

# OpenTheo

## September 15th: Habakkuk 3 & Matthew 12:22-50

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The prayer of Habakkuk. Addressing an evil generation.

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## Transcript

Habakkuk chapter 3. A prayer of Habakkuk the prophet, according to Shigyōnath. 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 Tīmān, 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 Kushan in affliction, the curtains of the land of Midian did tremble. Was your wrath against the rivers, O LORD? Was your anger against the rivers? Were 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, 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 quietly wait 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. To the Choir Master with stringed instruments  
The Book of Habakkuk has two main sections. The first two chapters contain the Prophet's complaint and the Lord's response, assuring him that the proud Babylonians will not endure, but that those who trust in his word will live.

The third and final chapter is set apart from the others and introduced by another superscription. Chapter three is the prayer of the Prophet. It could be understood as the Prophet's response to revelation that he has received.

The book that began with his prayer of complaint ends with his prayer of petition and confession. The relationship between the prayer and the rest of the book is worth considering, especially as many commentators have argued that they are independent works, a position held not least because the Habakkuk commentary found among the Dead Sea Scrolls only comments on chapters one and two of the book. As Francis Anderson argues, however, having such material as part of a prophetic book isn't strange.

We have a similar prayer in Jonah chapter two, for instance. As for its absence from the Habakkuk commentary, the commentary that we have was not an original and is quite possibly incomplete. He goes on to observe the presence of shared vocabulary with the rest of Habakkuk, supporting its integrity as a book.

Besides, whatever position we arrive at concerning the prehistory of the text, its unity within the canon should be our primary point of departure. Habakkuk chapter three is an incredibly difficult and much debated text in the Hebrew, with numerous suggested emendations and contrasting readings. The passage is introduced to us as a prayer of Habakkuk the prophet.

Various proposals for the meaning of the term Shugionath have been advanced. Some, for instance, have noted its similarity with the superscription of Psalm 7. It is likely that it is the name of the tune, or perhaps some other form of musical direction, but we can do little more than speculate. We should read the beginning of the prayer of Habakkuk against the backdrop of the rest of the book.

Habakkuk was dismayed by the oracle that he quoted in chapter one, verses five to eleven. However, in chapter two the Lord responded to his complaint, revealing the doom of the proud Babylonians. We should read this prayer as the prophet's response to the Lord's fuller disclosure of his purpose and justice in that situation, and as a petition for the Lord to fulfil his word.

The posture of Habakkuk before the Lord has noticeably shifted to one of more pronounced humiliation before his majesty. He has heard of the great deeds of the Lord in the past, yet faced with current trials, feels keenly the need for the manifestation of the Lord's saving faithfulness once again, pleading with the Lord to show compassion to his people in the midst of his judgment upon them. The prayer draws heavily upon theophanic imagery, describing the glorious advent of the Lord.

Teman and Mount Peran are both places associated with the land of Edom, south of Judah. This is not the only description of the Lord coming from the land of Edom in scripture. We find other ones in places like Deuteronomy chapter 33, verse 2, in Moses' blessing of Israel.

The Lord came from Sinai and dawned from Seir upon us. He shone forth from Mount Peran. He came from the ten thousands of holy ones, with flaming fire at his right hand.

Also in the Song of Deborah in Judges chapter 5, verses four to five. Lord, when you went out from Seir, when you marched from the region of Edom, the earth trembled and the heavens dropped, yes, the clouds dropped water. The mountains quaked before the Lord, even Sinai before the Lord, the God of Israel.

As Anderson observes, the imagery of the Lord's coming from the south is described like

the rising of a glorious and dreadful sun, much as in the imagery of Deuteronomy chapter 33. The Lord's advent is a dawn, it's the coming of the day of the Lord. The Lord led a triumphal march as he went before his people in their first entry into the land, accompanied by splendour in the heavens and wonders and worship upon the earth.

The movement began in the region of Midian, Cushan and the land of Midian being referenced in verse 7. Cushan is an unusual word, it seems likely that this is the Cush that's associated with Moses through his Midianite wife Zipporah, not the Cush that is in the region of Sudan. The Lord comes flanked by destroyers, by pestilence before him, plague behind him and fire in his hand. Anderson proposes that, given what we know about the four destroyers elsewhere in scripture, in places like the book of Ezekiel, we should probably imagine the sword on his other hand.

This description of the Lord on his war path into the land should remind us of various places in the Psalms, Psalm 68 verses 6 to 8 for instance. God settles the solitary in a home, he leads out the prisoners to prosperity, but the rebellious dwell in a parched land. O God, when you went out before your people, when you marched through the wilderness, the earth quaked, the heavens poured down rain, before God the one of Sinai, before God the God of Israel.

The theophanic imagery of the Lord's marching into battle and the earth quaking and melting before him is used elsewhere in the Psalms, Psalm 97 verses 1 to 5. The Lord reigns, let the earth rejoice, let the many coastlands be glad, clouds and thick darkness are all around him, righteousness and justice are the foundation of his throne, fire goes before him and burns up his adversaries all around, his lightnings light up the world, the earth sees and trembles, the mountains melt like wax before the Lord, before the Lord of all the earth. The shaking of the world order as the Lord comes is more than just generic theophanic imagery, it recalls the way that as the Lord first led his people into the land, the world order really was turned upside down, the Lord overturning the old order and refounding it by his presence and providence. Again we see this in the Psalms, in Psalm 114 for instance.

When Israel went out from Egypt, the house of Jacob from a people of strange language, Judah became his sanctuary, Israel his dominion. The sea looked and fled, Jordan turned back, the mountains skipped like rams, the hills like lambs. What ails you, O sea, that you flee? O Jordan, that you turn back, O mountains that you skip like rams, O hills like lambs.

Tremble, O earth, at the presence of the Lord, at the presence of the God of Jacob, who turns the rock into a pool of water, the flint into a spring of water. The cosmic imagery throughout this prayer accents the Lord's remaking of the world by his coming, presenting his past actions and leading his people in a way that reminds the reader that in such mighty deeds he was acting as the creator ruling in his creation with no force or

power sufficient to oppose or to resist him. Verses 8 to 15 have a symmetrical structure, flanked by the horses of the Lord in the opening and closing verses and having other concentric or paralleled elements within.

It depicts the Lord as a chariot-riding warrior, employing among other things the imagery of cosmogonic myth but using it to characterise the Lord's leading his people out of Egypt and into the Promised Land. By playing with the imagery of ancient Near Eastern creation myths and the conflict with the chaotic sea, Baal and Yam or Marjuk and Tiamat, the prayer presents the exodus as a new creation event. We might also appreciate an ironic contrast between the Lord, the great warrior advancing before his people with his war chariots, and Pharaoh and the pursuing Egyptians with theirs.

The Lord acts with anger and with might, not against the rivers and the sea but against the pagan nations. The rivers, the mountains, the raging waters, the deep, the sun and moon all recall the foundations and the fundamental elements of the creation. The Lord is once again dividing and exerting his mastery over the elements to establish his heavens and his earth.

In the exodus the Lord acted to deliver his anointed people, crushing the head of the house of the wicked. Such head crushing should recall Genesis chapter 3 verse 15 and the promised crushing of the head of the serpent. In scripture enemies of the people of God are frequently characterised as serpent-like, not least Pharaoh and the Egyptians.

Psalm 74 verses 13-14. You divided the sea by your might. You broke the heads of the sea monsters on the waters.

You crushed the heads of Leviathan. You gave him as food for the creatures of the wilderness. Psalm 89 verses 9-10.

You ruled the raging of the sea. When its waves rise, you still them. You crushed Rahab like a carcass.

You scattered your enemies with your mighty arm. The Egyptians had thought that they would be able to storm, scatter and devour the Israelites, pursuing them to the Red Sea. However in dividing the waters and then crushing the heads of the Egyptians within them, the Lord both brought about a new sort of creation, bringing a new symbolic dry land up from the Gentile waters and also defeated the old enemy, the dragon, crushing his head as promised.

In verse 16 Habakkuk returns to the language of verse 2, referring to his hearing of the great deeds of the Lord. The theophanic splendour and dread of the Lord's coming overwhelms the prophet. However his response is to wait as he was instructed to do back in chapter 2 verse 3. The Lord would avenge his people and he would act for their deliverance once more.

However in the interim Habakkuk will have to be patient and persevere in trusting the Lord. In verses 17-19 Habakkuk makes a climactic confession. The confession makes extensive use of parallelism with each statement followed by a counterbalancing synonymous statement.

When the land denies man its bounty, when farmers lose their flocks and herds and their crops are destroyed, life becomes progressively more challenging, necessities gradually being stripped away. In such desperate and dark times it might be easy to abandon faith in the Lord. However now Habakkuk's response is to rejoice in the Lord.

The Lord has delivered his people before and he will deliver them again. Habakkuk might feel himself to be placed on uncertain terrain, his foot about to slip. Yet the Lord will, even on such treacherous terrain, make his step sure, making him like the deer, who can run even on the most dangerous of heights.

As Psalm 18 verse 33 puts it, he made my feet like the feet of a deer and set me secure on the heights. The prayer concludes with musical directions, suggesting that Habakkuk's prayer of petition and confession was one in which a larger worshipping community was invited to participate. A question to consider, what do you think are the main factors that led to the Prophet's change of perspective? Matthew chapter 12 verses 22 to 50 Then a demon-possessed man who was blind and mute was brought to him, and he healed him, so that the man spoke and saw.

And all the people were amazed and said, Can this be the son of David? But when the Pharisees heard it, they said, It is only by Beelzebul, the prince of demons, that this man casts out demons. Knowing their thoughts, he said to them, Every kingdom divided against itself is laid waste, and no city or house divided against itself will stand. And if Satan casts out Satan, he is divided against himself, how then will his kingdom stand? And if I cast out demons by Beelzebul, by whom do your sons cast them out? Therefore they will be your judges.

But if it is by the Spirit of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you. Or how can someone enter a strongman's house and plunder his goods, unless he first binds the strongman? Then indeed he may plunder his house. Whoever is not with me is against me, and whoever does not gather with me scatters.

Therefore I tell you, every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven people, but the blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven. And whoever speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven, but whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven, either in this age or in the age to come. Either make the tree good and its fruit good, or make the tree bad and its fruit bad, for the tree is known by its fruit.

You brood of vipers, how can you speak good when you are evil? For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks. The good person out of the good treasure

brings forth good, and the evil person out of his evil treasure brings forth evil. I tell you, on the Day of Judgment people will give account for every careless word they speak, for by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned.

Then some of the scribes and Pharisees answered him, saying, Teacher, we wish to see a sign from you. But he answered them, An evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. For just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.

The men of Nineveh will rise up at the Judgment with this generation, and condemn it. For they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and behold, something greater than Jonah is here. The Queen of the South will rise up at the Judgment with this generation, and condemn it.

For she came from the ends of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon, and behold, something greater than Solomon is here. When the unclean spirit has gone out of a person, it passes through waterless places seeking rest, but finds none. Then it says, I will return to my house from which I came.

When it comes, it finds the house empty, swept, and put in order. Then it goes and brings with it seven other spirits more evil than itself, and they enter and dwell there. And the last state of that person is worse than the first.

So also will it be with this evil generation. While he was still speaking to the people, behold, his mother and his brothers stood outside, asking to speak to him. But he replied to the man who told him, Who is my mother? And who are my brothers? And stretching out his hand toward his disciples, he said, Here are my mother and my brothers.

For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother. In the second half of Matthew chapter 12, Jesus deals with the question of how he performs his exorcisms, and also with the issue of true membership of the people of God. The question of how Jesus casts out demons, and the claim that he does so by the power of Satan himself, is one that occurs on a number of occasions within the Gospel of Matthew, and it's an important one.

It's one that Jesus highlights elsewhere. It's important to consider how much of Jesus' ministry is focused upon direct conflict with Satan and demonic forces. Jesus isn't just a teacher or even a healer or a miracle worker.

He's an exorcist. He's someone who drives out evil spirits, like David who gave relief to Saul who was troubled by an evil spirit after the Spirit of God left him. So Jesus, as David's greater son, brings relief to the people of Israel who are troubled by evil spirits.

The Pharisees accuse him of acting in the power of Beelzebul, or Beelzebub, the lord of

the flies, or maybe the lord of the garbage heap. If this were the case though, Jesus argues, Satan's kingdom would be doomed as it would be divided against itself, seeking to cast out itself. And they aren't even consistent in their accusations, for if they were, they'd be accusing their own disciples and sons who cast out demons.

Jesus seems to acknowledge here that there are others who are performing exorcisms, but his exorcisms seem to be operating on a different level. He is casting out by the Spirit of God, which is proof that the kingdom of God has come upon Israel. He's conquering the oppressed land for God.

Now other exorcists seem to cast out demons using incantations, bizarre rituals, and other things along those lines, whereas Christ does so by his powerful and authoritative word, something that's noted in the Gospels, that with a word he can cast out demons. It's his own authority that he's doing this with, it's not with some special trick or some ritual that he has to perform. He has personal authority over the demonic realm.

The demons recognise him and tremble. Jesus binds the strongman and as a result can plunder his house. In Luke chapter 11 verse 20 there's a reference to the finger of God in this same saying, which suggests that the story of the Exodus might be in the background here, as the Egyptian magicians speak about the plagues being performed by the finger of God, that they can't replicate them at a certain point.

That is a sign that God is acting, and likewise here, God is acting in Jesus Christ in a way that proves there's a new Exodus type event taking place. In this moment in history things have narrowed to a point and there are no places to stand on the sideline. You can't be neutral, you're either for or against Christ, either gathering with him or scattering, and Jesus presents this alternative very clearly to people, that they don't have the opportunity to just stand back and be neutral.

In verses 31 and 32 Jesus declares that blasphemy against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven, and this is contrasted with speaking against the Son of Man. The best way of understanding this, I believe, is to read it against the background of redemptive history. In Stephen's speech in the book of Acts for instance, he speaks about two visitations, about Joseph when he first is rejected by his brothers, and then the second time when he brings them salvation, likewise with Moses.

And the same is true of Christ. He first comes in humility in his earthly ministry, but then on the day of Pentecost the Spirit is given to continue the ministry of Christ, to continue it in power in the ministry of the Church. However, if Israel reject not just Christ in his earthly ministry, but also the ministry of the Church by the power of the Holy Spirit, they are not just blaspheming against the Son of Man, they are also blaspheming against the Holy Spirit.

Or as we read in Hebrews chapter 6, they are crucifying Christ again. They crucified him



once, now they are crucifying him again, in rejecting the ministry of the Gospel through the Church. The Pharisees' rejection of Christ, and more particularly their accusation that he is acting by the power of Satan himself, is a manifestation of the state of their hearts.

And it will be for this reason that they reject the ministry of the Church too when that comes along. Bad trees cannot bear good fruit. They are a brood of vipers.

And that image is that they are children of the great serpent, that they are the seed of the serpent rather than the seed of the woman. Jesus draws particular attention to the relationship between the heart and the tongue. This is a common theme in the wisdom literature, for instance, in the book of Proverbs and elsewhere.

Speech manifests the heart. And the themes here might also relate to the healing and exorcism that has provoked this discourse in the first place. Jesus has healed a mute and blind man who was oppressed by a demon.

And it seems that the oppression of the demon prevented the man from seeing and from speaking. In a similar manner, the people who are accusing him of casting out demons by the power of Beelzebul are displaying the failure of their faculties of speech and of perception as a result of their demonically oppressed hearts. Some of the scribes and Pharisees then ask him for a sign.

And Jesus refuses to give any sign apart from the sign of the prophet Jonah. And note the similarity with the challenge of Satan earlier on in chapter 4. If you are the son of God, then do this great sign. Jesus declares them to be an evil and adulterous generation.

And this recalls the language of Moses during the Exodus. In Deuteronomy chapter 32, verse 5, they have dealt corruptly with him. They are no longer his children because they are blemished.

They are a crooked and twisted generation. And again in verse 20 of that same chapter, they are a perverse generation, children in whom there is no faithfulness. Why are they given the sign of Jonah? Jesus among other things is declaring in advance what he is going to do in his death and resurrection so that when it happens it will be very clear that it was intended.

As we read in John's Gospel on a number of occasions in particular, Jesus said a number of things in his ministry that were not understood at the time, but afterwards they were understood to be confirmatory statements that made clear that Christ knew all along what he was about to do. Such sayings encouraged faith later on as they were brought to mind. Jonah's generation was described as adulterous and Jonah was sent to the people of Nineveh among other reasons as a sign of God's judgement of leaving Israel and going to the nations, provoking Israel to jealousy by showing others mercy.

The Israel of Jesus' day would experience the same thing. The book of Jonah is also a

sign to Israel of its own judgement of exile, but then its deliverance from that. There is a lot of symbolism in the book of Jonah as Jonah's sin leads to the shaking up of the waters and trouble for the sailors on the boat.

They have to cast Jonah into the sea and then Jonah is swallowed by this big fish. As he prays to God in the belly of this big fish he is later vomited out on the land. And the second half of the book of Jonah, chapters 3 to 4, parallel the first two chapters in other ways.

It is the story of two missions of Jonah, the dove. It's a story that brings to mind Ark themes, not just in the fact that it's two missions of a dove, but in other respects as well. God is preparing an Ark for his people in Nineveh itself and the emphasis upon the cattle and their involvement within all the events, the events of the fasting, that God is concerned for the cattle at the very end of the book and the way that Nineveh is described, the numbers associated with it, suggest a connection between Noah's Ark and Nineveh.

God is preparing to cast his people into the sea. They've caused upset in the region because of their sin and they have to be cast into exile. But God is preparing a big fish of Nineveh to swallow them up and as they are swallowed up, if they pray to God in the belly of that big fish, they will be delivered.

Likewise, as we go through, we can see that the gourd that provides shade to Jonah also represents the way that the rising kingdom of Assyria in the north provided shade from the Aramean kingdoms and gave Israel the chance for its borders to expand. All of these are things that speak not just to a story of an individual prophet, but to the political situation of that day. And in the same way, Christ is giving a message to his generation.

The Israel of Jesus' day would experience something very similar. It would also experience being cast out. Christ himself will be cast into the sea of the Gentiles, but he will rise up and Jesus' whole mission is a sign.

He is the sign. The resurrection in particular confirms this. Jesus is not going to perform just a single great wonder to demonstrate his identity.

His identity will be demonstrated by the full scope of his work and the way that that work relates to the destiny of the people as a whole. Christ is the greater than Jonah, but he is also the greater than Solomon, whom the queen of Sheba travelled to see. He is God's wisdom in person, not just the wisest man as Solomon was.

Rather, he is God's wisdom come in human flesh. Note again that it is a Gentile being summoned as a witness against them. We've seen this in Tyre and Sidon, in Sodom and Gomorrah, and now with the queen of Sheba.

All these characters and the character of Jonah who goes to the people of Nineveh and

they repent, whereas the people of Israel do not repent. In all of the witnesses being brought forth, we're having some indication of the way that the story is heading. Christ drives demons out of Israel to the wilderness, the place of the evil spirits.

But if Israel does not fill the house of the nation with God's presence, things will become even worse for them. It's important to consider the fate of that generation. They were indeed possessed by more evil spirits than the first.

And in the 60s, in this outpouring of revolution and rebellion and messianic fervour, they ended up leading to their destruction in AD 70. Their failure to respond appropriately to Jesus' casting out of the earlier demons was in many ways part of what led to that crisis. Jesus' family wait outside, wanting to speak to him.

But Jesus makes clear that blood relations are secondary to, and relativised by, the bonds of the kingdom. His truest kinship is with the brotherhood of his disciples around him. Once again, it's important to notice that this doesn't just pit these things against each other as opponents.

While they can be at direct odds with each other, as we see in some Jesus teaching in these contexts, there is also the fact that Jesus' family relations are largely taken up into and transformed within the life of the kingdom. Note, for instance, that Mary's blessing is not simply on account of some biological connection to Jesus, but because she received Christ, being conceived in her, in submission to the will of God and believed that God would fulfil his word to her. Mary's blessing is not merely the fact that she bears Christ biologically.

She's blessed as the archetypal believer, not merely as the natural mother. We become as Christ's mother when we receive the word of the Lord, like Mary did, and we become as Christ's brothers and sisters as we follow him and are faithful to the will of God as he is. A question to consider.

How can the shared life of the kingdom of God transform the way that we relate to the believing members of our own families?