

Rejoice in the Lord A Sermon on Habakkuk 3:1-19

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Have you ever heard someone say something like: “Yes, but my god would never (fill in the blank).” Or like this: “Yes, but I would never believe in a god who (fill in the blank).” These kinds of statements indicate that a person desires to create a god after his own image, instead of recognizing that he is in fact created after God’s own image.

Since we are created after God’s own image, we do not get to decide who God is, what he is like, or what he would do or not do. God alone determines who he is and what he would do. And he tells us who he is and what he is like in his word, the Scriptures. In the third chapter of the book of Habakkuk we learn that God is a God of wrath.

God is a God of wrath

Much is made today, and rightly so, of the love of God. God is love. This is a great and glorious truth; and one that we will look at further in a moment when we talk of God’s mercy, which can be considered an aspect of love. Yet we must be very careful not to develop a one-sided or a lop-sided view of God. God is, as it were, multi-faceted. He is both Father and Judge. He is both Just and Love. He hates sin and he pardons sin. He punishes sinners and he saves sinners.

The Bible makes it clear that God is a jealous God and that he is a consuming fire (Deut. 4:24; Heb. 12:29). Although he shows steadfast love to thousands of those who love him and keep his commandments, he visits the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and fourth generation of those who hate him (Ex. 20:5-6).

We are confronted with God’s wrath in his dealings with his own people. God had warned Israel that if they forsake him and commit the same grievous sins as those whom they had removed from Canaan, then He would punish them. They would experience the curses and not the blessings. They would perish and be removed from the Promised Land.

Sadly, Judah turned away from the Lord and steadfastly refused to repent. As a result, and in response to Habakkuk’s first question, God says that he is sending the cruel Babylonians to crush his own people. It is for this reason that in verse 3, the prophet speaks of God coming to his people in wrath. In accord with his covenant word, God pours out his wrath upon his rebellious people.

Now if God is willing to be wrathful towards his own people, it should not surprise you that he would be so towards the wicked who are not his people. In his answer to Habakkuk’s

second question, God said that he would providentially punish the Babylonians for what they did to other nations, including Judah. While God used the Babylonians for his own purposes, the Babylonians had no right before God to commit such wicked and cruel acts. Consequently, they too were going to experience the wrath and curse of God.

Verses 3-15 depict in poetic language God's judgment upon the Babylonians. The image given of God is that of a mighty warrior coming with great power to destroy his enemies. Clothed with glory and majesty and accompanied by pestilence and plague, the Lord marches through the earth with fury and threshes the nations in anger (vs. 12). He crushes the head of the house of the wicked, laying him bare from thigh to neck (vs. 13). The Lord gains complete victory.

Here we should note that God is very much active in history. From one perspective, the Medes and Persians were the ones that put an end to Babylon. Yet, we need to understand that God was behind the Medes and Persians judging the Babylonians. This is why history is aptly named. All of history is truly His Story. History is the unfolding of God's plan. History is the account of God's reign over the world.

Since Christ's resurrection and ascension, history is the account of Christ's reign over all things. Hebrews 2 tells us that God has subjected all things to Christ. Hence, Jesus says to His disciples that all authority and power has been given to him. All men therefore, ought to bow the knee in allegiance to him. Speaking of our Lord Jesus, Psalm 2 says, "Now therefore, be wise, O kings; Be instructed, you judges of the earth. Serve the LORD with fear, And rejoice with trembling. Kiss the Son, lest He be angry, And you perish *in* the way, When His wrath is kindled but a little. (Ps. 2:10-12)." The Lord Jesus Christ is truly a God of wrath.

Since God is a God of wrath the only appropriate response is to fear him. After seeing the vision of God as a mighty warrior who crushes Babylon, Habakkuk trembled. Verse 16 says that his body trembled, his lips quivered, rottenness entered his bones and his legs trembled beneath him. If this is how Habakkuk reacted to a vision of God's wrath, imagine the kind of reaction the people who experience it will have!

God is to be feared because he is a holy God! We should stand in awe of his great power and might. We ought to tremble at his warnings to destroy the wicked and those who reject the Gospel. God is a God of wrath. He is not mocked. He will not overlook sin forever. A time of reckoning will eventually arrive. And when it does, look out! For it will be a day of terror; a day when there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Indeed, it is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God (Heb. 10:31).

The good news, however, is that God is not only a God of wrath. He also is a God of mercy, who will forgive all who repent and believe in the Lord Jesus Christ.

God is a God of mercy

In verse 3, the prophet appeals to God for mercy: "...in wrath remember mercy." He knows judgment is justly coming upon his people. Yet in the midst of that judgment, he pleads for

mercy. Undoubtedly, the prophet does so because of God's character, God's promise, and God's past deeds.

God is a God of mercy. That is who he is. And so showing mercy is what he does. In revealing himself to Moses, the Lord proclaimed, "The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin...(Ex. 34:6-7)."

God is also a God who has made a covenant with his people. In Deuteronomy 30, the Lord, knowing that his people would reject him and so be punished, promised to give them a repentant heart and renew them. He promised to have compassion on them and to restore their fortunes.

Still further, God is a God who has shown himself faithful on behalf of his people. He has shown himself again and again to be his people's mighty Savior and Deliverer, most notably in the Exodus. In verse 2, the prophet reflects upon God's saving acts. He is filled with awe and reverence for God due to his mercy and power. And so he is encouraged to ask God to come again and save his people: "In the midst of years revive it; in the midst of years make it known; in wrath remember mercy."

We have already noted that verses 3-15 depict God's wrath upon the Babylonians. It is also, in answer to Habakkuk's prayer, a depiction of God's mercy. For here the prophet is given a vision of the Lord coming with great glory to deliver his people. Even as God's wrath upon Pharaoh for disobedience resulted in Israel's redemption so God's judgment upon Babylon will result in Judah's redemption and restoration. Verse 13: "You went out for the salvation of your people, for the salvation of your anointed."

It is because God is a God of mercy that even in times of judgment we still should run to God in love and adoration. He is to be feared for his power, justice and wrath. But he is also to be feared for his mercy and grace. The Psalmist says, "If you, O LORD, should mark iniquities, O Lord, who could stand? But with you there is forgiveness, that you may be feared."

God is a God of wrath and mercy. As Paul says in Romans 11:22: "Note then the kindness and the severity of God." What is striking about these two attributes in the book of Habakkuk is that they are joined at the hip. Wrath and mercy, judgment and salvation, are intertwined. Deliverance for Judah comes through judgment on Babylon. And this is exactly what we see happening at the cross. God judges the Lord Jesus for our sins. The Lord is condemned in our place, suffering the wrath of God, so that we who believe in him might not perish, but have everlasting life. The wrath and love of God meet at the cross. Our deliverance comes through judgment on Christ.

In light of this, we can and should rejoice in the Lord, regardless of our circumstances.

Rejoice in the Lord always

Paul says in Philippians 4:4: "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice." And in 1 Thessalonians 5:16: "Rejoice always!" Notice he doesn't say to rejoice sometimes or when times are good, but rejoice always. It is noteworthy that Paul called upon the Philippians to rejoice always when he himself was in prison awaiting trial before Nero. Moreover, the apostle had suffered much in service to Christ, and yet underlying all the difficulties and hardships, was a foundation of joy in Christ. In 2 Corinthians 6:10, he writes, "...as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing."

The prophet Habakkuk embodies this spirit in verses 17-19. He is not naïve. He knows that there are rough times ahead. His personal circumstances and those of his fellow countrymen are about to take a dramatic turn for the worse. But it doesn't matter. Even if everything goes to pot (vs. 17), he will still rejoice in the Lord (vs. 18).

Now how can he do that? What exactly is there to rejoice about? Well, he can rejoice always because God is the God of his salvation (vs. 18). God will save him, even in the midst of judgment. God will protect him and watch over him. God will be his strength and see him through (vs. 19). The righteous shall live by his faith (2:4).

And this is why we can rejoice in the Lord, regardless of our circumstances, even when things are terrible. We shouldn't fool ourselves. We will go through difficult times. We are sinners and live in a sinful world. Consequently, we will experience the various miseries of this life, including the ultimate one: death. We might suffer hardship due to our personal sins; due to other peoples' sins; due to our country's sins (as was the case for Judah and Babylon in Habakkuk's day); or because of the simple fact we live in a fallen world where things do not always work right. The point is that there will be times in our lives when the fig tree will not blossom and the produce of the olive will fail. Thus, we will to one degree or another experience God's wrath over sin. And all of the temporal judgments that we experience teach us how awful sin is and how much God hates it. They also remind us of the future Day of Judgment when God will fully punish people for their sins. Then the punishment will be unbearable and eternal.

Nevertheless, we can and ought to rejoice in the Lord because God is not only a God of wrath. He is a God rich in mercy. He sent his son, the Lord Jesus Christ, who bore our griefs and carried our sorrows; who was wounded for our transgressions and crushed for our iniquities. Upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his stripes we are healed. Or as Paul put it, for our sake God made Christ to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God (2 Cor. 5:21). Or as John put it: God so loved the world that he gave his only son that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.

This situation then is this: either you will suffer for your sins yourself for all eternity and so experience the full wrath of God. Or Christ can have suffered for you. The choice is set before you: life or death; salvation or judgment; Christ or everything else. Choose life, choose salvation, choose Christ!

We who are in Christ and follow Christ can and indeed should rejoice, even when we do undergo the miseries of this life. For we know what awaits us because of the mercy of God: eternal life. The sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory

that is to be revealed to us. We know that God is in control. We know that God is just. We know he will judge the wicked and he will in the end completely and fully deliver us. He will even deliver us from death, as he will one day raise us from the dead, just as he raised Jesus from the dead. Indeed, even when we do die, we shall live, for to be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord. To live is Christ and to die is gain. We know that the righteous will live by his faith.

We noted earlier that Psalm 2, which speaks of Christ, warned the rulers of the earth to kiss the Son lest he be angry and they perish in the way because of his wrath. But the Psalm does not end there. It goes on to say, "Blessed are all who take refuge in him." When you take refuge in Christ, then you have every reason to rejoice, regardless of your circumstances.

But when troubling circumstances begin to make you doubt that God is in control, that God is rich in mercy, and that God will deliver you, take time to reflect upon the character of God, the promises of God and the great works of God. The OT saints often found great encouragement when they looked back in the past, particularly the Exodus, that grand demonstration of God's faithfulness, power and grace. We NT saints, however, have a far greater work of God to look back upon. We look back to the cross and we can meditate upon this great truth: "He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things (Rom. 8:32)?"

God is a God of wrath and a God of mercy. So regardless of your circumstances, rejoice in the Lord, the God of your salvation. Serve him with fear, and rejoice with trembling.

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