

“Living By Faith In Terrifying Times”

Habakkuk 3:1-2

Series: Book of Habakkuk, #6

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Last week we thought about “*Life Beyond The Guardrail*” as we looked at five “woes” of judgment which illustrate that God will judge all who reject Him, all who do not come to Him by faith. I am sure that some of us have thought, “I’m glad that’s over!” We don’t like to hear and think about sin and judgment. But God’s judgment on sin is real. It is an unalterable fact. It is as certain as God’s love, grace and mercy.

It can be easy for us to close chapter two out of our minds as we open this grand psalm in chapter 3. If we do that, however, we will not understand the message God has for us as we should. This is the final leg of Habakkuk’s journey that began with his questions and distress at the rampant sin in God’s people, went on to His questions to God about that, through God’s silence, and then God’s answers which raised even more questions, and on again to God reminding him that the righteous live by faith and sinners will be judged.

It has been a long, troubling, terrifying journey. The people’s sin and God’s silence were troubling. God’s news that He was raising up the Chaldeans to punish Judah was terrifying. Habakkuk has come to and walked with God by faith. But what does he do now?

- Judah will be conquered, ravaged.
- Many people will suffer and die.
- The nation will no longer be a nation, but land and people annexed to Babylon.
- What about the future? What about God’s promises?
- How can he and the people face this, live through this?

The righteous, the one whose heart is right within him through his relationship with God, *will live by faith.*

But what does that mean? How did he, how do we, practically, specifically live by faith in a terrifying time? The brief prayer that opens chapter three shows us three critical answers and concrete steps of faith for Habakkuk and all of the righteous then, and for us today.

Living by faith in terrifying times is, first, believing the truth about God.

Now, this is not as easy as we sometimes think, let alone *automatic* for believers. I think you will see what I mean as we look at Habakkuk. Pick it up at the start of verse 2, he prays, “LORD, I have heard the report about You and I fear.”

Let’s look at a few words in this sentence. He prays I have “*heard.*” The basic idea of this word is simple: *to hear.* But often, as here, it has extended meaning: to pay attention to, to

understand and even to follow or obey. Genesis 11:7 shows us this. God said He would confuse the languages of the sinful people at the time of the tower of Babel so “that they

Much earlier God confronted Adam with his sin in the garden of Eden and said to him, “... you have *listened to* [there’s our word again] the voice of your wife.” That is, “You have followed her suggestion.” It’s even stronger in Exodus 24:7. Moses read “the book of the covenant” to the people and they responded by saying, “all that the LORD has spoken we will do, and we will *be obedient* [our word once again].”

Habakkuk is saying, “God, I have heard, payed attention to and followed the reports, the truth about You. I believe.”

That brings us to the second word, or phrase, “the *report* about You.” The NRSV reads: “I have heard of your *renown*.” In the NIV it is: “I have heard of your fame.” This word is a form of the word “*heard*” which we just looked at. It’s basic sense is a report, or secondhand information of any kind—good, bad, or indifferent. 1 Kings 10:1 tells us, “Now when the queen of Sheba heard about *the fame* [our word] of Solomon, concerning the name of the LORD, she came to test him with difficult questions.”

The great and dramatic works of judgment Habakkuk cites in the verses after this prayer are part of the *report*, *the fame* of God he refers to here.

Thirdly, after this, Habakkuk tells God his response to understanding and believing this truth. He said, “I *fear*.” The word for *fear* used here is a very common Old Testament word with several basic meanings.

It can mean to be afraid. For example, after Adam and Eve sinned in the garden, they hid themselves when they heard God coming. God asked them “Where are you?” Adam answered, “I heard the sound of You in the garden, and I was *afraid* because I was naked; so I hid myself.” (Genesis 3:9-10)

This word also can mean awe, to be in awe of, have great respect or reverence. We see this many times in Proverbs where, for example, 1:7 tells us, “The *fear* of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge.” The setting or context tells us the emphasis.

As we look at the setting here, Habakkuk is saying to God, “I have heard and believed the reports of Your great works of judgment and,” jumping down to verse 16, “my inward parts *trembled*, at the sound my lips quivered.”

The realization of what God had already done in the past and what He has said He will do in the near future has shaken Habakkuk. There are no more questions to God or debates with Him on patience and justice. There is fear and, yes, also awe, reverence of God here.

Habakkuk was in a terrifying time as the thunder clouds of God’s judgment on Judah were rolling and booming closer and closer. How did he get to his grand closing chorus of praise at the end when he sings in full voice, “Yet I will exalt in the LORD, I will rejoice in the God of my salvation.”?

“The righteous will live by his faith.” That included his believing the truth about God. The truth of God’s past mighty, righteous acts of judgment. Judgment which in many cases was for the deliverance of Israel, and so a cause of joy, praise and adoration. It also included the truth of God’s message of present mighty, righteous judgment on Judah. A message of deep sorrow and anguish which shook him to the core.

He worked his way through frustration, questions and fear, and could now say, “God, You are God. You speak and do the truth. Your ways are not my ways. In fact, Your coming judgment scares me! But I believe. I know You. I know Your plans are perfect. And so, I will exalt You, I will rejoice in you!”

Living by faith in our terrifying times also is believing in the truth about God.

- The times when your world seems out of control, and God seems distant or absent.
- The times when the path you are on is a nightmare, especially when it is not from poor or wrong choices you have made.
- The times when cliches and even sound explanations don’t seem to make any sense.
- Yes, the times when believing God and His truth is not easy, let alone automatic.

Question, listen... and keep on believing God and His truth. That is living by faith. Keep living by faith.

Living by faith in terrifying times, secondly, is asking God to do His work in your time and world.

Let’s move to the next phrase in verse 2, he prays, “O LORD, revive Your work in the midst of the years, in the midst of the years make it known.” First, we should be clear on what this does not say. Warren Wiersbe wrote about this phrase, “‘Revive’ has nothing to do with the modern revival meeting.” Indeed, Habakkuk here is not asking God to revive *him* spiritually or, for that matter, the people of Judah.

So then, what is his request? Cyril Barber writes,

“Revivalist preachers have often used 3:2 as a basis for stirring the emotions of God’s people. What Habakkuk probably had in mind, however, was an appeal to the Lord to revive His work (i.e., to renew His deeds) in that day...”

In short, Habakkuk is praying,

“God, just as You have worked powerfully in the past, do that now in my time, in my world. Yes, I know that means judgment, it means punishment on us. I know it will bring suffering, humiliation and death. I also know from the reports, the truth about You, that You will not abandon us forever, that You have promised that David’s throne will endure, that the Messiah will come. So now, God, in this day, in

my day, work powerfully so that world will see and know You and Your work.”

Let’s move from Habakkuk to ourselves. If you were in his place could you, would you pray like this? You see, just as it is not always easy to believe God, so it is not always easy to pray “Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done.”

It is easy to pray this when life is good and when we really don’t think about what God’s will is for ourselves and our world right now. It may be relatively easy if we add some conditions stated or not. Conditions such as ...

- “Your will be done, but don’t ask me to do this. I can’t.”
- Or, “Bring about Your will and make me more like Jesus, but don’t disturb what I’m doing, what is going on in my life. After all, I’m doing that badly and I don’t think I could handle changes right now.”
- Or, “But don’t ask me to give up that.”

Do you see the progression here? Living by faith starts with hearing, believing, obeying God —truth about Him, truth about us and our world. Then we can take the next step—asking God to work powerfully to bring about His will in a way that people will see it so He will be glorified.

As you look at where you are right now, what is your view of God and His truth? How are you really thinking about Him? How are you really responding to Him and His truth? Living by faith in terrifying times is believing the truth about God, asking Him to do His work in your time and world, and also ...

Pleading to God for mercy.

The last phrase of this one-verse prayer starts with “in *wrath*.” The basic meaning of this term for wrath is to tremble, quake or rage. It refers to the effects of the emotions or actions which cause them. For example, in Job 37:2, Elihu said, “Listen closely to the *thunder* [our word] of [God’s] voice, and the rumbling that goes out from His mouth.” We see it on a human level in Proverbs 29:9, “When a wise man has a controversy with a foolish man, the foolish man either *rages* [our word again] or laughs, and there is no rest.”

God’s coming judgment on Judah is not detached or mechanical. It is an expression of His wrath or anger. Most of us don’t like seeing, hearing or talking about anger of any kind. It is shocking and disturbing, and so we try to avoid even thinking about it. In the edition of *The Voice of the Martyrs* magazine that Jim has placed on the missions table, the regular feature *That’s A Good Question* deals with why the magazine sometimes publishes graphic pictures of persecuted Christians. The editors write that it is never to shock or sensationalize, but to provide proof of the truth of persecution they report. Just as some of those pictures may make us feel uncomfortable but need to be seen, so we need to think about God’s anger.

Thankfully, God's anger is not like ours. It always is righteous. It is His response of holiness and righteousness to our impurity and sin. And God's righteous anger toward His people not only upholds His holiness, it also is for our good. Proverbs 3:11-12,

“My son, do not reject the discipline of the LORD or loathe His reproof, for whom the LORD loves He reproves, even as a father corrects the son in whom he delights.”

Discipline for godliness.

Listen also to God's words through Jeremiah, Habakkuk's contemporary,

“Behold, the tempest of the LORD! Wrath has gone forth, a sweeping tempest; it will burst on the head of the wicked. The fierce anger of the LORD will not turn back until He has performed and until He has accomplished the intent of His heart; in the latter days you will understand this.” (30:23-24)

God's righteous anger with His people is not without limit and it is not forever, but until it accomplishes His purposes. As Asaph reviewed Israel's history of unfaithfulness as a warning in Psalm 78, he wrote,

“But [God], being compassionate, forgave their iniquity and did not destroy them; and often He restrained His anger and did not arouse all His wrath.” (Psalm 78:38)

King David wrote in Psalm 103,

“The LORD performs righteous deeds and judgments for all who are oppressed. He made known His ways to Moses, His acts to the sons of Israel. The LORD is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in lovingkindness. He will not always strive with us, nor will He keep His anger forever. (Psalm 103:6-9)

Judah's sin aroused God's wrath. It is coming. Habakkuk now knows that all too well.

In light of this, He prays, “In wrath remember *mercy*.” Mercy. This word has the basic idea of loving deeply; and so then the deep feelings and sincere actions of compassion, pity, mercy. God is compassionate. Isaiah records,

“But Zion said, ‘The LORD has forsaken me, and the LORD has forgotten me.’” Then there are God's tender, beautiful words in response to that desperate cry, “Can a woman forget her nursing child and have no *compassion* on the son of her womb? Even these may forget, but I will not forget you. Behold, I have inscribed you on the palms of My hands; your walls are continually before Me.” (Isaiah 49:15-16)

A few moments ago we read in Psalm 103,

“The LORD is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in lovingkindness. He will not always strive with us, nor will He keep His anger forever.” (Psalm 103:8-9)

3) Almost a hundred years before these events in Habakkuk the prophet Micah wrote, “Who is a God like You, who pardons iniquity and passes over the rebellious act of the remnant of His possession? He does not retain His anger forever, because He delights in unchanging love. He will again have *compassion* on us; He will tread our iniquities under foot. Yes, You will cast all their sins into the depths of the sea.” (Micah 7:18-19)

Habakkuk had heard, read and understood these *reports* and promises of God. He knows judgment is coming and so he *prays the promises*—he pleads to God for mercy. In the opening lines of this book Habakkuk characterizes the people of Judah’s conduct and character with the terms violence, iniquity, wickedness, destruction, strife, contention, perverted justice.

He was not one of *them*. He was not idly standing by. He was perplexed and distressed by all of this. He did not wash his hands of the people and respond to God’s coming judgment by shouting, “That’s right God! Let them have it with both barrels! They deserve it!” Yes, they deserved it. But Habakkuk had grown in God-like character and in faith. He had compassion. He pleaded to God for mercy.

Are we like that? Part of the theme of the International Day of Prayer for the Persecuted Church we are observing today is praying for the persecutors. It is a lot easier to pray for persecuted believers than it is to pray for their persecutors. But God calls us to bless those who persecute us, to pray that even when He pursues them with His justice in that they will seek Him.

Bringing it closer to home, there are people,

- who misunderstand and misjudge us;
- people who reject us as well as the message of Christ;
- yet other people who badly mistreat us.

It’s easy to pray for God’s justice on them. Easy, but it is not the full heart of God, nor that of a person who is really living by faith in that situation. This change of heart is not easy. In fact, only God can truly change our hearts and minds as we live by trusting Him. You may have heard the story about a group of people huddled in a storm shelter, desperately trying to keep the door shut as the winds raged outside. And old preacher was there and he began to pray. “Eternal God, Creator of the Universe, Sovereign Lord, our solid Rock and Redeemer, most merciful Father. In this time of danger we pray, Lord, send us the spirit of the children of Abraham. Lord, send us the spirit of the children of Israel. Lord send us the spirit of the children of Moses.” As he took a short breath, another man interrupted and continued the prayer, “Lord, don’t send nobody. Come Yourself! This ain’t no job for

children!”

Yes, only God Himself can change our hearts and minds. And He does that as we live trusting Him.

“Behold, [look, see, take note] as for the proud one, His soul is not right within him; but the righteous will live by his faith.” *Living by faith in terrifying times is...*

- believing the truth about God;
- it is asking God to do His work in your time and world;
- it is pleading to God for mercy.

As you take a few moments to talk and think with God now,

- Thank Him that He loves you, is patient and compassionate to you. That while you were spiritually dead, totally helpless in your sin, Christ died for you.
- Think with God about *the reports*, the facts you have heard and learned about Him, and how much you really believe them right now. Confess unbelief. Reach out in faith to true belief. Reach out, fly to God who is your refuge and strength.
- As you think about God’s purposes for you and your world, ask God to breathe life into His mighty works *now*. Yes, it may mean changes and difficulties. Place yourself in His hands to both care and work.
- And then, plead for mercy, not just for yourself, but for those who are struggling, for some who seem to be indifferent, and yes, also for those who persecute you or others.

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