



Habakkuk - Chapter Three

Summary of Chapter Three

Habakkuk asks for a new demonstration of God's wrath and mercy, such as God demonstrated so powerfully in the past, and closes with a confession of faith and trust in God. This prayer uses terms similar to Psalms 17 and 90.

IV. Habakkuk 3:1-16 - The Prophet's Prayer

This prayer is both a song of praise and affirmation that Habakkuk trusts that God will deliver his people.

¹ A prayer of the prophet Habakkuk according to Shigionoth.

Habakkuk 3:1

The word for prayer here usually refers specifically to a prayer of supplication (v.2) but can also refer to prayer in general, including prayers sung corporately, for example: <<*Hear my prayer, O God; give ear to the words of my mouth*>> (Psalm 54:2), and: <<*Give ear to my prayer, O God; do not hide yourself from my supplication*>> (Psalm 55:1).

Shigionoth occurs only twice in the OT, once in the singular and once in the plural, and may refer to an instrument or a type of psalm. The other usage of the word in Psalm 7:1 favours a type of psalm, and it may be related to *Akkadian shigu*, 'a lament.'

² O Lord, I have heard of your renown,
and I stand in awe, O Lord, of your work.
In our own time revive it;
in our own time make it known;

in wrath may you remember mercy.

Habakkuk 3:2

I have heard of your renown and I stand in awe, O Lord, of your work. Habakkuk had heard, perhaps in the temple, of God's great saving acts, which he recounts in vv.3-15; refer to the Song of Moses in Exodus 15:1-21. Job declares: <<*These are indeed but the outskirts of his ways; and how small a whisper do we hear of him! But the thunder of his power who can understand?*>> (Job 26:14).

In our own time revive it. God had done great things in the past; now the prophet is looking for revival, for God to repeat what he has done before. The prayer of Habakkuk reveals that revival is a work of God, not the achievement of man. There is something man can and must do for revival, simply cry out to God and plead for his reviving work.

In our own time make it known. Habakkuk longs for God to do a work that is evident to everyone as a work of God. He prays that revival would be known at a definite time and place, not just as an idea in someone's head.

In wrath may you remember mercy. A plea that when God judges, he will also be merciful; this is a classic statement of how God deals with his people: <<*In overflowing wrath for a moment I hid my face from you, but with everlasting love I will have compassion on you, says the Lord, your Redeemer*>> (Isaiah 54:8).

³ God came from Teman,
the Holy One from Mount Paran. Selah
His glory covered the heavens,
and the earth was full of his praise.

Habakkuk 3:3

Teman means 'south'; with the reference to Mount Paran: <<*So Moses sent them from the wilderness of Paran, according to the command of the Lord, all of them leading men among the Israelites*>> (Numbers 13:3), and: <<*The Lord came from Sinai, and dawned from Seir upon us; he shone forth from Mount Paran. With him were myriads of holy ones; at his right, a host of his own*>> (Deuteronomy 33:2), it may suggest the time following Israel's exodus from Egypt. When the biblical authors refer to God's mighty acts in the exodus, they often use images to evoke the fear or awe of God, for example: <<*Lord, when you went out from Seir, when you marched from the region of Edom, the earth trembled, and the heavens poured, the clouds indeed poured water. The mountains*

quaked before the Lord, the One of Sinai, before the Lord, the God of Israel>> (Judges 5:4-5), and: <<The Lord also thundered in the heavens, and the Most High uttered his voice. And he sent out his arrows, and scattered them; he flashed forth lightnings, and routed them. Then the channels of the sea were seen, and the foundations of the world were laid bare at your rebuke, O Lord, at the blast of the breath of your nostrils>> (Psalm 18:7-15).

Selah is a term occurring often in the psalms, of unknown meaning; it is probably some kind of musical direction.

His glory covered the heavens, and the earth was full of his praise. As Habakkuk prays for revival he begins to praise the God who brings revival. In this song of praise, punctuated by several expressions of Selah as in the psalms, Habakkuk glorifies the power and majesty of God.

It is good to praise God like this, and God's people need to do more of it. It is good to praise God:

- Because it gives appropriate honour and glory to God.
- Because it declares God's specific works.
- Because it teaches and reminds a person of who God is and what he has done.
- Because it places man in proper perspective under God.
- Because it builds confidence in the power and works of God.

⁴ The brightness was like the sun;
rays came forth from his hand,
where his power lay hidden.

⁵ Before him went pestilence,
and plague followed close behind.

Habakkuk 3:4-5

The brightness was like the sun. Habakkuk likens God's presence at Mount Sinai to that of a thunderstorm with darkness and flashes of lightning; refer to Exodus 19:18-20 and Psalm 18:9-14.

Pestilence and plague are often used as pictures of divine judgement; refer to Exodus 7:14-12:30, Leviticus 26:25, Deuteronomy 28:21-22, and Psalm 91:3-6.

⁶ He stopped and shook the earth;
he looked and made the nations tremble.

The eternal mountains were shattered;
along his ancient pathways
the everlasting hills sank low.

Habakkuk 3:6

The eternal mountains. Mountains were considered part of the foundation of the earth, and thus their quaking was a sign of divine judgement. Earthquakes are frequently associated with God's power; refer to Exodus 19:18, Psalm 18:7, Isaiah 24:1-3, Jeremiah 4:24-26 and 10:10, Micah 1:3-4 and Nahum 1:5.

⁷ I saw the tents of Cushan under affliction;
the tent-curtains of the land of Midian trembled.

Habakkuk 3:7

Cushan, Midian. These Arab tribes living near Edom see God's power and are stricken with fear: <<*The peoples heard, they trembled; pangs seized the inhabitants of Philistia. Then the chiefs of Edom were dismayed; trembling seized the leaders of Moab; all the inhabitants of Canaan melted away. Terror and dread fell upon them; by the might of your arm, they became still as a stone until your people, O Lord, passed by, until the people whom you acquired passed by*>> (Exodus 15:14-16), <<*and said to the men: 'I know that the Lord has given you the land, and that dread of you has fallen on us, and that all the inhabitants of the land melt in fear before you. For we have heard how the Lord dried up the water of the Red Sea before you when you came out of Egypt, and what you did to the two kings of the Amorites that were beyond the Jordan, to Sihon and Og, whom you utterly destroyed*>> (Joshua 2:9-10).

⁸ Was your wrath against the rivers, O Lord?
Or your anger against the rivers,
or your rage against the sea,
when you drove your horses,
your chariots to victory?

Habakkuk 3:8

Was your wrath against the rivers, O Lord? God used his power over the Nile (Exodus 7:14-24) and Jordan Rivers (Joshua 3:14-17), as well as the Red Sea (Exodus 14:2-15:5), to demonstrate his greatness in the exodus.

The chariot of victory or salvation is a picture of God bringing deliverance to this people as they travelled safely through the Red Sea and later through the wilderness and into the Promised Land. This can also be seen in the two instances where God brought deliverance to his prophets with chariots of fire: <<*As they continued walking and talking, a chariot of fire and horses of fire separated the two of them, and Elijah ascended in a whirlwind into heaven*>> (2 Kings 2:11), and: <<*Then Elisha prayed: 'O Lord, please open his eyes that he may see.'* So the Lord opened the eyes of the servant, and he saw; the mountain was full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha>> (2 Kings 6:17).

- ⁹ You brandished your naked bow,
sated were the arrows at your command. Selah
You split the earth with rivers.

Habakkuk 3:9

You brandished your naked bow, sated were the arrows at your command is probably an image of thunderbolts sent by God. God's perceived weaponry often includes arrows in a similar context: <<*I will heap disasters upon them, spend my arrows against them*>> (Deuteronomy 32:23), and: <<*If one does not repent, God will whet his sword; he has bent and strung his bow; he has prepared his deadly weapons, making his arrows fiery shafts*>> (Psalm 7:12-13).

You split the earth with rivers provides an image of thunderstorms and floods cutting through the desert landscape.

- ¹⁰ The mountains saw you, and writhed;
a torrent of water swept by;
the deep gave forth its voice.
The sun raised high its hands;
¹¹ the moon stood still in its exalted place,
at the light of your arrows speeding by,
at the gleam of your flashing spear.

Habakkuk 3:10-11

The sun raised high its hands; the moon stood still in its exalted place. This may be a reference to Joshua's victory at Gibeon: <<*On the day when the Lord gave the Amorites over to the Israelites, Joshua spoke to the Lord; and he said in the sight of Israel, 'Sun, stand still at Gibeon, and Moon, in the valley of Aijalon.' And the sun stood still, and the moon stopped, until the nation took vengeance on their enemies. Is this not written in the Book of Jashar? The sun stopped in mid-heaven, and did not hurry to set for about a whole day*>> (Joshua 10:12-13); the victory here will be equally sensational. God is pictured as a great warrior with his bow and spear.

¹² In fury you trod the earth,
in anger you trampled nations.

Habakkuk 3:12

In anger you trampled nations. Another prophet wrote: <<*Thus says the Lord: For three transgressions of Damascus, and for four, I will not revoke the punishment; because they have threshed Gilead with threshing-sledges of iron*>> (Amos 1:3), where the poetic expression is used to introduce the judgement upon all seven of the neighbouring nations, and upon Israel as well.

¹³ You came forth to save your people,
to save your anointed.
You crushed the head of the wicked house,
laying it bare from foundation to roof. Selah

Habakkuk 3:13

You came forth to save your people, to save your anointed. As Habakkuk remembers how God has saved in the past, it makes him full of faith for what God can do right now and in the future. God fought for his people because they were his covenant people, a nation of priests: <<*but you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation. These are the words that you shall speak to the Israelites*>> (Exodus 19:6), and: <<*Judah became God's sanctuary, Israel his dominion*>> (Psalm 114:2). Some commentators believe this also declares that salvation is brought with his anointed Messiah, Jesus Christ.

The head of the wicked house may refer to the pharaoh of Egypt or the leaders of Canaan; both felt God's displeasure.

Laying it bare from foundation to roof. The Hebrew is obscure, but the imagery of destroying a house completely suggests a thorough defeat.

14 You pierced with their own arrows the head of his warriors,
who came like a whirlwind to scatter us,
gloating as if ready to devour the poor who were in hiding.

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

Habakkuk 3:14-15

You pierced with their own arrows the head of his warriors is yet another reference to the destruction that God brought on the Egyptians, who had set out to defeat the Israelites. It is also a reflection of what happened when Gideon defeated the Midianites: <<*When they blew the three hundred trumpets, the Lord set every man's sword against his fellow and against all the army; and the army fled as far as Beth-shittah towards Zererah, as far as the border of Abel-meholah, by Tabbath*>> (Judges 7:22).

16 I hear, and I tremble within;
my lips quiver at the sound.
Rottenness enters into my bones,
and my steps tremble beneath me.
I wait quietly for the day of calamity
to come upon the people who attack us.

Habakkuk 3:16

I hear. Habakkuk realises that he must wait patiently for the destruction of his people and that God will then unleash his power against the Babylonians.

I tremble within. Habakkuk shows the proper response of man under the sovereign power of God. He recognises his own weakness and low standing before this God of all majesty and power, as did Job: <<*dread came upon me, and trembling, which made all my bones shake*>> (Job 4:14).

I wait quietly for the day of calamity is a reference for the day when the Babylonians lay siege to and eventually capture and destroy Jerusalem, taking almost the entire surviving population into captivity. Some may read the day of

calamity as being a reference to the Day of the Lord: <<*Alas for the day! For the day of the Lord is near, and as destruction from the Almighty it comes*>> (Joel 1:15). This can be seen as multiple times of judgement, which would include the Babylonian exile, or it could refer to the Second Coming of Christ, which does not fit the context in Habakkuk.

The people who invade us refers to the Babylonians.

V. Habakkuk 3:17-19 - Trust and Joy in the Midst of Trouble

Anticipating great destruction at the hands of the Babylonians, Habakkuk has radically changed – he began by informing God how to run his world, and ended by trusting that God knows best and will bring about justice.

- 17 Though the fig tree does not blossom,
and no fruit is on the vines;
though the produce of the olive fails
and the fields yield no food;
though the flock is cut off from the fold
and there is no herd in the stalls,
18 yet I will rejoice in the Lord;
I will exult in the God of my salvation.

Habakkuk 3:17-18

Though the fig tree does not blossom. Verse 17 contains a frequently quoted list of material disasters in which all crops and livestock are lost, and as a result it is unclear how there will be food to eat. Yet even amid suffering and loss, Habakkuk has learned that he can trust God, and with that trust comes great joy, not in circumstances but in God himself: yet I will rejoice in the Lord; I will exult in the God of my salvation, which Paul agrees with: <<*Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice*>> (Philippians 4:4), and: <<*Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you*>> (1 Thessalonians 5:16-18). Yahweh has become Habakkuk's strength in the same way that he was David's strength: <<*For you girded me with strength for the battle; you made my assailants sink under me*>> (Psalm 18:39).

Habakkuk knows that this God of majesty and power is not diminished because man faces difficult trials. Sometimes Christians think, "If God is so great and

powerful, how come I am going through a hard time?” Habakkuk knew this was the wrong question and the wrong attitude. Instead, he says: “I know you are strong and mighty, and if we are in desolate circumstances it is because we deserve it. I will praise you still, and even rejoice in you.” Habakkuk did not just practice positive thinking and shut out the idea of the barren fig tree and the empty cattle stalls. Instead, he saw those problems for what they were and remembered that God was greater than them all.

Benjamin Franklin, who was not a Christian although he had great respect for the Bible, used Habakkuk 3:17-19 to confound a group of sophisticated, cultured despisers of the Bible. When he was in Paris he heard this group mocking the Bible, and mocking Franklin for his admiration of it. One evening he came among them and said that he had a manuscript containing an ancient poem, that he was quite impressed by the poem and he wanted to read it to them. When he read Habakkuk 3:17-19, his listeners received it with praise and admiration, “What a magnificent poem!” they said, and wanted to know where they could get copies. Franklin told them to just look in Habakkuk Chapter 3.

¹⁹ God, the Lord, is my strength;
he makes my feet like the feet of a deer,
and makes me tread upon the heights.

To the leader: with stringed instruments

Habakkuk 3:19

God, the Lord, is my strength. Habakkuk can only properly pray this after he prayed the prayer of faith in the previous verses. He rightly declared that his strength was not in fig trees or vines or fields or flocks, but only in the Lord God. Some might even say that what they praise is their own strength. If by his words, life, or heart a man lives to praise his own achievements and resources, that those are his strength. If by words, life, or heart one praises a person or an idea, then those are his strength. Christians demonstrate that the Lord God is their strength when they praise him.

He makes my feet like the feet of a deer. Habakkuk can have sure-footed confidence in God and can live on the heights even amid extreme circumstances: *<<But for you who revere my name the sun of righteousness shall rise, with healing in its wings. You shall go out leaping like calves from the stall>>* (Malachi 4:2). Habakkuk thought of the deer running about on the high hills, never losing a step and never falling. More than that, the deer positively dance and leap on the hills, they are full of life and joy. So the prophet declares, “God will set my

steps that firmly and lively also. As I trust in him, he will not allow me to slip or fall, and I will do more than merely plod along, I will skip about with life and joy.”

To the leader is also translated as choirmaster and is probably the director of the temple musicians. David frequently uses this expression at the head of his psalms.

With stringed instruments refers to harps, lyres, etc. <<*Praise the Lord with the lyre; make melody to him with the harp of ten strings*>> (Psalm 33:2), and: <<*I will sing a new song to you, O God; upon a ten-stringed harp I will play to you*>> (Psalm 144:9). This kind of liturgical notation suggests that Habakkuk meant this to be a prayer that the faithful would sing together.