

# In Wrath Remember Mercy

*Hope from Habakkuk*

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*Heavenly Father, with your word open before us, Lord, we seek to hear from your Holy Spirit. Lord, we know that you have promised that you have given your Holy Spirit as a teacher to lead us into all truth, we know, Lord, that through your Spirit you inspired this word, Lord, and that you have told us that the Scriptures are useful, Lord, that they're given for our use, Lord, for doctrine, for teaching, for reproof, for encouragement in righteousness and, Lord, I pray that you would help us even as we go back thousands of years ago and hear these words of Habakkuk, Lord, that they would ring in our ears as fresh, new, applicable, useful right here in the midst of a pandemic in the 21<sup>st</sup> century in the nation of Canada. Lord, we give ourselves to the hearing of your word and we ask, Lord, that you would give to us attention as we do this and we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.*

There are three times in the book of Habakkuk that Habakkuk prays. In the first chapter, the first prayer of Habakkuk, "God, are you listening, God? I've been praying, God, and it just seems that you don't hear. God, do you see violence all around me, injustice, justice goes forth perverted, the people are at each other's throats, there are terrible terrible things, the nation is in decay." And God answers and says to Habakkuk, "I do see. I have heard and I have raised up the Chaldeans, a bitter and hasty nation swift as leopards, hungry as wolves, striking like eagles. They will come and they will put an end to the injustice and the wickedness of Jerusalem because they will put an end to Jerusalem."

Which leads to the second prayer of Habakkuk where he says, "God, these people are more wicked than we are. How is this a solution that you would send the Chaldeans upon us and wipe us out? God, are you not from everlasting? Are you not eternal? Are you not without rival? Are you not the holy one? Are you not the one who promised Abraham that he would have an inheritance greater than the stars of the heaven?" And so struggling with this question, Habakkuk lays it before the Lord and says, "I will stand on the watchtower and wait to see what answer he will give to me." And the Lord responds and says a few things to Habakkuk. He says, "Habakkuk, the righteous, will live by faith." But then he goes on to say, "Habakkuk, you don't understand the ways of the Lord but understand this, that the Chaldeans are coming, that the Chaldeans will strike and will smite and will conquer and will carry away and I will be faithful to my promise and once

again restore Israel, that the Chaldeans are only for a time before I cast them away like a piece of rubbish that I am done with."

And that brings us to chapter 3. Look with me at verse 16. That's where I want to begin today. Honest words from Habakkuk. These are not doubtful words. These are not the words of unbelief. These are words of trembling faith, quivering faith, quaking, shaking faith.

16 I hear, and my body trembles; my lips quiver at the sound; rottenness enters into my bones; my legs tremble beneath me. Yet I will quietly wait for the day of trouble to come upon people who invade us.

Habakkuk tells the truth. He does not doubt the Lord's prophetic word. He has prayed, God has spoken, he has heard the answer to the problem in Jerusalem is the Chaldeans are going to come and bring judgment, it's going to be eye-for-eye and tooth-for-tooth. An enemy more terrible than any that had ever been imagined to this point will strike his nation and your fatal blow, and not only will God not prevent the blow from falling, it is the Lord who has dealt the blow. Understand, God's ways are not our ways. Wrap your mind around this. Spit out that prosperity theology that you heard that says if you follow Jesus, everything's going to go easy. Not true. Not true. Ask Habakkuk. Ask Jeremiah. Ask Elijah. Ask the apostles. Ask Jesus.

So Habakkuk anticipating what it will be like to see the walls around him brought down by a marauding enemy and to see his neighbors slain in the streets and to see his children carried into captivity, trembles. That's not a lack of faith, that's not doubting God, that's not unbelief, that's reality. "I tremble. My body trembles. It's hard to speak. I feel rotten in my bones. My legs are shaking." Have you experienced that sort of trembling faith before? Sometimes we experience that trembling faith and we say, "I must be deficient. I must be lacking in something. I tremble. I am fearful. I feel ill as I think about what is coming."

But listen, Habakkuk felt that, so did Elijah. Elijah the day after he had beat the prophets of Baal, called down fire from the heavens followed by rain for the first time in years, flees away and when the Lord speaks to him, what does Elijah say? He says, "I have been very jealous for the Lord, the God of hosts, for the people of Israel have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, killed your prophets with the sword and I, even I, am only left and they seek my life to take it away and I tremble. I tremble." Elijah is not saying, "God, I doubt you." He's not saying, "God, I don't think you're sovereign." But he's saying, "God, in the midst of your sovereignty and in the midst of all of this affliction and suffering and terror, I tremble."

Here's Jeremiah, Jeremiah 4. "My anguish, my anguish! I writhe in pain! Oh the walls of my heart! My heart is beating wildly; I cannot keep silent, for I hear the sound of the trumpet, the alarm of war. Crash follows hard on crash; the whole land is laid waste. Suddenly my tents are laid waste, my curtains in a moment. How long must I see the standard and hear the sound of the trumpet? For my people are foolish; they know me

not; they are stupid children; they have no understanding. They are 'wise'--in doing evil! But how to do good they know not." Jeremiah knows what trembling faith feels like. He doesn't doubt God, absolutely believes that God is bringing about the things God has promised he will bring about but it's a painful thing to watch.

Paul knows something about it. 2 Corinthians 1, "For we were so utterly burdened beyond our strength that we despaired of life itself. Indeed, we felt that we had received the sentence of death."

Even Jesus knows something of this. There in the garden of Gethsemane as he is considering thinking about what will soon come upon, how God who is sovereign and utterly in control is about to bring into this garden the murder squads sent by Caiaphas, the high priest, to arrest him and this will not be over until he has been beaten and flogged, nailed to a cross, hung up for all the world to see in his nakedness, spit upon, mocked, ridiculed, the royal clothed in darkness, God poured the wrath against a wicked world upon him and he will die with the sins of the world upon him. What does he do? He trembles. He sweats great drops of blood.

It is not unbelief, it is no lack of faith to tremble before the coming of what God has said will come and you will experience it some day too. It may come in the form of a terminal disease. You say, "I prayed and prayed and prayed, we took all the treatments, all the chemo, all the radiation, my hair fell out, I grew weak and frail, I'm nothing but skin and bones. Healing has not come. Death awaits." You'll tremble. I think you'll tremble in the moment when you think, "I may not wake up tomorrow." But it doesn't mean you don't believe.

As you stand by the graveside of a loved one, of a spouse, a child, you may tremble. When the election fails to go the way you believed and hoped and thought it must go, you may tremble, you may feel this rottenness in your bones. What happens next? Habakkuk and Jeremiah and Elijah are thinking about things like war and famine and plague and it used to be we would read about those things in the Bible, war and famine and plague, and say those are Old Testament things, those are far off things but not so much anymore. We know what plague is. Is famine far away? Is that impossible? Is war so far off? You may feel this trembling in your bones and that's the context, that's the words that immediately precede what comes next is Habakkuk in honesty and for your help stands before God and says, "I have heard what you have said. I believe that it is coming. I understand it. I accept it and I tremble and my bones feel rotten and my knees knock together."

But he keeps on talking. This is what he says, verse 17, "Though the fig tree should not blossom, nor fruit be on the vines, the produce of the olive fail and the fields yield no food, the flock be cut off from the fold and there be no herd in the stalls, yet," hold on for a minute. Those are the things that give people joy. You don't have to be a Christian to find joy in good food and it's not wrong to find joy in good food. I enjoy good food. You don't have to be a Christian to enjoy the fruit of the fig tree or the fruit of the vine or the olive oil that comes, or the wheat, or the grain, or the herds, or the cheese, or the curds, and all these good, luxurious, luscious things, or the financial rewards that come from

herds that are in the field or in the stall. These are things that give us joy and yet Habakkuk says even without these things, even if every source of human joy be cut off from me, what does he say, "yet I will rejoice in the LORD; I will take joy in the God of my salvation." Okay, this is the key. If you get nothing else from today, this is the key. How do I cope with all these things around me even as I tremble, even with the terminal diagnosis? Even standing by the graveside? Even when the election goes wrong? Even in war and famine and pestilence and plague? It is, "I do not take my joy from the temporal good blessings that everybody else takes their joy from, I take my joy from the knowledge of the salvation of the Lord. I take my joy from knowing that at the end of all these things, nothing can separate me from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus."

Now let me help you get there because Habakkuk helps us get there. We've got to go back and hear how he prays in order to get to this place. He prays a prayer and then he makes the statement after the prayer, "God, here's my faith, here's my trust, here's my prayer. I still tremble. I have a trembling faith. I am fearful at the prospect of what this will bring and, Lord, my joy is not in things but in the salvation of the Lord."

So here's how to pray, two things I want you to see here. First, how to pray, the first couple of verses show us that, actually the whole passage does but the first couple passages make it clear. And then second, and this is key, in prayer how to engage faith. Here's the problem with sermons at Walsh is you just can't passively listen to a sermon at Walsh. If you sit back and casually listen, you'll go home and say, "I don't know what it was about." And any sound preaching is going to be active preaching, it's going to call you to engage your mind and to think. So shake off the grocery list and think here for a moment, listen to Habakkuk.

Listen, here it is, first of all, how to pray. Listen to how Habakkuk begins his prayer. Do you pray like this? Do you pray like this? You should. If you want to say my prayer life is weak, how do I make it stronger, pray like Habakkuk. Here's how he begins, Habakkuk 3:2, "O LORD, I have heard the report of you," he's talking about the chapter right before where God says, "Write this down on tablets and scribe it so it can be run out. The message is coming. It will not delay. If it seems slow, wait for it, it will surely come."

He says, "I have heard the report of you, and your work, O LORD, do I fear." And then he prays this, "In the midst of the years revive it; in the midst of the years make it known; in wrath remember mercy." What does he mean by "in the midst of the years"? He's talking about the prophecy that's coming, the prophecy that says the Chaldeans are going to sweep in here and are going to destroy you and carry you away, and God is not going to let that situation last forever. But it is going to last. Well, basically the Israelites will be away from Judah, the Judahites will be away from Judah for 70 years. "So in the midst of years, in the midst of the affliction and the suffering and the penalty and the punishment and the chastisement coming upon us, in the midst of years, Lord, revive us again. Lord, in the midst at these years, reveal yourself, make it known. Reveal yourself. Lord, in the midst of wrath, remember mercy."

Habakkuk stands in godly fear, in a quivering terror, awe-struck at the word of God, but in agreement that God is right and just. He agrees with God in prayer. He accepts God's will in prayer. He doesn't pray, "Lord, this penalty is too harsh." He doesn't pray, "Lord, we don't deserve this." He doesn't pray, "Lord, look at all the good things we've done. Put them on the scale, balance them out. See whether or not we're not a virtuous people after all, at least compared to the Chaldeans. Instead," he says, "God, revive us. Give to us new life. God, reveal yourself to us. Make it known, God." And this is key for your prayer, he pleads mercy. He doesn't plead who we are, he doesn't plead who I am, he pleads, "Who you are, God. You are a God slow to anger and abounding in lovingkindness, showing tender mercy to a thousand generations of those who love you. God, in the midst of a just wrath, remember mercy. Be merciful to us."

That's how he prays but he also does this, his faith is active. His faith is active. Let me go on up just a little tiny rabbit trail and come right back. I hope that one of the things that I will be remembered for as a pastor is as a pastor who continually said to you, "Take up and read this book. Eat this book. Feast upon this book." It is not sufficient for you to have a once a week Sunday sermon from this book. Take it home, read through it systematically. I don't say to you you have to read the whole thing in a year but I say to you, you should read the whole thing and you should read the whole thing more than once. If you're young, you should read the whole thing probably 100 times before you die. Why? Is there some sort of gold star that God gives to the person that reads the whole book of the Bible? Well, not a gold star but if you say, "I'm a person who believes this book, I live upon this book, I stand upon this book. This is the word God." Why would you not read it? Why would you leave any corner of it unread or unpreached?

Habakkuk is a man who knows the word of God. He bleeds Bible. The word of God flows through and this is why this rabbit trail matters because it affects his prayer. He prays the Scriptures. He prays through the history of Israel. He engages his mind on what he sees. You need to read this book and not just to read it but to steep in it, to think about it. You need to view the news on CNN, CBC, Fox, whoever you like watching, whoever you don't like watching, watch the news through a lens of Scripture because you have read it and you know it so well that it is flowing around in your heart and you look at things and you say, "Ah, I see things entirely different because the word of God is upon me." You need to view your life through it. You need to view the past through it, the present through it, the future through it. It speaks. And then you need to pray through it.

Here's one more rabbit trail and then back to the sermon. The greatest limitation that we have on describing the glory of God in words are words, as much as our words can do, our words cannot really capture the glory of God but Habakkuk tries to capture the glory of God with words. Listen, there's two sections here and verse 3 through 7 is theology wonky stuff, 3 through 7 he speaks to God in the third person and he sees the Lord of salvation coming and he sees the glory of the Lord in salvation coming. Verse 3 to 7 are that way. Verse 8 through 15, he moves from third person which is he, he, he, to second person which is addressing God as you. God is now present and he's working through the history of Israel and he's working through it in poetic language. He is trying to depict for you the glory of God.

Listen, here's verse 3 through 7. "God came from Teman, and the Holy One from Mount Paran." Those are areas down near Egypt. "His splendor covered the heavens, and the earth was full of his praise. His brightness was like the light; rays flashed from his hand; and there he veiled his power." So he says even as God seeks to cover his power and conceal his glory, even the concealed glory of God is brighter than the sun. And the closed hand that is hiding his glory, the light is streaming from it like rays of light and like beams. He cannot fully conceal it.

"Before him went pestilence, and plague followed at his heels." He's talking about Egypt. He's talking about Israel 400 years in Egypt waiting and how God sets them free. This miraculous thing, a slave people, a people without power, a people without any hope, a people who could not set themselves free and yet they become God's people. And the people who down to this very day, though the world has tried over and over again to exterminate God's people, are still here.

"He stood and measured the earth; he looked and shook the nations; then the eternal mountains were scattered; the everlasting hills sank low. His were the everlasting ways. I saw the tents of Cushan in affliction; the curtains of the land of Midian did tremble." God is coming, His glory draws near. Habakkuk is remembering this, remembering how God once came and delivered his people.

And now verse 8 it changes, all of a sudden it's no longer he, it's you. "Was your wrath against the rivers, O LORD? Was your anger against the rivers, or your indignation against the sea, when you rode on your horses, on your chariot of salvation? You stripped the sheath from your bow, calling for many arrows. You split the earth with rivers. The mountains saw you and writhed; the raging waters swept on; the deep gave forth its voice; it lifted its hands on high. The sun and moon stood still in their place at the light of your arrows as they sped, at the flash of your glittering spear. You marched through the earth in fury; you threshed the nations in anger. You went out for the salvation of your people," that's what this is all about. That's the hope of Habakkuk. That's the joy of Habakkuk. Not the figs, not the grapes, not the olives, not the sheep or the grain or the goats or the herds and flocks, those things that could make anybody joyful. He says, "Even if those things aren't there, the salvation of the Lord, that's my joy. That's my joy. That's my hope. That's what I'm waiting for. That's what I'm resting on. That's why I can stand trembling before a terminal disease or stand trembling before a terrible ruler, or stand trembling before disaster and famine and plague and not lose hope, because God is God and he is the God my salvation."

"You marched through the earth in fury; you threshed the nations in anger. You went out for the salvation of your people, for the salvation of your anointed. You crushed the head of the house of the wicked, laying him bare from thigh to neck. You pierced with his own arrows the heads of his warriors, who came like a whirlwind to scatter me, rejoicing as if to devour the poor in secret. You trampled the sea with your horses, the surging of mighty waters." And then he comes to, "I hear and my body trembles."

A couple of things to think about out of this text. How did God deliver his people from Egypt, the world's superpower of the day? With 10 plagues, and we hear it here echoed in this poetic language. It was through rivers and hail and blood and fire and fleas and frogs, which seems pretty small. And plagues. Plague wouldn't bring down a world superpower, not in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Maybe it would.

"You marched through the earth in fury; you threshed the nations in anger. You went out for the salvation of your people, for the salvation of your anointed. You crushed the head of the house of the wicked." He sees the Lord stripping the sheath from his bow and calling for arrows and here's what I want you to see, two things. First, the certainty of the fact that God will fight his own battles. God says, "Vengeance is mine. I will repay." And time and time again through Scripture we see the God of glory march out to battle. He calls himself over and over again one of the most common names in the Old Testament for God is the Lord of Hosts. Do you know what that means? The God of angelic armies. And here's the interesting thing, when he marches out with the angelic army, he doesn't ask the angels to fight. It's God himself that unsheathes his bow and calls for arrows and drowns the entire Egyptian army in the Red Sea, and slays 185,000 Assyrians and camped against the walls of Jerusalem with a plague in one night, and casts down the city of Babylon, that great fortress in a day.

You say, "Yeah, yeah, that's fine for late bronze age and early iron age when people are coming forth with bows and arrows and swords and horses and chariots. This is the nuclear age." Well, second is the method. How does God deal damage to his enemies when he comes forth? Because here's the thing, the promise of Scripture is there is one more coming, at least one more coming, one more time when the Lord himself will ride out before the angels in heaven before the armies of heaven, bearing on himself the name King of kings and Lord of lords with a sword to smite the nations. Go read the book of Revelation. Read Revelation, I think, 19 about the bowls of wrath being poured out and you will see this is how God fights, this is how God defeats the nations of the world. He is the God of all the universe. He does not fight with swords and bows and horses or M1 Abrams and stealth bombers and nuclear weapons. He is the God of the hurricane, the God of the tsunami, the God of the earthquake, the God of the polar icecaps, the God who rains down fire and burns up entire coastlines, the God who calls forth plague and paralyzes the nations. Look at the news through the lens of Scripture and ask yourself this question: are the Scriptures not yet relevant? Are the things that God says he will do not yet relevant for the 21<sup>st</sup> century? The prophecies more believable than ever before? Not Revelation 19, Revelation 16. Go look at the seven bowls of wrath that are finally poured out upon the earth.

What modern army, navy or air force could take the field, let alone triumph in the day when God levels the mountains down to rubble? When he shakes the earth? When the tsunamis sweep things away? When the hurricanes blow things clear? Peter says this, 2 Peter 3:10, "But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a roar, and the heavenly bodies will be burned up and dissolved, and the earth and the works that are done on it will be exposed. Since all these things are thus to be dissolved, what sort of people ought you to be in lives of holiness and godliness, waiting

for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be set on fire and dissolved, and the heavenly bodies will melt as they burn! But according to his promise we are waiting for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells."

Here's my conclusion. Let's come back to where we began, a trembling faith, a faith that says, "I hear God and I fear. I hear God and with Jeremiah, I maybe am not delighted because it's going to hurt. We're going to suffer, affliction will strike us as well as everybody else." In the midst of this time, Lord, revive us. In the midst of this time, Lord, make yourself known. In the midst of wrath, remember mercy. But here's the key: how do you find hope in the midst of this? How do you find joy in the midst of this? How do you press on in the midst of this? By learning to place your joy not in good food, though there's nothing wrong with delighting in good food. To learn to not place your joy on a good harvest, though that is a blessing from God. To learn not to place your joy on a bank account or a retirement savings fund. To not put your joy on who will win this next election here or elsewhere. To not put your joy on the rights and freedoms that you enjoy but to let your joy rest entirely upon the promise of the Lord who says, "I will be triumphant." Then these things really become glorious as you see God strive for it in power and in glory with the promise that he will win.

My joy is dependent on the Lord and his salvation. Even if I must suffer now, even – hear this – even if I must die here, even if I must die sufferingly here, I delight, I rejoice in the God of my salvation because I know this, my suffering, this affliction, my death here is a mere pinch before the glorious revelation of God's eternal salvation. Concern yourself not with being on the right side of human history, the church if you read Revelation, ends up on the wrong side of history as far as the human world is concerned, but rather concern yourself with being found in the sight of the Lord at the end. "Though the fig tree should not blossom, nor fruit be on the vines, the produce of the olive fail and the fields yield no food, the flock be cut off from the fold and there be no herd in the stalls, et I will rejoice in the LORD; I will take joy in the God of my salvation. GOD, the Lord, is my strength; he makes my feet like the deer's; he makes me tread on my high places."

Let's pray.

*Father God, Lord, I pray that this sermon, this word of God, this message from Scripture, Lord, would have the effect that you intend it to have, Lord, that it would give to us hope and joy. Lord, it comes with hard words and difficult thoughts and yet, Lord, it is so true to the lives we are living and to the world we find ourselves in the midst of. Lord, I pray that our hope would be on nothing less than Jesus' blood and righteousness. Lord, that we would trust not the sweetest frame, but wholly lean on Jesus' name. That we would find all of our hope and all of our joy ultimately wrapped up in the God of salvation and the promise that he will be victorious so that, Lord, if all these other things be stripped away and none of them be present, Lord, yet tremblingly we might rejoice before you. Father, I ask, Lord, that you would apply this word to our hearts in the way you see fit. These things we ask in Jesus' name. Amen.*