

Wait and Rejoice
Habakkuk 3

Turn to Habakkuk 3 please. Habakkuk is the fourth last book in the OT. Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, etc. Habakkuk was a prophet in Judah at about Jeremiah's time. He's hard to date exactly. Our real interest here is the last four verses of Habakkuk 3, which is the last chapter in the book. I'm not sure there are more striking words of faith in the Bible.

But the whole chapter is a unit, a prayer of Habakkuk that became a congregational song, so we'll read the whole chapter. But prepare yourselves, my brothers and sisters, for a call to faith actions. Not just a call to faith, but to two faith actions that show our confidence in our God, our Ancient Legendary Warrior Storm-God.

Habakkuk's First Complaint – 1:1-4

Habakkuk 1-2 tells a story, and we will set up Hab 3 by going over that story. In Hab 1:1-4, Habakkuk says to God, "How long must I call on you for help, but you don't listen? Why do you make me look at violence, and injustice? Why do you tolerate how terribly your people are living? There is conflict everywhere, the wicked trap the righteous, the law is paralyzed."

Habakkuk wants God to DO SOMETHING about how sinfully his people are living, and God is not DOING anything. "Why do you tolerate your people acting so sinfully?"

God's first answer – 1:5-11

"I am about to do something, Habakkuk. I will raise up the Babylonians, ruthless people, feared and dreaded, a law to themselves, and they will sweep across the whole earth. They fly like the eagle, and come for violence. They gather prisoners like sand. They are guilty people, whose strength is their god. They will punish Judah for her sins."

Habakkuk's second complaint – 1:12 – 2:1

Detour – a word about complaining. In the Bible, complaints directly to God are received by God, they are treated as honourable expressions of faith. Complaining to other people is a big problem, lack of faith and a disobedient mouth. It is pretty much that simple. Habakkuk took his complaints to God, as did Jeremiah, and the lament psalms.

Now, Habakkuk's second complaint: "God you chose Babylon to punish. You cannot tolerate evil, so why do you tolerate the wicked swallowing up those more righteous than they are? This makes no sense, God. The Babylonians are far more violent than your people. You bring sinners worse than your people to punish your people? You are a holy God. Why do you do this?"

God's Second Answer – 2:2-20

God's second answer is a prophecy against Babylon: "The Lord Almighty has decided, Babylon, that all you have accomplished will be fuel for the fire. All the nations you conquered will plunder you. The cup of wrath in the Lord's right hand is coming around to you, Babylon. You will be overwhelmed, and terrified. Disgrace will cover your glory. The Lord is in his holy temple; let all the earth be silent before him."

To summarize, twice Habakkuk found God too tolerant of evil and oppression. God answered Habakkuk both times, and in both God had the situation entirely in hand. Not the way Habakkuk wanted, not at all, but nevertheless, God was in his holy temple, God was on his heavenly throne, he knew what was happening, and was carrying out his purposes on earth.

Habakkuk's Song

Habakkuk responded to all this with a prayer that became a song. Habakkuk 3 opens and closes with singing instructions: *A prayer of Habakkuk the prophet. On shigionoth.* Several psalms are called "prayers" in this way. We don't know what *shigionoth*, means, but Ps 7 begins with a very similar word. Don't know what that one means either. We assume a music term of some kind.

Hab 3 ends with *For the director of music. On my stringed instruments.* Both of those appear often in the psalms. So, Habakkuk 3 is a congregational song. Picture a congregation of Israelites singing this to God.

Remember Habakkuk's story. He has learned that God is going to bring the powerful ruthless Babylonians to punish his people, and afterward he will judge the Babylonians. Habakkuk was stunned by all this. And frightened. So this is what he does:

Habakkuk goes back to Yahweh, the Ancient Warrior Storm-God. He sings the mighty victories of God, because: if God has done that *before* for his people, he will certainly do it *again*. Moses, on the happy shore of the Red Sea, sang the original classic warrior song to Yahweh.

Deborah shortened it and sang it, and David revised it and sang it in Psalm 18. Moses, Deborah, and David all sang this song *after* the victory. In Ps 77, Asaph sang this confidently, *before* the victory he knew would come. Habakkuk prays and sings in faith, as Asaph did.

Opening Prayer - 3:2.

Lord, I have heard of your fame; I stand in awe of your deeds, Lord. Repeat them in our day, in our time make them known. This is why discouraged Israelites sang these songs: to remember what God had done, and to move God to do the same again. In the Bible, knowing the past is the core of prophecy. What God has done, he will do again.

In wrath remember mercy. You are angry at your people, God, but remember also your mercy toward your people, don't be too harsh when you send the Babylonians.

Habakkuk's Warrior Storm-God – Hab 3:3-15

We'll not go through details here, but imagine Yahweh the Warrior, the God of Mt Sinai, doing to the Babylonians what he did to Egypt.

*God came from Teman, the Holy One from Mount Paran.
His glory covered the heavens, and his praise filled the earth.
His splendor was like the sunrise; rays flashed from his hand, where his power was hidden.
Plague went before him; pestilence followed his steps.
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.
I saw the tents of Cushan in distress, the dwellings of Midian in anguish.
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?
You uncovered your bow, you called for many arrows.
You split the earth with rivers; the mountains saw you and writhed.
Torrents of water swept by; the deep roared and lifted its waves on high.
Sun and moon stood still in the heavens at the glint of your flying arrows,
at the lightning of your flashing spear.
In wrath you strode through the earth, and in anger you threshed the nations.
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.
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.
You trampled the sea with your horses, churning the great waters.*

This God masters all creation. When God shows up, everything staggers and squirms. His glory covers the heavens. His praise fills the earth. He stood, and the earth shook. He looked, and the nations trembled. The ancient mountains crumbled. The mountains saw God, and writhed. God made torrents of water sweep past. The deep roared, and lifted its waves high. Sun and moon stood still in the heavens. God trampled the sea, churning the great waters.

This is NOT just poetic imagination. It is a poetic description of things they actually saw with mountains and oceans, and rivers and fire, and plague and pestilence, and thunder and lightning, and the sun and the moon, all these actually behaving in ways that no one had never seen before.

Almost everything in here was used earlier in the OT. Habakkuk knows the songs of Moses and Deborah, and the Psalms, and he pulls all this together to sing about God, the Warrior Storm-God. Yahweh is a warrior, Yahweh is his name, as Moses said.

Habakkuk prays this to encourage himself, he imagines the God of the Red Sea and of Sinai going after the Babylonians the way he went after the Egyptians, and he celebrates in advance!

Habakkuk's Fear – 3:16a,b *I heard and my heart pounded, my lips quivered at the sound; decay crept into my bones, and my legs trembled.*

This is Habakkuk's response to the news that the Babylonians would invade: heart pounds, lips tremble, bones begin to rot, and legs shake. Our bodies react to fear. It's adrenaline, fight or flee. It is a God-given defense mechanism, to get us ready for action right now. People do remarkable things in that state. But sometimes, as for Habakkuk, there is nothing to be done.

Habakkuk is terrified, he's totally honest. He heard the news, and he is full of dread. God told Habakkuk in chapter 1 that Babylon would come in his days, in his lifetime. Let's assume he feels these things just as he describes them. His heart pounds, lips tremble, decay crept into bones (I don't know what that means), legs shake. I've felt the rest of those. He's very afraid.

Habakkuk's Choice Part 1: Yet I will Wait Patiently – 3:16c *Yet I will wait patiently for the day of calamity to come on the nation invading us.*

We often cannot change our circumstances, or our feelings, but we still can choose how to respond, we can choose what we tell ourselves. Pay attention to your self-talk, brothers and sisters. Habakkuk is declaring himself: *yet I will wait patiently for calamity on our enemy.* This kind of choice, this self-talk, is not easy, and is not learned in a minute.

What we feed gets stronger. If circumstances and feelings overwhelm us, and we have rarely taken this kind of path, it will be overgrown with weeds and branches. But the path is there. Push through, trample some weeds, break some branches. Push in. If we regularly go as far as we can, the path gets clearer, and we get stronger, and we get farther.

Because we have God, the Warrior God, the thing that scares us will certainly be destroyed, when God decides. We can decide to wait patiently for that, or not. Habakkuk will not live to see the Babylonians destroyed. God told him they would come in his days, but never said they would be destroyed in his days.

But God had told him both that the Babylonians were coming, and also that they would be destroyed. I will wait patiently for God to do what he said, I will wait patiently while the enemy I dread is coming, I will wait for God to do what he said, and destroy what terrifies me. There are few of us who cannot make use of this. I certainly can.

Habakkuk is completely confident that he will outlast what terrified him. Because he has God, sooner or later his enemy will fall, and Habakkuk has decided to wait patiently for that.

Reason for Habakkuk's Fear: Famine – 3:17

*Though the fig tree does not bud, and there are no grapes on the vines,
though the olive crop fails, and the fields produce no food,
though there are no sheep in the pen, and no cattle in the stalls,*

A nation that invaded your country brought famine. Invasion brought famine in three ways. (1) The men who should be farming have become soldiers, so livestock and fields were largely ignored. (2) Invading armies need food. They don't pack it with them. Babylon had a huge army, they would eat all the stored grain in Judah, and kill the livestock for food. (3) Often the invading army destroyed what they did not use, work animals, and fruit trees.

When they left, there was no food, nothing in the granaries, no animals for food or to pull a plow, no grain even to seed the next crop, not to mention the human grief and trauma.

In the ancient world, "famine" was probably the scariest word there was. We don't know anything about famine. Our scariest word is probably "cancer." Theirs was "famine." Habakkuk did not fear the soldiers, he feared the famine that would happen after they left.

What's your famine? Many of us have some kind of famine, some kind of strengthening and satisfaction, some kind of nurturing, that we do without. A hunger that won't leave. It's available to others, but not to you. What's your famine? Habakkuk's was probably the worst kind: no food. It hasn't happened yet. He expects it, dreads it. But even though there is no food, no crops and no animals, yet:

Habakkuk's Choice Part 2: Yet I will Rejoice in the Lord 3:18

Yet I will rejoice in Yahweh the Lord, I will be joyful in God my Savior. First part: Yet I will wait patiently for calamity to come on the enemy. Second part: Yet I will rejoice in the Lord.

With this line, Habakkuk's song reaches out and grabs my soul. I am staggered by Habakkuk's resolve, in the middle of his heart pounding fear. "Though my heart pounds, and my bones rot, yet I will wait patiently for God to destroy my enemy. Though my lips tremble, and my legs shake, yet I will rejoice in the Lord, I will be joyful in God my Saviour."

Habakkuk knows that since his God is the Ancient Warrior Storm God, he has far more reason for joy than for fear. Habakkuk resolves to wait and to rejoice.

What God Does 3:19

*The Sovereign Lord is my strength;
he makes my feet like the feet of a deer,
he enables me to tread on the heights.*

The Sovereign Lord is my strength. This does not mean we get strong. No, we stay weak, but our God has great strength, and he helps us, is with us, watches over us. I'm not strong, says Habakkuk, but I have the Sovereign Lord, the Almighty God, and that's my strength, right there.

He makes my feet like the feet of a deer, he enables me to tread on the heights. The other OT places that use this picture of the feet of a deer, and treading on high places, have military flavour to them. Deut 33:29 and Ps 18:32-39. God gives us victory, now. David uses this later in Ps 18 – we went over the first part of that psalm last week.

But the core of these lines is something more basic. *God* is working for us and in us. He *does* actually make us stronger. *He* makes my feet like deer's feet. *God* does this to my feet. *God* enables me to walk the high places. God *makes sure* we are surefooted in dangerous places.

He makes my feet like the feet of a deer, he enables me to tread on the heights. God makes surefooted so we be steady in dangerous places. God does that. *I will be joyful in God my Savior.* This is the kind of saving that Habakkuk needed, and knew he would get.

Our part: we will wait patiently for God to destroy what continues to terrify us, and we will rejoice that we have the Lord, we will be joyful in God our Savior. God's part is to be our strong God, make us agile on a rocky path, keep us steady against our enemies.

These words are actually the path to the high places. The one who waits patiently, and who rejoices in the LORD, is treading on the heights. We agree to wait patiently, and to rejoice in the Lord, and God gives us the feet to do this, and enables us to walk there.

*I heard, and my heart pounded, my lips quivered at the sound;
decay crept into my bones, and my legs trembled.
Yet I will wait patiently for the day of calamity to come on the nation invading us.
Though the fig tree does not bud, and there are no grapes on the vines,
though the olive crop fails, and the fields produce no food,
though there are no sheep in the pen, and no cattle in the stalls,
yet I will rejoice in the LORD, I will be joyful in God my Savior.
The Sovereign LORD is my strength;
he makes my feet like the feet of a deer, he enables me to tread on the heights.*
Amen

PRAYER: O God, be our strength. Whatever exactly this line means, to make our feet like the feet of a deer, and to enable us to tread on the heights, we ask for this. We plead for this, O God. Do that to our feet, and take us to those heights. We don't quite know what that means, but we know we need it. We are selfish and self-centered people, Lord. We are often ignorant and wandering. We still need so much rescuing, and saving. We are the kind of sheep that keep the Shepherd real busy. Take us down Habakkuk's path, the path of waiting patiently, and rejoicing in you.

We remember that we are talking to the God whose glory covers the heavens, and whose praise fills the earth. When you stand on earth, it shakes. When you look, the nations tremble, and the mountains crumble. The mountains see you, O God, and writhe. You churn the great waters, and make the oceans roar. Sun and moon see you, and stand still in the heavens. You will come like that to save us! Come soon, Lord! We long for your appearing. We rejoice in you, our strength and our salvation. Amen.

BENEDICTION: May the God who gives endurance, and encouragement, give us the same attitude of mind toward each other that Christ Jesus had, so that with one mind and one voice, we may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen. Go in God's peace, to love and serve the Lord.