

Habakkuk 3:1-2

<https://thebiblesays.com/commentary/hab/hab-3/habakkuk-31-2/>

Habakkuk asks God to have compassion on Judah amid their exile so that they can experience spiritual revival and restoration.

In the first chapter, Habakkuk complained to God about the wickedness that prevailed in the land of Judah. God told the prophet that He would use a wicked nation called “Chaldea” or “Babylonia” as His instrument to discipline Judah. Habakkuk then asked why a Holy God would use an even more wicked and unrighteous people to judge Judah—His covenant people? In the second chapter, God answered the prophet by assuring him that He would intervene in due time to rescue Judah and destroy the wicked Chaldeans for their arrogance and greed. In the meantime, the righteous Judahites should live by their faithfulness and integrity.

Habakkuk had heard God’s revelation. He had learned that God was not pleased with the wicked deeds of the people of Judah and was about to send them into exile to Babylonia. Habakkuk had accepted the divine message. In the present chapter, he responds to God with a prayer of trust and praise—not with another complaint. He prayed that God might have compassion on His people amid their exile so that they might experience restoration and spiritual revival. His prayer resembles the poetic language found in the book of Psalms.

The chapter begins by telling the reader that it is a *prayer*. By definition, *prayer* is human speech addressed to a deity. It is humanity’s genuine conversation with God. The biblical example of *prayer* is simply speaking in a conversational manner. The worshiper humbles himself before God and expects to align his thoughts with God’s, hear and gain wisdom from God, and ask God to act on his behalf. He offers up words to God and is confident that God hears the sentiment he expresses (Psalm 34). Prayer reminds the worshiper that he needs God and depends on Him.

Prayer also offers an excellent opportunity to align our perspective with the truth, since God is truth (John 14:6). Thus, when someone prays, that person takes a posture of submission, which supports developing an attitude of trust and obedience. Of course prayer is a petition, God hears our prayers, and answers the *prayer* based on His character. The altar of incense in the tabernacle can be seen as an image of continual prayer to God, as the incense ascends to heaven.

In Revelation, we are given a picture of the prayers being stored up as heavenly incense (Revelation 5:8). This could be connected with the bowls of God’s wrath which will be poured out upon the earth in God’s time (Revelation 15:7;16:1). Perhaps this is a picture of God answering prayers for justice. Unlike Habakkuk’s prayer for justice, which will have a fairly brief time delay, other prayers for justice might have a much longer delay. But with God a day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as a day (2 Peter 3:8).

A *prayer* can be corporate or individual. In our passage, the *prayer* was individual because the text credits *Habakkuk* as the author, saying, a *prayer of Habakkuk the prophet*. This phrase is similar to the opening verse of the prophecy of *Habakkuk* (Habakkuk 1:1). In both instances, the

reader learns that *Habakkuk* was a *prophet*, an authorized envoy for God with a message that originated with God.

Although the prophet's *prayer* was personal, it apparently was written for a group, and had become part of the Israelite worship service, to be sung *according to Shigionoth*. The term *shigionoth* is a transliteration of a Hebrew word whose meaning is uncertain. From context we can infer that it denotes a musical poem Jewish tradition holds that it means a psalm of supplication. The term *Shigionoth* also appears in the superscription of Psalm 7.

The *prayer of Habakkuk* is primarily an exercise in conforming his mindset to the reality of God. It contains only one petition (a formal request) and that is in verse 2. The remaining verses provide a meditation *prayer* as the prophet described the greatness and goodness of God. Perhaps this prayer is an exercise in renewing the mind that will lead to walking by faith (Habakkuk 2:4). The prophet began his *prayer* by addressing God using His covenant name, saying, *LORD, I have heard the report about You*.

Habakkuk used the term *LORD* ["Yahweh" in Hebrew] to emphasize God's covenant relationship with the people of Judah. Yahweh means "The Existent One." This emphasizes that all things derive their existence from God, and in Him all things consist. The prophet had *heard* God's *report* concerning how He would deal with Judah and Babylonia. God made it clear to him that He would use the Babylonians/Chaldeans to discipline Judah. But He would thereafter also punish the Chaldeans severely for their arrogance, idolatry, and greed (Habakkuk 2:4–19).

Thus, although Habakkuk had accepted the message, he knew that God would remain faithful to the words of the covenant He established through the faith of Abraham. Therefore, he prayed to the *LORD* asking for compassion and mercy.

As Habakkuk offered his *prayer* to God, he declared, *LORD I have heard the report about You and I fear*. The verb *hear* ("shema" in Hebrew) means to listen attentively and respond appropriately (Deuteronomy 6:4). The prophet paid close attention to the revelation God disclosed to him. As a result, he responded with *fear*, meaning that he made focusing upon consequences from God his first priority over other fears. Such a reverential *fear* caused the prophet to give priority to the *report* he had *heard*. It would be natural for the prophet to fear rejection from those in Judah who did not want to hear this dire news. But Habakkuk understands that it is much more important to fear disappointing the God of Israel rather than having concern about disappointing mere humans.

Thus, Habakkuk issued three important statements to request God's help. The first two statements are parallel with each other and read as follows:

*O LORD revive Your work in the midst of the years,
In the midst of the years make it known.*

To *revive* means to restore to life, to renew, or to revitalize. Habakkuk prayed that God would renew His *work*. The term *work* refers to God's actions. In our context, it refers to His past actions with His people, especially the exodus events in which He delivered His covenant people

from slavery in Egypt and led them through the wilderness wandering (Deuteronomy 6:12; 8:2). The phrase *in the midst of the years* likely refers to the period between the announcement of the judgment and its final accomplishment.

The prophet asks that God's wondrous deeds be shown even while Israel is being judged in exile. Habakkuk petitions God to bless Israel even while they are being judged. He hoped that God would make His *work known* so that all the earth might know it and acknowledge God's supreme power. It could be viewed that one way in which God favorably answered this prayer is by giving us so many books of the Bible that are directly connected to the period of Judah's exile. This would include:

- The book of Daniel, which covers Daniel from the point he is led captive from Israel through the time Babylon is conquered by the Medo-Persians.
- The book of Ezekiel, which covers Ezekiel the prophet while he is in exile in Babylon.
- The books of Jeremiah and Lamentations (written by Jeremiah) which covers the prophet while he dwelt in Jerusalem during and after the Babylonian exile
- The books of 1 and 2 Chronicles, which review the history of Israel and Judah from the perspective of those seeking to understand that Judah was led into exile due to its unfaithfulness to the covenant into which it had entered with its Suzerain (ruler) God (Exodus 19:8; I Chronicles 9:1).
- The book of Ezra, which records the initial return of Jews from exile to repopulate Judah.
- The book of Nehemiah, which records Nehemiah's return to Jerusalem to rebuild its walls.
- Haggai, which records the prophet's call for the governor of Judah to rebuild the temple that had been destroyed by the Babylonians.
- Zechariah, which records a prophecy around the time that the seventy years of exile proclaimed by God have expired, and exhorts Judah to return to God.

In the last statement, the prophet implored the compassion of God: *In wrath remember mercy*. The term *wrath* is defined as God's response to human sin and disobedience. In the New Testament, God's wrath is said to pour out on those who seek their own way by giving them over to their own desires (Romans 1:24,6,28). In other words, God judges people by giving them what they asked for. In the case of Judah's judgement, God is following the provisions of the treaty which they had agreed to, exercising the provisions for disobedience to the covenant. Israel was to be disciplined when they exploited one another rather than loving their neighbors as themselves (Deuteronomy 28:36).

The term for *mercy* is "rakham" in the Hebrew language. It refers to a deep compassion. It is used in the book of Isaiah to speak of a mother's love for her nursing baby (Isaiah 49:15). The prophet's plea is that God might show compassion to the people of Judah as a mother would do for her nursing child, even while they are in exile to a foreign people. God promises to do so in the book of Jeremiah. Just after describing the horrific destruction Judah will suffer at the hands of the Babylonians, God declares:

“For I know the plans that I have for you,” declares the LORD, “plans for welfare and not for calamity to give you a future and a hope.”
(Jeremiah 29:11)

Biblical Text

¹**A prayer of Habakkuk the prophet, according to Shigionoth.**

²**Lord, I have heard the report about You *and* I fear.**

O Lord, revive Your work in the midst of the years,

In the midst of the years make it known;

In wrath remember mercy.