

Habakkuk 3:16-19

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Habakkuk was filled with fear when he hears the report about how the LORD will use Babylon to discipline Judah. Despite his fear, he is overwhelmed with joy as he puts his trust in God and waits patiently for Him to rescue His covenant people.

After Habakkuk shared the report about the LORD's impending discipline of Judah through invasion by the Babylonians, he described the fearful effects that it produced within him. His fear triggered three physiological symptoms. The first symptom of Habakkuk's fear affected his inward parts: *I heard and my inward parts trembled*. The verb *hear* ["shema" in Hebrew] means to listen attentively and respond appropriately (Deuteronomy 6:4). The word for *inward parts* means "belly." The prophet paid close attention to the message God revealed to him. He *heard* it and accepted it. As a result, he responded with *trembling* as his belly writhed with fear with the knowledge of this impending disaster, and the experience of hearing from God.

The second symptom caused by the prophet's fear impacted his lips: *At the sound, my lips quivered*. The prophet's *lips* palpitated from fear of the awesome message he heard from the voice of God (Habakkuk 2:1). Since Habakkuk believed God, he responded with fear and trembling, knowing the message from God was true.

The third physiological symptom produced by Habakkuk's fear affected his bones, the strongest part of the human body. He stated, *Decay enters my bones. And in my place I tremble*. The phrase of *decay* or rotteness entering someone's *bones* is found other places. In Proverbs it is contrasted with a peaceful heart:

"A tranquil heart is life to the body,
But passion is rotteness to the bones."
(Proverbs 14:30)

The Hebrew word translated "rotteness" in Proverbs 14:30 is the same root word translated *Decay* in the phrase *Decay enters my bones*. This would infer that the phrase *Decay enters my bones* refers to the adverse physical effects that anxiety has on humans. This connects *tremble* with *decay* that entered Habakkuk's *bones*. This seems to describe the kind of fear that cuts through to the very core of your being, which fits with the idea of rotteness of bones.

Yet, Habakkuk was not without hope, for he said, *I must wait quietly for the day of distress, for the people to arise who will invade us*. As Habakkuk has hope, so do all who recite or sing this psalm. Habakkuk's psalm is to remind all of Judah of God's promise to redeem Judah, even during the coming time of distress.

Habakkuk's initial reaction was a trembling fear that cut to the core of his being. But he realizes that focusing on anxiety is counter-productive. Anxiety does not control the future. So Habakkuk resolves to step away from worry, and instead determines to choose patience. He decides to *wait*

quietly for the judgement to begin, *the day of distress*. Thus this psalm invites all who read/sing its contents to actively choose a perspective of trust. Rather than having anxiety about future events, Habakkuk resolves to patiently await and then simply trust God in that day of distress.

In choosing this perspective, Habakkuk leads all who sing his psalm to set aside anxiety and choose trust. God is in control. Choosing anxiety does not change what will come. But trusting God in whatever circumstance we face allows us to live in peace. To live *quietly*.

It would seem the purpose of this psalm is to remind Habakkuk (and others) that God is in control. His future redemption is as certain as the looming judgment. So Habakkuk can rest *quietly*, trusting that God is in control. He can choose a perspective that God is orchestrating all events for their good, even in times of great duress (Jeremiah 29:11, Romans 8:28).

In the first chapter, Habakkuk was perplexed why God was not judging the wickedness and injustice that prevailed in the land of Judah. He knew that in God's covenant/treaty with Israel, their disobedience required God's judgment. He asked how long the situation would remain the same, before God would intervene, as He had promised (Deuteronomy 28:15).

God answered Habakkuk's inquiry. God told him that He is the one who controls the destiny of the nations. He would use the arrogant Chaldeans/Babylonians as His instrument to discipline Judah. But afterward, He would also judge the Chaldeans for their arrogance and greed.

Habakkuk heard God's message and believed it. Then his speech changed. Instead of questioning what God was doing in the world, as he did in the first chapter, he was determined to *wait quietly*. He promised to live by his faithfulness as he waited on God to restore righteousness in Judah (Habakkuk 2:2-5).

Although the prophet knew that the immediate invasion of Judah could lead to a state of desolation and famine, he did not faint. Rather, he trusted in God and decided to choose to face the future with confidence. In this passage we see Habakkuk modeling how to properly apply the three things we control:

1. Who we trust: Habakkuk chose to trust God. To believe His word was true. This initially caused him great anxiety.
2. Our perspective. Habakkuk decided to choose a perspective that God knew best, and therefore would *wait quietly for the day of distress* to come. Actively choosing this perspective gave him peace.
3. What we do. In this case, Habakkuk chose to take the action to write a psalm, which is this Chapter 3. In the psalm he expresses words that enforce his trust of God. Further, in the psalm, he chooses a perspective that God's actions of judgement will certainly be followed by redemption.

Not only did Habakkuk trust the LORD amid such uncertainties, but he rejoiced in Him. This was an additional choice of perspective, choosing to be grateful to God that He is just, righting wrongs, but also knowing that God will restore Judah in time. These words of Habakkuk capture his belief in God's word, and trust in God's benevolence toward Israel:

*Though the fig tree should not blossom and there be no fruit on the vines;
Though the yield of the olive should fail, and the fields produce no food;
Though the flock should be cut off from the fold, and there be no cattle in the stalls;
Yet, I will exult in the LORD, I will rejoice in the God of my salvation.*

This passage records a commitment of Habakkuk to make a choice to trust God in the face of adverse circumstances. The ancient Israelite society was primarily agrarian. That means that the economy largely depended on crops and flocks. Thus, the abundance of these agricultural products was a blessing from God (Deuteronomy 8:8). Conversely, the loss of these products would symbolize divine curses, as the books of Hosea and Joel make clear (Hosea 2:12; Joel 1:7, etc.). Crop failure was part of the consequence for Israel's disobedience to their covenant with God (Deuteronomy 28:18).

Habakkuk knew that crop failure or loss of sheep and cattle would mean pain and possibly starvation for people and could lead to a recession in the land. However, Habakkuk here commits to choose to trust God in the face of such difficulties.

The loss of *fig trees* and *vines* would mean the loss of important sources of nourishment and enjoyment, but Habakkuk here commits that he will choose to trust God, even in the face of such want. The *fig tree* was a source of sweetness and nourishment in ancient Israel and Judah. Its fruits could be eaten either fresh or dried. Some people even baked them into cakes. *Vines* were the source of grapes and wine.

Similarly, if there is insufficient *olive oil* to light their lamps and cook their food, and even as an aid in healing, Habakkuk makes a commitment that he will choose to trust God's benevolence notwithstanding. Since this is written as a psalm, we can deduce that Habakkuk understood that making this internal choice would be something he would need to do on an ongoing basis. Singing these words would be a reminder of a choice he needed to make in order to shape his perspective.

Habakkuk committed to trust God even if *the fields produce no food*. The term *fields* represents the main crops grown in the field, notably wheat and barley. Habakkuk has seen that a great time of want is coming. This psalm will be a constant reminder to quiet his soul: "When difficulty comes, I will trust God."

Though the flock should be cut off from the fold, and there be no cattle in the stalls, Habakkuk, through this psalm, is choosing to trust God. A *fold* is the sheep's home (2 Samuel 7:8; 1 Chronicles 17:7). It refers to an enclosure where ancient Israelites kept their sheep and goats to prevent them from being stolen or killed by wild animals (1 Samuel 24:3). A *stall* refers to a place where animals are kept and fed for fattening (Malachi 4:2).

In the ancient Israelite society, cattle could roam (walk) in the fields when not in use. Otherwise, they would be confined in *stalls* during the winter season, and people would bring their food to them (Amos 6:4). In considering the looming Babylonian invasion, Habakkuk states that he will trust God even though there are no more animals to support his livelihood.

Habakkuk in this psalm makes a choice to *exult in the LORD* in spite of these dark circumstances and dire situations. He is choosing to have triumphant jubilation regardless of life difficulties. He is not refusing to recognize reality. He is facing the stark realities of the famine around him. But he is rejoicing anyway, because he knows that God will work all these things for good, even if he does not live to see it. He trusted in *the God* of his *salvation*. In this case, Habakkuk appears to express confidence that God will deliver (save) him from despair, because God had given Habakkuk hope by promising that Judah will be restored. He also trusted that God would ultimately save His people from their enemies.

Habakkuk knew that his ultimate source of help did not rest in circumstances or material possessions but in his LORD, the covenant God of Israel. That is true, but Habakkuk still has to choose to believe it, and adopt that perspective. It appears that writing this psalm, to rehearse these truths to himself, is a material part of making such a choice. This appears to be an excellent example of how to make ongoing choices that are life-giving. Because of Habakkuk's perspective he has chosen, no adverse circumstance could steal his joy. Habakkuk had chosen a source of joy that is dependable and inexhaustible: trust in the LORD's ultimate benevolence toward him and his people. Therefore, he added a note of trust through a metaphor, saying, *The Lord GOD is my strength*.

The term translated as "Lord" in the phrase *the Lord GOD is my strength* here is "Adonai" in Hebrew, which means "master" or "ruler." The Hebrew word translated as GOD is "Yahweh," the covenant name of God (Exodus 3:14–15). It means "the One who exists." Habakkuk used the two terms together to emphasize that the LORD was his master and his covenant God. As such, God was Habakkuk's *strength*, meaning that God was the source of Habakkuk's stability, rather than circumstances. Because of Habakkuk's trust in the LORD, he could have joy in spite of current difficulty. This was also available to anyone who sang or spoke this psalm.

Having said that the LORD was his strength, Habakkuk went further to describe the level of strength provided by God: *He [God] has made my feet like hinds' feet and made me walk on high places*. The term *hind* refers to a female deer. According to the book of Deuteronomy, this animal is ceremonially clean and thus fit for eating (Deuteronomy 14:5). One of the characteristics of the *hind* is the surefootedness that allows her to climb sheer rocky mountains without stumbling (Psalm 18:33).

In climbing high places, the *hind* puts her back feet exactly where her front feet were so that she will not fall. In the same manner, God protects and strengthens His children to keep them from falling when facing life crises. Habakkuk acknowledged his dependence on God and was ready to face the challenges of his day because the LORD was his *strength*. By creating this mental image, Habakkuk reminds himself that he can rely on God, but not circumstances.

This would indicate at least two things. One, we need a constant reminder that we need to choose to trust God rather than circumstances. Circumstances are volatile and ever-changing. There is no stability in circumstances. But if we put our trust in God, trusting in His benevolence toward us no matter the difficult circumstances we may face, then we have the footing of a deer. We can *walk on high places* without fear of falling.

The prophet concluded with a musical note that pertains to the performance of the song in public worship. He said that the song was *for the choir director* and was to be performed on *stringed instruments*. This addendum is related to the heading of the psalm (v. 1). The heading tells the reader that the song is a prayer of supplication (“shigionoth”). The addendum tells the reader that the song was to be accompanied by *stringed instruments*.

In summary, the book of Habakkuk deals with the prophet’s uncertainties regarding God’s holiness and justice in light of a world permeated by wickedness and injustice. Trapped in a corrupt society, Habakkuk’s faith wavered so that he questioned God about His delay in judging evil. God answered the prophet and told him that He was not being passive, that judgement was sure. God would use the Chaldeans to discipline Judah.

Upon hearing that God would use the wicked Babylonians to chastise Judah, Habakkuk petitioned God again to know why He would use such an evil nation as His instrument of discipline. God then told the prophet that He controls the destiny of the nations. Though He would use the Chaldeans to discipline His covenant people, He would ultimately destroy them for their arrogance and greed.

The prophet heard and accepted God’s report. He then wrote a psalm recorded in Chapter 3. Driven in prayer, he recalled God’s action in the past, especially how God had liberated the people of Israel from the hand of the Egyptians and led them safely to the Promised Land. He recounted God’s provision, and the certainty that God would do it again in the future. Habakkuk (and any who recited the psalm) vowed to trust the LORD despite the social upheaval of his day.

In today’s society where wickedness and injustice prevail, believers can find encouragement and comfort in the literary work of Habakkuk. Amid difficult times, people called to a life of faith and faithfulness would do well to abandon themselves to their Redeemer in absolute trust. May the LORD through this book strengthen all Christians who, like Habakkuk, are perplexed by the circumstances of life!

Biblical Text

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At the sound my lips quivered.
Decay enters my bones,
And in my place I tremble.
Because I must wait quietly for the day of distress,
For the people to arise *who* will invade us.**

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And there be no fruit on the vines,
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**¹⁸ Yet I will exult in the Lord,
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And He has made my feet like hinds' *feet*,
And makes me walk on my high places.
For the choir director, on my stringed instruments.**