

Habakkuk 3:1–5

Trusting in God's Promises in Times of Distress

notes by Tim Hegg

The Background of Habakkuk's Song

The opening line of Habakkuk's song is:

A prayer of Habakkuk the prophet, according to Shigyonoth.

This identifies it as a “prayer” (תְּפִלָּה, *tephillah*). Here we see the prophet Habbakuk pouring out His soul before the Lord, fully confessing that He is the all-powerful God of the universe, and thus able to bring about all of His holy will. But the fact that his prayer is being set to some form of music (עַל שִׁיְיוֹנוֹת, *al shigyonot*) may well indicate that it was to be repeated and not just a “one time” prayer seeking God's help and salvation. That the preposition *al* is used would indicate that the *shigyonot* was some musical instrument. We find that same word being used in the heading of Ps 7.

A Shiggaion of David, which he sang to the LORD concerning Cush, a Benjamite. (Ps 7:0)

Some have suggested that the word envisions “a song delivered in the greatest excitement, or with a rapid change of emotion.”¹ The point is, that the song Habakkuk is engaged in, is one of deep, heartfelt emotion as he addresses himself as a prophet of Adonai, pleading for strength and perseverance as he envisions what is about to take place in the history of his people.

It is therefore very important to understand the background of events that have brought the prophet to offer this prayer, for when we do, we realize that God is bringing upon the southern kingdom, Judah, the discipline they deserve for their unfaithfulness to Him.

While not being able to pinpoint the date of this prayer precisely, we know that Habakkuk lived during the last days of Josiah (640-609 BCE) and under the reign of Jehoiakim (609–598 BCE). While the northern tribes had been conquered by the Assyrians and taken into the diaspora of Assyria (722 BCE), the southern tribes (Judah, Benjamin, and Levi) had remained in the Land. What was on the horizon for them, however, was being conquered and taken into exile by Babylon, finally by 586 BCE. For

1 See Keil & Delitzsch, *Habakkuk*, p. 93.

though they had seen the discipline of God upon the wayward tribes of the north, they did not turn from their own pagan ways but continued to reject the admonitions of the prophets and went after false gods and goddesses.

It is this, then, that the prophet Habakkuk has seen in a prophetic vision, and he therefore comes pleading to the Almighty for His mercy.

2 – Adonai, I have heard the report about You and I fear.

**O Adonai, revive Your work in the midst of the years,
In the midst of the years make it known;
In wrath remember mercy.**

First, Habakkuk acknowledges the supreme holiness, power, and almighty sovereignty of God. He is fully aware of what has taken place for the northern tribes and their being conquered and exiled by Assyria. But it is also likely that Habakkuk as the prophet of God has been appraised of what God is about to do with wayward Judah. It is this “report” about God’s utter and infinite holiness that requires Him to act in judgment upon Judah, for Judah has forsaken Him and turned to worship idols. It is also most likely that Habakkuk is aware of the rising power of the Chaldeans (Babylon) and how they are powerful enough to easily overtake Judah and bring Judah, Benjamin, and Levi into the Babylonian exile.

And what is the only solution to the mounting disaster that the prophet foresees? It is that God would do the work which only He can do, to change the hearts of the people and draw them to Himself.

O Adonai, revive Your work in the midst of the years – True revival, i.e., bringing to life, must first be initiated by the Almighty Himself, and Habakkuk is fully convinced of this. It is not going to be done by “creative campaigns” or by some “human efforts.” Only the Almighty has the power to change the hearts of those who are estranged from Him.

In the midst of the years make it known – The revelation of God to mankind is a divine work but He also incorporates the work of His obedient children, for in proclaiming the truth of God to others, we have the grand opportunity to be partners with Him in bringing about His eternal and sovereign plan of saving people from every tribe, family group, language, etc. Yet only God can open the heart and grant the gift of faith to believe and be saved. We are privileged to be His servants to carry the message that He will bring to life in the hearts of all who believe.

In wrath remember mercy. – Here, once again, the prophet uses the word “remember” as fully tied to a covenant promise. God always “remembers” His covenant promises, and this includes both His promise to

discipline those with whom He has entered into covenant, as well as ultimately to bring upon them the blessing promised in the covenant. Habakkuk prays on the basis of the unchangeable character of the Almighty and pleads for His mercy, which is also promised in the covenant.

At times of real difficulties and struggles, it is not uncommon for believers to have these questions: “Why doesn’t God intervene? Why does He allow these things? Why doesn’t God come to revive His people?” But Habakkuk is not approaching the Almighty with these words. He knows that wayward Judah is deserving of the discipline of God, for they have forsaken His ways and given into idolatry. Rather, he begins by humbling himself before God: “I have heard the report about you and I fear.”

Second, he implores God to show mercy in making Himself known, even if this is done by the drastic measures of discipline which would come upon the southern tribes. “In wrath remember mercy” is first of all a recognition that God would always remain faithful to His covenant promises. If the southern tribes would turn from their wickedness, seek God and His forgiveness, then surely God’s mercy would be seen. In this way, Habakkuk is reminding Himself and confirming the truth that God is always faithful to His word. This becomes the bedrock upon which the child of God can remain standing firm even in time of great distress.

**3 God comes from Teman,
And the Holy One from Mount Paran. Selah.
His splendor covers the heavens,
And the earth is full of His praise.**

These final verses of the pericope portray the God of Israel as the mighty Warrior He is, the One Who can conquer the enemies of His people and bring them to safely dwell with Him. The picture is set against the backdrop of Sinai, for having redeemed Israel for Egypt, He brought them to Sinai where He showed forth His sovereign power and might.

Thus, even as Sinai remained the icon for Israel’s deliverance from Egypt, so God’s coming from Teman and Mt Paran, would indicate in Habakkuk’s perspective that God is equally able to rescue Judah from the wicked hands of the Chaldeans.

The remainder of these verses portray the mighty splendor and utter sovereignty of the God of Israel. He created the earth and all that is in it. Thus, the earth is full of His praise!

The heavens are telling of the glory of God; And their expanse is declaring the work of His hands. Day to day pours forth speech, And night to night reveals knowledge. (Ps 19:1–2)

- 4 His radiance is like the sunlight;
He has rays flashing from His hand,
And there is the hiding of His power.**
- 5 Before Him goes pestilence,
And plague comes after Him.**

The final verses portray the power of God to defeat all of His enemies. Like the sun in the sky, He controls all aspects of the earth, and like the thunder, the flashing rods from His hands show Him to be a warrior Who cannot be defeated.

Yes, even in His ability to bring utter destruction to His enemies, such power enables those who are His covenant members to be assured of success, for He fights for His own and routes the enemy.

Here, once again, we learn an important lesson: it is God is sovereign power and control that overcomes the enemy and it is this same power that guards and saves eternally all who are His.