

# Rejoice in the Lord

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[ 0 : 00 ] It's Habakkuk chapter 3, beginning at the first verse. A prayer of Habakkuk, the prophet, according to Shigianoth. 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. God came from Timon, and the Holy One from Mount Paran.

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.

Before him went pestilence, and plague followed at his heels. 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 Cushion in affliction. The curtains of the land of Midian did tremble.

[ 1 : 14 ] 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.

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.

[ 2 : 15 ] 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.

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 wait quietly for the day of trouble. To come upon people who invade us. 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 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.

[ 3 : 16 ] To the choir master with stringed instruments. In 2003, James Arvedek founded a company making soufflés and chocolate puddings called goo puddings.

And later he diversified this into a variety of desserts. And in 2010, he sold his company for 32 and a half million pounds.

How did he make so much money in just seven years? What is it that people were so happy to give their money away for?

What were they so desperate to buy? Well, it was a vision of happiness. I'm sure many of you have heard the slogans for goo puddings. You've probably eaten a few yourself.

The slogans are, pleasure is everything. Seek delight. All hail the goo decadence. People worship pleasure. Our society is obsessed with being happy.

[ 4 : 21 ] And goo tries to sell us a vision of happiness. Have you had a bad day? Have a goo pudding. Have a good day. Seek delight in food.

The problem is that when disaster strikes, goo puddings are no good. When not just misfortune but real evil confronts us, the pleasure of goo puddings can't help us.

We hear almost weekly in the news of brutal murders of helpless children, sexual violence, indiscriminate torture. And our vision of happiness is utterly torn apart.

We're looking at the last chapter in the book of Habakkuk today, chapter 3. And Habakkuk, as I'm sure you know, is an Old Testament prophet who was confronted with real evil.

Have a look in Habakkuk chapter 1, verse 3. Habakkuk says to God, why do you make me see iniquity? And why do you idly look at wrong?

[ 5 : 24 ] Destruction and violence are before me. Strife and contention arise. Habakkuk cries out to God to deal with injustice and evil. And God's surprising answer is that he'll raise up the Babylonians to destroy the wicked who oppress God's people.

Which seems to make things even worse. Habakkuk complains again and says, how can you do this? How can you let the evil Babylonians be the ones to carry out your justice? And as we saw last week in Habakkuk chapter 2, God says he will punish the Babylonians for their wickedness and ultimately bring about perfect justice.

I wonder what sort of a God you believe in. Perhaps you're here this morning and you deeply dislike this idea of a God who punishes. A God who destroys those who do evil.

I guess like the culture around us, we're tempted to want a kind of soft justice. If only we can rehabilitate and educate those who do evil, then they'll be okay.

They're not really that bad. They're just misguided. But the idea of a kind of soft Santa Claus God isn't enough when confronted with real evil.

[ 6 : 40 ] Like goo puddings, that sort of a God might make us feel good for a minute. But he can't really help us. And so the vision that Habakkuk gives us in chapter 3 is a God that we long for.

A God who really can help us in the face of evil. And Habakkuk's so excited by this God that he actually sings a song about him. I don't know if you noticed that in chapter 3, verse 1.

A prayer of Habakkuk the prophet according to Shigoneoth. Now you'll be forgiven for not knowing what Shigoneoth means, but it's used only once elsewhere in the Bible in Psalm 7.

And it's a musical term, perhaps describing the tune of the song. And at the end of chapter 3, in chapter 3, verse 19, it ends with, To the choir master with stringed instruments.

And every now and again we get the word seller in verse 3, verse 9, and verse 13, which again is only found in the Psalms and is a musical term.

[ 7 : 38 ] So in a world of injustice and evil, Habakkuk is singing about the God that really can help in the face of evil, the God that he trusts. And this song is recorded here for us too, so that we too, in a world of evil, can sing about the God that we trust in.

But in order to sing, we need to see what Habakkuk sees. We need a better vision than goo puddings, a better vision than a Santa Claus God. And Habakkuk gives that to us in verses 1 to 7.

And that's the first thing I want to see. And do follow along on the back of the service sheet if you want to. The first thing Habakkuk wants us to see is that God is a glorious, all-powerful creator.

And that's from verses 1 to 7. Habakkuk, like all the Old Testament prophets, he points us back to who God is. And particularly in the rescue of his people from the Exodus.

And do you remember when God showed himself to be far more powerful than the gods of Egypt, when he rescued his people through the Red Sea, when he showed that he was in control of the creation itself? Habakkuk knew what God had done.

[ 8 : 50 ] And he begins his prayer in verse 2, not by another complaint, but by saying, I've heard the report of your work, O Lord. And your work, O Lord, do I fear.

And he prays that God will show his power in judgment again. In the midst of the years, revive it. In the midst of the years, make it known. But Habakkuk is terrified of God's justice.

He's terrified of his wrath. And so even in asking for justice, he says in verse 2, in wrath, remember mercy. Remember mercy. Habakkuk looks at this vision of God's glory and power from the Exodus.

Verse 3, God comes from Teman and Mount Paran, not from heaven, but from the wilderness, as he did in the Exodus. And God's splendor covers the whole earth. The earth is full of his praise.

All of creation is under his dominion. And just as Moses' face shone bright when he came down from the mountain after speaking with God at Sinai, God's brightness, Habakkuk says, is like purest light.

[ 9 : 58 ] Have a look at verse 4. His brightness was like the light. Rays flashed from his hand. Like the sun, he's so bright, you can't even look at him directly. Light flashes everywhere, doesn't it?

If you're in a dark room, you turn the light on, you can see exactly all the mess and where it is. When you're driving at night and it gets the sunrise, the sun rises, the sunlight spreads all over the land and you can finally see where you are. And in the same way, God's brightness covers the whole earth. But not only is God's brightness like pure light, around him is destruction. I wonder if you noticed that in verse 5. Have a look with me. Before him went pestilence and plague followed at his heels. It's as if before God even arrives, curses and plagues against his enemies, reminiscent of the plagues against Pharaoh in the Exodus, bring devastation. And then he arrives in verse 6. He stands and measures the earth. Just as Isaiah says in chapter 40, verse 12, it's like he's got a pair of scales and he measures the earth on the scales. [11:11] The earth is thought to be about 6,000 billion billion kilograms. But to God, it's just like weighing ingredients for a cake. Verse 6.

The eternal mountains were scattered. The everlasting hills were low. It's as if God flattens Mount Everest. Instead of 8,848 meters, it's sea level. That which seems so permanent, so unshakable, so everlasting. It says nothing to God. In contrast, he is the permanent, eternal, and unshakable one. In verse 6. His were the everlasting ways. And in verse 7, God's enemies tremble, as the Midianites did in Judges chapter 7, because God is the glorious, all-powerful creator. No wonder Habakkuk fears him in verse 2, because he's seen something of God's power and glory. Now, we live in a world, don't we, which has by and large turned its back on its creator. [12:15] Rather than seeing the enormity of his power, we begin to think that we are the powerful ones. As the secular humanist Christopher Hitchens' book title says, God is not great.

Instead, science and technology are worshipped as gods, and man is elevated to being master of the universe. But Christopher Hitchens would never be so foolish as to try and flatten Mount Everest. He'd never stare directly at the sun for any length of time, and he'd never try and cause a plague just by his mere presence. He'd never try and weigh the earth on a pair of scales, because like all of us, Christopher Hitchens is very small. In the universe estimated to be 93 billion light-years wide, we're humbled by its magnificence. But God is not, because he is great.

His splendor covers the heavens. He is not humbled by the awe of the cosmos, because like an artist painting a picture on a canvas, tearing apart as he or she wishes, God the creator holds the universe in his hands. [13:24] 93 billion light-years is not very big to him. So have you seen what Habakkuk has seen? Have you seen the God who is more than able to bring justice to a world of evil? Habakkuk sings of God as the glorious, all-powerful creator. Well, perhaps you're sitting here and you're thinking, well, why doesn't he do something? Why doesn't God end in justice if he really is so powerful?

Doesn't he care? Well, as we've seen already in Habakkuk, God does care. And as he has done in the past, he will bring about justice. But it's not a weak, soft justice. It is a strong justice. And that brings us to the second thing I want us to see, which is that God is a terrifying warrior. And that's from verses 8 to 15.

God is a terrifying warrior. Have a look at verse 8, which starts a new section, talking to God in the second person. 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? [14:41] Again, Habakkuk picks up the imagery of the Exodus and the defeat of Pharaoh in the Red Sea as God parted the waters and covered the Egyptian chariots with them. But this time, God himself is the warrior.

He's painted as a warrior in verse 8, his horses and his chariots, as Moses sung about in Exodus chapter 15. God prepares himself for battle with his bow and arrows in verse 9. And in verse 10, the creation bows before him. The seas and raging waters acknowledge their helplessness before God. One of the saddest things about migrants fleeing from war and traveling to Europe across the Mediterranean is the perilous journey many have made across the sea. Thousands have died because the sea is extremely dangerous. The sea has often been seen in ancient mythology as a force of evil. Both the Canaanites and the Egyptians, they had gods of the

sea.

And by Habakkuk explaining that God is having dominion over the seas, he's also showing God's rule over his enemies. In verse 11, Habakkuk looks back to God's defeat over the Amorites in Joshua 10, when their sun and moon stood still in their place, until God's people had won victory.

[16:06] God marched through the earth in fury, verse 12. And like crops, he threshed the nations in anger. See, God has such an enormous effect on creation that you might think he was angry with the seas, verse 8.

You might think he was angry with the earth, verse 9. Or the mountains, verse 10. Or even the sun and the moon, verse 11. But God's real purpose is against his enemies. That is how he will bring about justice.

Now, perhaps you're sitting here, and you're finding this idea of God destroying his enemies is really difficult to accept. Can't we just educate those who do evil and show them the error of their ways with some kind of soft justice?

Well, on the 27th of January 1945, the Red Army liberated the Nazi concentration camp of Auschwitz in southwestern Poland.

The Nazis had done unspeakable evil to millions of prisoners, many of whom had died. But if you were to ask the prisoners, those waiting to be liberated, how they expected it to happen, you'd only get one answer.

[17:19] You have to destroy the Nazi occupation. The only way to bring about justice and liberation was to destroy the enemies. There was no other way.

Strong justice was needed to deal with real evil. And the purpose of God destroying his enemies in verse 12 is ultimately in verse 13.

Have a look down at verse 13 with me. You went out for the salvation of your people, the salvation of your anointed, both in the past, in the exodus, and in the future that Habakkuk was looking forward to.

God's anointed is a word in the Bible for God's king. And it's sometimes used for people like Saul or David in the Old Testament as they represent God's people.

But many of the Psalms speak of God's anointed king in a greater way than could ever apply to King David, such as in Psalm 2, where the ends of the earth are his possession.

[18:21] And the New Testament sees this as fulfilled in the person of Jesus Christ. We saw last week in Habakkuk chapter 2 that part of God's judgment symbolized in his cup of wrath against the Babylonians is also fulfilled by Jesus drinking the cup of God's wrath in our place as he dies on the cross.

And therefore, even here we get a glimmer of the salvation which God is going to bring about through his anointed king Jesus, through judgment, both at the cross and ultimately at the final judgment when he brings perfect justice to our world.

In Revelation chapter 19, Jesus is portrayed not as a soft Santa Claus but as a righteous judge and terrifying warrior, declaring war on the nations and all those who have rejected him as king.

See, the God of the Old Testament and the God of the New Testament, they're not two different gods. They're the same God destroying evil to bring about justice and rescue for those who turn to him.

So in Habakkuk chapter 3 verse 13, he describes the crushing of the head of the wicked, perhaps alluding to Pharaoh's army and the self-destructive nature of evil.

[19:40] In verse 14, you pierced with his own arrows the heads of his warriors. Again, in verse 15, Habakkuk describes God's dominion over the seas, subduing evil powers.

God is a terrifying warrior, destroying his enemies to save his people. I guess this image of God as a warrior and of his anointed king Jesus declaring war on the nations who reject him, it's not really an image that we like very much or that we think about.

We try to domesticate him, try to make him more palatable, more 21st century. But it's because God is so good, so righteous, so holy, that he cannot tolerate evil and ultimately he must destroy it.

It is the God that we long for, but we cannot domesticate him. Many of you will know the Narnia stories by C.S. Lewis, who describes Jesus as Aslan, the lion.

And Susan is worried when she hears that Aslan is a lion and she asks, is he quite safe? I shall feel rather nervous about meeting a lion. Safe, said Mr. Beaver.

[ 20 : 51 ] Who said anything about safe? Of course he isn't safe, but he's good. He's the king, I tell you. Jesus is described in Revelation as a lion of the tribe of Judah.

He destroys his enemies to save his people. And so when Habakkuk prayed in verse 2, in wrath, remember mercy. It's not that he's kind of wants God to show some wrath and some mercy. It's that the way he can show mercy is through his wrath. Auschwitz could only ever be shown mercy through wrath against the Nazis. We can only ever be shown mercy through wrath against evil, both at the cross as Jesus died and ultimately at the final judgment when God will destroy his enemies completely.

So how do you respond to this vision of God's power and glory, his wrath and mercy? We'll look at how Habakkuk responds, and this is the last point I want us to see, that we should rejoice and trust him even in disaster.

And that's from verses 16 to 19. Rejoice and trust him even in disaster. Have a look at verse 16 with me. Habakkuk rightly fears God.

[ 22 : 13 ] His body trembles, his lips quiver, his bones feel rotten, his legs tremble. He's understood, hasn't he? He sees a vision of a God who acts in history in the past and will act in the future again.

And so he says in verse 16, I will quietly wait for the day of trouble to come upon people who invade us. Isn't that astonishing?

Habakkuk has just been told that God's initial answer to the injustice in his world is to send the Babylonians to invade. Only after that were the Persians invade in 539 BC in judgment on the Babylonians to rescue God's people.

It's not that Habakkuk thinks, Habakkuk thinks, okay, well, God has told me things will get better. So, you know, at least I can hold on to that. Things won't get better. In fact, God has promised that they'll get worse for Habakkuk.

The Babylonians are going to come and invade them. But Habakkuk knows that ultimately God will bring about justice and salvation for his people because it's what he did in the past.

[ 23 : 22 ] And initially it was fulfilled in the Persians. But God promises that one day he will ascend his anointed King Jesus who will ultimately bring about perfect justice and salvation.

And that's what Habakkuk can say in verses 17 to 19, though the fig tree should not blossom nor fruit beyond the vines, the produce of the olive fail and the fields yield no fruit, the flocks be cut off from the fold and there be no herd in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the Lord.

Isn't that astonishing? Rather than only rejoicing and singing when life is good, Habakkuk rejoices even in disaster.

And verse 17 is complete economic ruin. It's far worse than the Greek debt crisis and austerity measures. This is a full-scale invasion by the Babylonians who will tear up society from its very roots.

Imagine a nuclear bomb dropped on London. The whole place turned into rubble. No homes, no banks, no supermarkets, no cafes, no schools, utter devastation.

[ 24 : 28 ] Yet I will rejoice in the Lord? How can Habakkuk say that? How can he take joy in the God of his salvation? Wouldn't you be able to say that?

Wouldn't you love to be able to say that? To be able to sing that? Yet I will rejoice. Even though I get bad news from the hospital or I lose my job or the money runs out or I fail my exams, yet I will rejoice.

Even though the relationships in my family are difficult and my future is uncertain and I feel overwhelmed by my situation, yet I will rejoice. Well, our culture longs to be happy, but goo puddings are not enough.

They might make us feel good for a few seconds, but very soon the reality of life hits us again. They promise a vision of happiness, but they can't deliver. So what's the secret?

How can Habakkuk rejoice in the Lord? Well, it's by seeing a better vision, a vision of the glorious, all-powerful creator who will ultimately bring justice to save his people.

[ 25 : 33 ] Habakkuk rejoices not in his circumstances, but in the God of his circumstances. He rejoices in God for his own sake. As he says in verse 19, God the Lord my strength, he makes my feet like the deers, he makes me tread on high places.

Habakkuk's happiness is tied to God rather than his circumstances. In just under two months' time, one of my younger brothers is getting married to his fiancée, Katie.

And at the wedding service, he's going to make promises to Katie. He's going to say to her, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health. In other words, I will love you, not dependent on circumstances, because they go up and down.

I rejoice in you for your own sake, not because of what you can give me, but because of who you are. And Habakkuk rejoices in God because of who he is, not because of what he gives him.

No figs, no grapes, no olives, no food, no sheep, no cattle. But because of who he is, and because in God's own time, he will bring about justice and salvation for his people.

[ 26 : 49 ] The Apostle Paul says a similar thing, doesn't he, in Philippians chapter 4 verse 12, when he says, I've learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need. And his secret is rejoicing in Christ.

I count everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Jesus Christ, my Lord. Now I don't know where you're at this morning, whether you're in a time of plenty, or whether things are very hard.

But Habakkuk urges to tie our happiness not to circumstances, to food or houses or schools or careers, but to tie our happiness to God, only by looking at who he is again, and what he'll do in Jesus.

Can we sing this song with Habakkuk? Can we say, yet I will rejoice in the Lord? In April 2015, eight men were executed by a firing squad in Indonesia.

And witnesses describe how they sang songs of praise to God, including, bless the Lord, O my soul, and amazing grace, as they were lined up to face their death. Their happiness was not tied to circumstance, but tied to the same thing that Habakkuk sung about, the God of glory and power who will ultimately bring about justice and salvation through Christ.

[ 28 : 08 ] Let's pray. Father, we thank you for Habakkuk's prayer and song, and we pray that you would help us to sing it by showing us again who you are and by helping us to tie our happiness to you and your salvation in Christ rather than our circumstances.

Amen.