

NOTES FROM TIM GAMSTON'S SERMON- 18th February 2024 pm

TITLE: "When mercy meets wrath" TEXT: Habakkuk 3 verses 1-19

Series: Lament and Faith in the Sovereign God part 5

Scripture references from the ESV

Habakkuk Ch 3 A prayer of Habakkuk the prophet, according to Shigionoth.

² O LORD, I have heard the report of you, and your work, O LORD, do I fear.

In the midst of the years revive it; in the midst of the years make it known; in wrath remember mercy.

³ God came from Teman, and the Holy One from Mount Paran. *Selah*

His splendour covered the heavens, and the earth was full of his praise.

⁴ His brightness was like the light; rays flashed from his hand; and there he veiled his power.

⁵ Before him went pestilence, and plague followed at his heels.^[a]

⁶ 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.

⁷ I saw the tents of Cushan in affliction; the curtains of the land of Midian did tremble.

⁸ 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?

⁹ You stripped the sheath from your bow, calling for many arrows.^[b] *Selah* You split the earth with rivers.

¹⁰ The mountains saw you and writhed; the raging waters swept on; the deep gave forth its voice;

it lifted its hands on high.

¹¹ 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.

¹² You marched through the earth in fury; you threshed the nations in anger.

¹³ 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.^[c] *Selah*

¹⁴ 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.

¹⁵ You trampled the sea with your horses, the surging of mighty waters.

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.

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,

¹⁸ yet I will rejoice in the LORD; I will take joy in the God of my salvation.

¹⁹ GOD, the Lord, is my strength; he makes my feet like the deer's; he makes me tread on my high places.

To the choirmaster with stringed instruments.

Throughout the book of Habakkuk, we have seen how the prophet's great concern was that God did not seem to be doing anything about the evil that his own people were doing. Israel had turned away from God's law and the people were doing what was right in their own eyes. They were acting in violent ways towards one another, and justice was being denied to the ones who deserved it. Habakkuk lamented to God (1:2-4):

O LORD, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not hear? Or cry to you "Violence!" and you will not save? ³ Why do you make me see iniquity, and why do you idly look at wrong? Destruction and violence are before me; strife and contention arise. ⁴ So the law is paralyzed, and justice never goes forth. For the wicked surround the righteous; so justice goes forth perverted.

However God will not let his people get away with sin, and Habakkuk is wrong in his assumption.

God is not idly looking at wrong.

God is about to act, but not in a way that Habakkuk might have chosen. Shockingly, he is going to bring judgement on the nation of Israel through the hands of the Babylonians. History tells us that this resulted in the brutal murder of many Jews, the exile of the young people to Babylon, the destruction of the temple and the ruin of all the crops. This was God's judgement on his people because they refused to turn from their idols and come back to him. It was Habakkuk's responsibility to tell the nation what God was going to do (2:2-3): **"Write the vision; make it plain on tablets, so he may run who reads it. ³ For still the vision awaits its appointed time; it hastens to the end—it will not lie. If it seems slow,**

wait for it; it will surely come; it will not delay.

Habakkuk was to warn the people that judgement was surely coming- they had gone too far for God to change his mind. The question that was likely to be uppermost in their minds as the people heard this message was:

How can we escape the judgement that is surely coming?

How can we stand in this day of God's wrath?

This question is relevant for every human being in every age. In the New Testament, we read

But do not overlook this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day. ⁹The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance. ¹⁰But 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. (2 Peter 3:8-10)

God will not allow sin to continue on his earth, and his judgement on his people in Habakkuk's day and later his judgement on the Babylonians point forward to the final judgement that will come upon all humanity.

**When the Lord Jesus comes back and calls every human being to account
how can we stand in that fearful dreadful day?**

Habakkuk's answer to the question is to pray that in wrath, God would remember mercy (v2 above). There is good news.

In the middle of God's wrath, there is mercy for those who turn to him

1. Habakkuk shows us God's wrath. As believers, we often find ourselves embarrassed by the idea of a God of wrath. We are happy to tell people about God's love but fail to tell of his anger against sin. However, God is not afraid to speak of his wrath! Here are a couple of examples from the many throughout the Bible.

- **God is a righteous judge, and a God who feels indignation every day (Psalm 7:11)**

- For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth.

(Romans 1:18)

We find this difficult because we do not fully understand this attribute of God. We tend to cast him in our own image and so we think his anger is like ours when we fly off the handle about something. In 'The Attributes of God' Arthur Pink wrote: *'The wrath of God is his eternal detestation of all unrighteousness. The holiness of God stirred against sin. God's anger is not malignant and malicious retaliation.'*

Because God is holy, he hates all sin, and because of this hatred that comes from his holiness his anger burns against both sin and sinner. The Psalms confirm this in many places. Two examples are: **you hate all evildoers (Ps 5:5)** and **The LORD tests the righteous, but his soul hates the wicked and the one who loves violence (Ps 11:5)**

God's holiness demands that he show wrath.

If he did not exercise wrath against sinners, he would cease to be holy.

As Habakkuk reflected on what God had done in the past, he came to see:

- God's holy hatred of all sin
- God's holy wrath against all who refuse to submit to him

V5 (above) is probably a reference to the ten plagues that God brought against Egypt, but also the plagues against his own people when they were in the wilderness. When Pharaoh refused to let the people go, he said to Moses: **"Who is the LORD, that I should obey his voice and let Israel go? I do not know the LORD, and moreover, I will not let Israel go."**

(Exodus 5:2). This arrogant disobedience (the very heart of sin) brought forth God's righteous wrath.

In **v8** (above), Habakkuk uses the words wrath, anger and indignation to describe this quality in God.

- It is the height of arrogance to assume that we can live in God's world, enjoying all the good gifts that he gives, while at the same time totally ignoring him, imagining that he will be indifferent to this great crime.

- It is the height of hypocrisy to be offended at God because he exercises his wrath and judgement against the sin of our living as if he is unimportant or non-existent.

We are rightly outraged at the enormity of the injustices we see in the world around us and are outraged on a personal level when we are ignored or treated as insignificant.

Why should we not permit God, who is of much purer eyes than we are, to exercise his righteous wrath?

God is holy and hates all sin.

Because of this, his anger burns against those who commit sin, and one day that anger will be seen in a final judgement, when God will pass down the eternal sentence of death on all those who refuse to honour him as God. John describes it thus: **When he opened the sixth seal, I looked, and behold, there was a great earthquake, and the sun became black as sackcloth, the full moon became like blood,¹³ and the stars of the sky fell to the earth as the fig tree sheds its winter fruit when shaken by a gale.¹⁴ The sky vanished like a scroll that is being rolled up, and every mountain and island was removed from its place.¹⁵ Then the kings of the earth and the great ones and the generals and the rich and the powerful, and everyone, slave and free, hid themselves in the caves and among the rocks of the mountains,¹⁶ calling to the mountains and rocks, "Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who is seated on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb,¹⁷ for the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand?"** (Rev 6:12-17)

- That is the reality that is to come and so we must ask how we can stand in that day.
- 2. Habakkuk shows us God's mercy.** From the message that runs through scripture, Habakkuk knew that

God is a God of mercy

He knew the God of Exodus: **The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness,⁷ keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin.**

He knew Psalms that picked up the theme of mercy and sang about it.

- However, just knowing that God is merciful was not enough for Habakkuk. He acted on what he knew and prayed for God to be true to his revealed nature (v2 above). That is faith at work.

Human nature tends to react very differently when confronted with an angry deity:

- We deny the existence of that deity, even though ultimately, we will have to stand before him
- We minimise the anger and the sin that causes this deity to act in wrath – Christians are guilty of this
- We try to appease the wrath of that deity through some kind of religious activity or good works

Habakkuk did none of those things. Instead:

- he acknowledged the existence of God by praying, meditating on him, rejoicing in him and waiting for him to act
- he acknowledged God's right to be angry at the sin of his own people and that of the Babylonians
- he did not try to appease God by religious effort but simply cried out to God to be merciful

He called on God to act in a way that was consistent with who he knew God to be.

God heard his prayer. The nation of Israel is still in existence today. The people were not wiped out by the Babylonians.

God preserved a remnant, although he had every right to pour out this wrath and destroy them.

In wrath, God remembered mercy

As we think about the Day of God's wrath that is coming on humanity, in faith we are to look away from our own efforts to appease God and to cry out to God to be merciful to us. Jesus taught us this from the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector (**Luke 18:9-14**). The Pharisee came before God and listed all his own good works, calling God to look at all he (the Pharisee) had done. The tax collector, an outcast, knew he had nothing to offer God but his sin and cried out '**God be merciful to me a sinner.**' Jesus, the judge who will one day sit in judgement over both these men said: '**I tell you, this man (the tax collector) went down to his house justified, rather than the other.**'

**We will be able to stand in that great and terrible day of God's wrath
only because of God's mercy**

When we cry to God to have mercy, God will choose not to hold our sin against us, so we do not get what we deserve.

- Rather than bringing on us the just judgement of eternal death, we receive eternal life
- Rather than receiving condemnation, we are pardoned, put right with God and accepted.

How can it be that God, who is holy and must satisfy his wrath against sin, is willing to show mercy and let people get away with their sin? How can God show mercy and at the same time satisfy his justice? Our sin has attracted the wrath of God, but the message of the gospel is that the wrath of God has fallen on Christ in our place.

Christ's body was broken and his blood shed for us on the cross.

The cross was the ultimate place where we see God remembering mercy in the midst of wrath. When you feel the weight and terror of your sin and the judgement to come, you are not to just try harder, for you cannot ever do enough to appease the wrath of God and you do not need to despair under the weight of guilt.

You just need to cry out to God to have mercy on you.

You can be sure that he will have mercy on you, because his wrath has fallen on Christ instead of you.

That statement is true if you have never asked God to be merciful to you, but it is also true for those who have been Christians for many years. We live as if we have to put ourselves right with God, but the Gospel message is:

- When we sin, we can run immediately to Christ, confess that sin, ask for his mercy and, in reverent rejoicing, experience his mercy to forgive us and cleanse us.

We do not need to carry about the weight of our guilt and sin because

In the cross of Christ, the mercy of God met the anger of God.

The penalty was paid and pardon for our sins was purchased.

Christ's righteousness became ours.

Habakkuk shows us two ways to respond. We are to rejoice in the Lord (v18 above) and to pray for our nation.

- We rejoice that God has done it all. He has shown mercy, choosing to pour his wrath out on his Son in our place.
- We are to be intercessors. Habakkuk's whole prayer is a prayer for the nation. He is not grumbling about his people but is praying for them to experience mercy. We are to cry out to God to have mercy on all those who are unsaved.

I will rejoice in the LORD; I will take joy in the God of my salvation
O LORD, I have heard the report of you, and your work, O LORD, do I fear.
In the midst of the years revive it; in the midst of the years make it known;
In wrath remember mercy