down, and bind him in chains in hell's deepest chamber forever and ever. **And this:** that we, once "the wretched in hiding," have been lifted high by Christ our Savior and seated with him in heavenly realms, that we are a royal priesthood, saints!
- E. To contemplate the saving deeds of God does not make our troubles go away, nor make our suffering less. But it certainly changes the way we pray! Remembering reorients our prayers, and fortifies our faith.

There is a kind of hush, a gasp, a deep breath, after all that has passed before our imaginations. Then Habakkuk continues leading us in prayer: **vv.16...** I've always assumed Habakkuk's fear was at the thought of the coming Babylonians but I think he was stunned at seeing so vividly the wrath of God. Daniel felt this way when he saw the future. John would have felt the same kind of thing as God revealed to him the judgment coming on the world. The wrath of God coming upon Judah and then on Babylon was terrifying. But notice here that little word, **yet**. *"Yet I will wait patiently for the day of calamity to come on the nation invading us."*

II. WHEN WE FEAR WHAT WILL BECOME OF US, RESOLVE IN PRAYER THAT WE WILL WAIT PATIENTLY FOR GOD'S VICTORY (3:16)

- A. For believers, prayer is often simply hunkering down to wait patiently for God. Prayer is how we settle in for the long haul. When we're in trouble, God welcomes us to pray for help then and there—for health or resources, for resolved conflicts and safety. But sometimes God does not make our problems go away. Sometimes we must wait for the day Jesus returns, and "the kingdom of the world will become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ and he will reign forever and ever." **We pray ourselves full of the God's salvation and his promises, and then we pray out our resolve to God that we will wait patiently for God.**

Finally we come to these last faith-filled verses, punctuated by another '**yet**': **vv.17-19...** In this wicked world, sure to face the wrath of God, his people may face times where everything is dead, where nothing is left, when life has been ransacked and looted. Even then...

III. WHEN WE FEAR WHAT WILL BECOME OF US, RESOLVE TO REJOICE IN THE LORD (3:17-19)

I don't think we can get to the place of rejoicing without the kind of prayer that preceded this—without filling our hearts and imaginations with the power of God in saving his people.

When we're frightened we cannot just manufacture faith; summon it up from some storeroom in our souls. Faith needs to be fed, and that is what Habakkuk has done throughout this prayer. That is why we read and feed on Scripture. Having done that, Habakkuk **rejoices over two unchanging assurances.** These are the touchstones of our faith:

- A. "I will be joyful in God my Savior" or, "in the God of my salvation." Our God is not neutral, impassive about those who put their trust in him. He loves us passionately and he bends all his infinite virtues to our salvation. God *has* and *will* rescue us from sin and death; from the world, the flesh and the devil. No matter what else is happening we rejoice because God has saved us in Christ and will save us to the uttermost when Christ returns. Rejoice because we are saved now and forever. We are safe. Thank God!
- B. The second reason we rejoice: "The Sovereign LORD is my strength." Fear comes because we're so weak and helpless; powerless over the enemies within and without. What chance do we have against the Babylonians bearing down upon us, or against disease or age or an unjust oppressor? What power do we have even over our own sinful nature, or our toxic memories and habits? **We do not have to be strong because "the Sovereign LORD is our strength."**

"He makes my feet like the feet of a deer, he enables me to tread on the heights." Only moments before Habakkuk was weak-kneed and trembling before the wrath of God. Now he is strengthened by our saving God to climb above the dark powers of this world, to take the hill. Remember that famous photo of the Marines planting the flag on Iwo Jima? Yes, like that! When we wonder what will become of us, rely on the strength of God to climb high, where the air is thin, and the footing is treacherous, up to the coveted high ground where the Victor plants his flag.

Illus.: I will never forget **Larry Hildreth**. He was a fellow in his 30s in my previous church. He had a wife and little kids and he got cancer. The last time I visited him was May 2, 1990. I brought him Communion and we talked. As he told me about his thoughts, I started writing up and down the margins of old bulletins in my Bible. I told him, “*You know, a lot of people tell me, ‘I could never handle something like this as well as Larry does.’ What do you say to that?*” This is what Larry said, in an echo of Habakkuk:

I always searched God deeper as each little attempt at optimism failed. When you’re searching toward God and making progress, you have to get to the point where you know that the Bible and its great passages are true or you get lost. I’d read passages over and over and ask him to make these promises workable in my life.

You really have to conquer the feeling of loss when the things that make the world run aren’t there anymore.
Rom. 8:37: “No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.”

Prov. 3:5-6: “Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge him and he will make your paths straight.”
Lean not on your own understanding. I tried not to lean on my own understanding. You never conquer that totally but if you start on that premise then “when I am weak then You God are strong.”

I prayed when all was uncertain that I would overcome the world. At the point in my life when I’m the weakest, I’m the strongest I’ve ever been. I had to work hard at communion with him. I have times of grievous weeping and times of joyful weeping. H tries to stabilize me and I try to concentrate and get the worldly problems out of my mind.

When I pray I start by meditating to get myself into the presence of the loving God. I concentrate on trying to stay close to Jesus, to the things he's given me and done for me.

We started talking about his funeral, which as it turned out would be exactly one month later. He told me he wanted lots of singing and I remembered how Larry would put his head back and sing with unabashed gusto. I asked him what he wanted his funeral to be like. He said,

"The only thing I want people to think on that day is joy; is . . ." and he raised his hands deliberately and then clapped once, slowly and grandly. "When I pass into His kingdom I envision this spectacular light, this spectacular feeling of being able to let go. I've felt a lot of grief for my children, my wife, my family, myself, but I've had to get over that. But once you get past that, you know that God is there—that spirit of joyfulness."

"It's going to be a happy day for me," Larry said, grace thick in the room. "No grief for me. God chose me this time!"

Larry was a man who, in the strength of God, went on the heights.