

***A MODEL FOR PRAYER***  
**Habakkuk 3:1-2**

**January 11, 2009 – Grace Covenant Baptist Church**

Tonight we begin to look at a different Habakkuk than we have seen previously in the beginning of this book—the Habakkuk that began by griping, grumbling, and questioning God, and consequently blaming Him, for the predicament both he and his people found themselves. The persecution at the hands of the Babylonians in chapters 1 and 2 was brutal. But even though there was great suffering, the nation of Israel still turned to live according to the sinful tendencies of both Babylon and their own hearts. Israel was in a mess – and Habakkuk was sent to bring God’s message to them in these times.

Habakkuk’s mistake, as we have seen, was that he focused on his circumstances and this led him to despair, to be frightened and unsure about his and Israel’s future. He knew the covenant that God had made with his forefathers, promising to bless Abraham and his descendants greatly, adding to their numbers and giving them a land. Now, where was this blessing? The peoples were greater in number, but the greater numbers only led to greater unfaithfulness to God. And the land they now lived in was anything but their own. Habakkuk thought that God had forgotten His promises and questioned God’s faithfulness.

As we see in our text tonight God’s responses to Habakkuk settled his spirit as we see him turn from doubt and fear to reverence and praise. Assured by God that Babylon and their ruthless treatment of the nation of Israel was serving, not hindering, God’s purposes, Habakkuk began to soften in his criticism. Then, after God pronounced a series of five woes upon Babylon that we looked at last week (2:5-20), we see here in Habakkuk an attitude of prayer and praise. Tonight we look at the opening of Habakkuk’s prayer and note three things that provide a model for us in how we should approach God in times of turmoil.

### **1. Humility**

Habakkuk’s prayer of praise opens, **“LORD, I have heard the report about You and I fear. O LORD, revive Your work in the midst of the years, in the midst of the years make it known; in wrath remember mercy.”** Do you notice a difference in Habakkuk’s tone? The last time we heard from Habakkuk was in 2:1, “I will stand on my guard post and station myself on the rampart; and I will keep watch to see what He will speak to me, and how I may reply when I am reproved.” Habakkuk stated that he would hear from the Lord once more and then, still with an edge of pride and uncertainty, said that he would respond accordingly. And respond he does, though not as he perhaps thought he would before the Lord’s response. The arguing and questioning as at first is now gone. There is no protest at all. As we will see, he does not even ask God to reverse His judgments on the nation and deliver them from their present distress. We find, as Martyn Lloyd-Jones noted, “a recognition that what God says He will do is perfectly right; that God is absolutely just, and that the punishment which is going to come upon Israel is well deserved—an attitude of complete submission to the will of God.”<sup>1</sup> No more questioning. No more trying to feebly defend himself or his people. There is simply a frank admission of the righteousness, holiness and justice of God. The confusion and fear came because of their sinfulness, not because God had forgotten them. Habakkuk is now content that the nation, under

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<sup>1</sup> D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *From Fear to Faith*, 58-59.

the oppression of the Babylonians, is right where God wants them to be and that God is still sovereign.

How was Habakkuk brought to this new position? It happened at the moment that Habakkuk took his eyes off of his circumstances, of thinking about himself and his nation and the Babylonians, and saw God at work against the background of sin in the world. Lloyd-Jones, who was a master of diagnosing things spiritually, remarked, “Our troubles can nearly all be traced to our persistence in looking at the immediate problems themselves, instead of looking at them in light of God.”<sup>2</sup> Does this not describe Habakkuk’s plight? As long as he was focused on the turmoil, he was troubled in spirit. Now he is no longer focused on the situation, but on God and his spirit is entirely different. Once he was reminded by God that God is God and man is not, he saw things in an entirely new light, from God’s perspective, not his own. Now he is more concerned about God and His glory than himself and Israel.

You see, Habakkuk’s root problem was that he began wrong. While he was focused on the people of God and somewhere in the back of his mind that glorious covenant that God had made with them, he forgot that Israel was a sinful people *just like* the Babylonians. Perhaps he had not forgotten Israel’s sinfulness altogether, but he had set it up as a more refined sinfulness, as if their sin was not as great in the eyes of a *their* God. That, my friends, is a prideful position. It is a snare set by the father of lies himself. Once a believer begins to look at their sin as somehow being less serious in God’s eyes than those of a pagan, we have lost any sense of the seriousness of sin and the need for repentance. Habakkuk now acknowledged that “All have sinned and come short of the glory of God” and, “The whole world lies in the evil one.” As Lloyd-Jones rightly asserted, “The holiness of God and the sin of man are the only things that matter.”<sup>3</sup>

Habakkuk had been humbled by God, and the question for us tonight is therefore, “Do we who know Christ savingly see our need to be humbled?” If not, then we will never be able to approach God on His terms. We too will come to Him griping, grumbling, and discontent. What about as a nation? We too live in uncertain times. Our nation is on the downward slope of moral decline. But do we, as Habakkuk, often want to blame anyone or anybody but ourselves? Yes, we live in a political climate that caters to secular humanism and moral relativism. The wicked have no concern for God or His truth. But we can learn from Habakkuk. These problems we face today cannot be solved politically because it is not a problem of politics. It is a spiritual problem that only the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ can rightly fix.

Again, hear Lloyd-Jones, who faced the political issues of Communism and two World Wars in his day, “Our one concern must be with the holiness of God and the sin of man—whether found in the Church, the State, or in the world. Whatever may be true of Communists, or of anybody else who is opposed to Christ, my first question must be: What about myself? Does the fact that there are others worse than I am mean that I am all right? All of us, like Habakkuk, must confess to God: ‘We have sinned against Thee, and we have no right to plead any mitigation of the sentence of Thy holy justice.’” “Such self-humbling in the presence of God,” Lloyd-Jones asserted, “is desperately needed.”<sup>4</sup>

What Lloyd-Jones said 60+ years ago concerning Europe is as true for us today. It is easy to look at the woes of our nation and blame only the godless. But what about the Church? Could it be that we are in this predicament because the Church has been lax with the gospel and become comfortable with the ways of the godless, much like the nation of Israel? Could it be that we are

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<sup>2</sup> *From Fear to Faith*, 59.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 60.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 61-62.

under the judgment of God because of the cheap grace and easy-believism that has been peddled from pulpits for a century or more? And even when we do cast an eye at the Church, we are quick to blame everyone else, whether it be liberalism or the Charismatic movement or Calvinism or Arminianism or faulty church growth principles or the traditional church or the contemporary church or the Joel Osteen's of the world. Are you beginning to get the picture? Yes, we should speak up against those things that hinder rather than promote the wonderful truths of the gospel. But we must be humbled, remembering that we are sinful people just as the rest and that judgment begins at home. Has there been a humbling? Is there a spirit of repentance? Or is there simply blame and accusation against others and ultimately towards God?

The first part of a model prayer is humility, a right acknowledgement of our own sinfulness and our own need for repentance, individually and corporately. That is how Habakkuk was changed so that he could live by faith. He understood that what he considered to be all wrong in his life and in his land was all right because God was in control. Initially, his perspective of right was not God's right because he was looking at it from his perspective and not God's. But once He saw things from God's perspective, all was right within him. **“Lord, I have heard the report about you.”** His pride was shattered, and he was humbled. How did he now reply when he was reproved?

## **2. Worship**

**“LORD, I have heard the report about You and I fear.”** I would suggest that this is probably not the response that Habakkuk anticipated he would have when he answered God's reproof in 2:1. **“Fear”** here does not mean that Habakkuk was afraid of the things that were going to happen as a result of the Lord's report. His **“fear”** was a reverent and awful fear because he was in the presence of a holy God and he is driven to worship Him.

We saw the beginnings of this type of fear in 2:20, **“But the LORD is in His holy temple. Let all the earth be silent before Him.”** That was the Lord's summation of all that was happening, and now, with those words, Habakkuk is overwhelmed by what God could and would do. As long as he focused on the circumstance, he missed this wonder. There was no amazement about God. But now God has spoken, and Habakkuk worships Him.

We see how reverence and awe is related to worship in other places in Scripture.

**Psalm 2:11-12** – <sup>11</sup> Worship the LORD with reverence and rejoice with trembling. <sup>12</sup> Do homage to the Son, that He not become angry, and you perish *in* the way, for His wrath may soon be kindled. How blessed are all who take refuge in Him!

**Hebrews 12:28-29** – <sup>28</sup> Therefore, since we receive a kingdom which cannot be shaken, let us show gratitude, by which we may offer to God an acceptable service (worship) with reverence and awe; <sup>29</sup> for our God is a consuming fire.

In both of these texts we see worship with reverence and rejoicing because of what the Lord can and will do. In both places, when the writer is faced with the dreadful truth of God's judgment and wrath, he rejoices.

This is the opposite of one who does not know Christ. The psalmist describes the wicked as follows in Psalm 36:1-4:

**Psalm 36:1-4** – <sup>1</sup> Transgression speaks to the ungodly within his heart; *There is no fear of God before his eyes.* <sup>2</sup> For it flatters him in his *own* eyes concerning the discovery of

his iniquity *and* the hatred *of it*.<sup>3</sup> The words of his mouth are wickedness and deceit; he has ceased to be wise *and* to do good.<sup>4</sup> He plans wickedness upon his bed; he sets himself on a path that is not good; he does not despise evil.

These words describe a man without God and with no thought of God. But it is also true of those who know God and approach God in a wrong manner, who are flattered with themselves rather than by God. That is the essence of pride. That is how Habakkuk began, but now the Lord has spoken, and his entire attitude towards God has changed. He now understood more fully the God who was in the midst of his calamity. As long as he focused on the calamity, he was in bondage to what might happen. But he forgot the greatness of God, who promises to always provide for those who truly fear Him—in His way and in His time. He now understood as the psalmist did in Psalm 34:9, “O fear the LORD, you His saints; *for to those who fear Him there is no want.*”

That is what it means that Habakkuk feared God. In the midst of his adversity he now saw the God of the adversity, and he worshipped. This does not mean that Habakkuk expected God to simply fix everything according to his own comforts. But he is satisfied with God’s judgments. We will look at this in a few weeks, but notice what Habakkuk says in closing this prayer in 3:17-19,<sup>17</sup> “Though the fig tree should not blossom and there be no fruit on the vines, *though* the yield of the olive should fail and the fields produce no food, though the flock should be cut off from the fold and there be no cattle in the stalls,<sup>18</sup> yet I will exult in the LORD, I will rejoice in the God of my salvation.<sup>19</sup> The Lord GOD is my strength, and He has made my feet like hinds’ *feet*, and makes me walk on my high places.”

Unfortunately, this is not the case in many places today. There is a familiarity with God which, true to the adage, often does breed contempt. That was how Habakkuk began. But now he sees the Lord high and lifted up and is thoroughly content regardless of the outcome because the outcome was for God’s own glory. Lloyd-Jones noted, “This is essential for an understanding of the times in which we live. We must learn to see God in His holy temple above the flux of history, and above the changing scenes of time. In God’s presence the one thing that stands out is the holy nature of God and our own sin. We humble ourselves and with reverence adore Him.”<sup>5</sup>

Is this how you approach God in prayer, with the understanding that you are in the presence of the God who “is a consuming fire”? Are you so overwhelmed by the goodness and greatness of God in the midst of adversity that you proclaim as Habakkuk did, “I fear”? Perhaps we need to be reminded of some of the saints of old who caught a glimpse of the majesty of God. Isaiah saw Him high and lifted up and was filled with woe. John saw Him in a vision and fell at His feet as dead because he was so overwhelmed by His presence. It is this God whom we converse with in prayer. *Do you fear Him?*

### **3. Petition**

Notice that Habakkuk’s requests come after he was humbled and adored God. We are invited by God, commanded by God, to come into His presence with intercessions—especially in times of need.

**Ephesians 2:18** – For through Him we both have our access in one Spirit to the Father.

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<sup>5</sup> *From Fear to Faith*, 63.

**Romans 5:1-2** – <sup>1</sup> Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, <sup>2</sup> through whom also we have obtained our introduction by faith into this grace in which we stand; and we exult in hope of the glory of God.

**Hebrews 4:15-16** – <sup>15</sup> For we do not have a high priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but One who has been tempted in all things as *we are*, yet without sin. <sup>16</sup> Therefore let us draw near with confidence to the throne of grace, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

So now Habakkuk approaches God confidently with his petitions. But again, notice what he does not ask for. He does not ask for the destruction of the Babylonians. He does not ask for Israel to be delivered from God's judgments. He doesn't even pray for his own deliverance. But, as Andy Davis points out, he prays for God's glory to be known, to see what He will do **"in the midst of the years."** He had one passion for God's glory to be known. Lloyd-Jones put it this way, "The prophet's one burden now was a concern for God's cause, God's work, and God's purpose in his own nation and in the entire world. His one desire was that things should be right. He had come to the position in which, in effect, he said, 'Whatever I and my countrymen may have to suffer is of no concern so long as *Thy work* is revived and kept pure.'" <sup>6</sup> That is a prayer for the glory of God.

But notice the specifics of his petitions, how he prays that God might accomplish His glory.

#### **a. Revive the faithful**

**"Revive Your work in the midst of the years."** Literally, "In the midst of the years make him live." This is a prayer for revival, that the man of faith would have his soul made alive in God. Notice that Habakkuk pleads for God's work to be revived, not his own. James Montgomery Boice commented, "Usually, when we pray to God for some specific project, we are asking God to renew *our* work. It is like building a castle of dominoes. So long as the structure goes up unhindered, we seldom think of God. We do not need Him. But suddenly something jars the table a bit, and the dominoes tumble. Now we become alert to prayer. We say, 'O God, renew the work; the structure is tumbling.' Our interest is really on what we are building and not on what God may desire. We need to learn that God may not be interested in our little piles of dominoes. We need to come to the point where we say, 'Renew *your* deeds; revive *your* work.'" <sup>7</sup>

That is what Habakkuk now pleads. He does not ask for the nation to be *removed from the storm*, but that they be *renewed in the storm*. Walt Chantry put it this way, "No, the saints do not escape the horrors and sadnesses of their nations' judgments from the hand of God. But through steadfast faith they live! God can keep their hearts alive in faith and even preserve their lives in the midst of general slaughters." <sup>8</sup> Habakkuk now sees God in this light, and prays that He would revive His work in the hearts of the nation.

#### **b. Instruct the faithful**

**"In the midst of the years make it known."** Here the petition is that the man of faith would know and understand why these tragedies and disasters were happening. Habakkuk prays that the nation would know that they had forsaken God and despised His law. I like what O. Palmer

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<sup>6</sup> *From Fear to Faith*, 63.

<sup>7</sup> James Montgomery Boice, *The Minor Prophets*, vol. 2, 422.

<sup>8</sup> Walter J. Chantry, *The Banner of Truth Magazine*, Issue 529, October 2007, 31.

Robertson says here, “By this petition, the prophet asks that the Lord will make known to the believing the program and plan that he had designed. Even as Habakkuk had agonized in coming to an understanding of the mysterious ways of God and finally had rested his case in the light of the revelation provided him, so he intercedes on the behalf of others that the Lord will make plain to them the understanding necessary for survival in the midst of calamity.”<sup>9</sup>

Do you sense the urgency in Habakkuk’s petition? He wanted everyone to know what the Lord had revealed to him. He prayed that the Lord would pierce their hearts and minds so that they would understand the reason of their calamity and trust in Him.

**c. Show mercy to the faithful man**

**“In wrath remember mercy.”** This a truly the most remarkable of Habakkuk’s petitions. Matthew Henry pointed out that Habakkuk does not turn to God and say, “O lord, I do see that this punishment was necessary, but I would remind Thee that we have tried to be good and that there have been worse times in our history.” Habakkuk does not ask God to remember their works. And it is a good thing because their works were sinful. The only thing he does is remind God of His own nature. “Yes Lord, we deserve only your wrath for our sins. But in your wrath, remember your mercy. We have nothing to say but to ask that Thou should act like Thyself. Have pity on us.”

Is that not the case for all men? No one is worthy of His mercy—only His wrath. We too should cry out as Habakkuk did that God in His judgment would temper it with His mercy. Again hear Walt Chantry, “Those who truly fear Him, who tremble before a holy, angry, and just God—the ultimate source of judgment—will appeal to him for mercy. Deserving no relief from God’s smoking justice, men and women of faith realize that there is pardon for sin in Jesus Christ... At the very time of wrath there is mercy to be shown to those who have faith.”<sup>10</sup>

You see, those who live by faith, those who are truly justified, know that wrath and mercy meet at the Cross! There, and only there, can man find relief for his troubled spirit. May we too be a people who pleads God’s mercy in times of wrath.

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<sup>9</sup> O. Palmer Robertson, *NICOT: The Books of Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah*, 218.

<sup>10</sup> Chantry, 31.