

A Prayer for Revival:

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Scripture Reading: Habakkuk 3

Text: Habakkuk 3:1-2

What is your greatest need right now in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic? How would you classify your needs? How would you classify the church's greatest need in the midst of God's finger of judgment? How would you classify the nation's greatest need? What is this world's greatest need?

- Is it a halt to the virus?
- Is it healing for those infected?
- Is it help for those on the front lines?
- Is it wisdom for our leaders?
- Is it a return to economic prosperity, work, and stability?
- Is it a return to what we used to call "normal" life?
- These are pressing needs of the hour that impact our daily lives.

But the greatest need according to Scripture that we have is the need for spiritual awakening. Our greatest need is for revival, to learn the spiritual lessons that God would have us to learn in order to humble ourselves under the hand of God. But what is awakening or revival? It is "a supernatural, divine influence [of the Holy Spirit],

which restores the joy of God’s salvation to apathetic Christians; awakens the spiritually dead in the church to their spiritual and moral condition; and leads many people from outside the church to the [biblical] Christian faith.”¹ This definition is not my own, but is gleaned from Dr. Schlachter’s book, *The Next Great Awakening*. It is a helpful little book that details the way that God works in awakening.

Why is revival and awakening the greatest need of the hour? Because God says so. His Word is full of warnings calling His people to return to Him and seek Him afresh, because God is speaking. God speaks in providence. He speaks in judgments. He speaks in COVID-19, calling humanity to turn to Him. As the idols of our hearts, which have caused spiritual amnesia, are being stripped from us one by one, there is one thing that comes to the fore—we need to turn to the LORD in repentance, in faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. Our greatest need is not to read the media reports, to see the numbers, and to see how the virus is progressing across the face of this world. We need to stop our pontificating and revising opinions. We need to put our hands over our mouths and confess that God is just and righteous and that God is just and true in all His judgments. We need to listen to what God is saying and we need to pray for spiritual awakening, so that the entire church will not waste this epidemic. What an indictment it will be if decades from now historians analyze the church’s response and they see only spiritual lethargy, a church that is slow to respond spiritually, and a church that remained sleepy and lethargic under the hand of God in the COVID-19 epidemic.

1. Terry Schlachter, *The Next Great Awakening* (Grand Rapids, MI: Ephesians 3:20 Publishing, 2014), Loc. 101–107, Kindle Edition.

This message gets us to reckon with God's judgment and what He is calling the church to do in the midst of such judgment. The prayer and life of Habakkuk provide a profound lesson for us in this matter—to pray in the midst of God's judgments upon us for revival and awakening, for that supernatural divine influence to come and take hold of us so that we would know that God is real, that our sin is real and an offence to God, and that we have done our part in this judgment as well. We pray for revival, the restoration of the joy of God's salvation to our souls. We pray for awakening of souls in our church and all around the world and to lead others into the church and to the glorious gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. Our theme is "A Prayer for Revival." There are four essential elements to such prayer:

- 1) The recognition of God's sovereignty;
- 2) The revival of God's people;
- 3) The revelation of God's work;
- 4) The remembrance of God's mercy.

The Recognition of God's Sovereignty

Habakkuk was given a message for Judah. It was not a comforting message. It was a message of God's judgment. God was going to use the Babylonians, the Chaldeans, to chastise Judah and bring them into exile. Why was God going to do that? Listen to Habakkuk's plea in 1:2-4, "O LORD, how long shall I cry, and thou wilt not hear! Even cry out unto thee of violence, and thou wilt not save! Why dost thou shew me iniquity, and cause me to behold grievance? For spoiling and violence are before me: and there are that raise up strife and contention. Therefore the law is slacked, and judgment doth never go forth: for the wicked doth compass about the righteous; therefore wrong judgment proceedeth." Habakkuk's plea shows that the cultural situation is dire—spoiling, violence, lawlessness,

injustice. The application of the law is craziness; that is the interpretation there. Habakkuk in a sense is reasoning with God, challenging God: “How long shall I cry, and thou wilt not hear?” He does not understand what God is doing in raising up the Babylonians to discipline Judah and even challenges God at points in this short book in his journey to recognize God’s sovereignty over the entire situation and the judgment that was going to come. How canst Thou send this heathen nation to discipline Thy people?

We need to understand that God will not spare Babylon either. God’s woes pronounced upon Babylon in chapter 2 likewise show a culture and nation ripe for judgment. None of the nations of the world are excepted from God’s judgments. Let me summarize those woes—Woe to the nation that exploits other nations for its own gain! Woe to the nation that exploits others for personal security! Woe to the nation that builds its empire through cruelty and violence! Woe to the nation that induces other nations to immorality! Woe to the nation that replaces God with lifeless, mute, and dumb idols that cannot help in the midst of calamities and trials! God’s accountability of the Chaldeans would have provided some comfort to Habakkuk and the faithful remnant.

The point is this—Judah’s situation and Babylon’s situation mirrors our own, doesn’t it? Habakkuk’s situation sounds a contemporary note. It reads like a modern-day news story. An analysis of our culture and the nations of the world demonstrate a culture ripe for judgment where the law and its application have become crooked and crazy. Where injustice and immorality abound on a personal level, a national level, and even an ecclesiastical level, we can say that we are ripe for judgment. No one wants to hear that message, but that is the reality we are facing in this world. That is what God is calling us to reckon with in His Word. Maybe we are perplexed by what

is happening. We look at COVID-19 and wonder what is going on. Maybe we cry out and challenge God, “How long will this go on and we cry to Thee and Thou wilt not hear? How can God do this? How can we acknowledge that God is sovereign over this virus as it spreads across the nation and to our own community? Why would God do this?”

How does Habakkuk come to recognize God’s sovereignty in the midst of judgment? How can we do the same?

First, through *submissive faith*. The words of our text show that Habakkuk is living by faith in the midst of judgment. This prayer in chapter 3 is a song of faith extolling God in the midst of God’s judgments. It is an exposition of Habakkuk 2:4, “The just shall live by his faith.” It is faith in the living and sovereign God that puts our lives in perspective in the midst of God’s judgments upon our church and nation. It is faith that submits to what God is doing in our lives. It is faith that reaches up to God and calls for Him to exalt Himself in the midst of judgment. It is faith that submits to God and enables us to say, “Although the fig tree shall not blossom, neither shall fruit be in the vines; the labor of the olive shall fail, and the fields shall yield no meat; the flock shall be cut off from the fold, and there shall be no herd in the stalls: Yet I will rejoice in the LORD, I will joy in the God of my salvation. The LORD God is my strength” (3:17–19). That is where faith brings us in the midst of trial, in the midst of challenge, even in the midst of God’s judgments and chastisements. Submissive faith clings to God alone in the midst of calamities. It says that God is righteous, and just, and holy. It is faith that sees through the judgment to see the sovereign hand of God to humble us as individuals, as a church, and as a nation. Without the lens of submissive faith, we will always challenge God in what He is doing. Submissive faith submits to God’s sovereignty and says, “God has this under control.”

Second, we move to recognize God's sovereignty through *submissive silence*. Habakkuk further recognizes God's sovereignty through submissive silence. This is seen in Habakkuk 2:20 where the prophet says, as he sees the impending judgments coming upon Judah and Babylon, "But the LORD is in his holy temple: let all the earth keep silence." This is an expression of submission to the sovereignty and holiness of God. Habakkuk stops with his "Why?" questions. His faith takes the helm of his life and he moves to silence before the awful majesty and the judgments of God because faith sees that what God does is good and right. Are you there? Submissively silent before the holy throne of God? How often have we clicked on the headlines to see what's going on? How often have we been quick to share our opinion or someone else's opinion of what's happening? We think to ourselves that this will be over in a few short weeks. No, this is going to take six or nine months. It doesn't matter how long or short it will take. What matters is that we are silent before the holiness and the justice of God. That's where we need to be. We need to turn off the media channels, the social media, the blogs, and Twitter, and we need to sit in silence and contemplate who God is. He is holy. He is righteous. He is glorious. He is sovereign. He is on the throne. He is on the throne, and we are not! We are sinful. Let's think about that, too. Let's consider how we have contributed to this trial, personally in our own lives and as a church. Let's reflect on that and see how we have contributed to God's judgments. Then we will be silent, and know that we cannot dictate to God what He must do. Let us humble ourselves in the dust. Let us put our hands over our mouths and let God be God. Without silence before a sovereign God, we will never learn the lessons that He has for us in COVID-19. We learn to recognize the sovereignty of

God when we learn to be silent before Him, and acknowledge that He is on the throne of our lives.

Third, we come to recognize God's sovereignty through *submissive fear*. Finally, Habakkuk recognizes God's sovereignty through submissive fear. In Habakkuk 3:2 he says, "O LORD, I have heard thy speech, and was afraid." In the midst of his silence before a holy God, Habakkuk hears the voice of God speaking. Faith listens and hears the voice of God, not just through His Word, but also through His providence and judgment, and we hear what God is doing. Habakkuk hears the sound of judgment and he recognizes that God's justice is perfect and righteous, a reflection of who He is. He cannot tolerate sin in His people and so He will come in purifying judgment to discipline His people. Habakkuk says earlier that God is of purer eyes than to behold evil. God cannot see evil and do nothing about it. God cannot see sin in His people, and leave it there. He will come to purify us. There is a movement from silencing our own voices, to hearing God's speech, and then to a submissive fear before God. It is a fear that trembles at the holiness of God, and at the judgments of God. Read verse 16: "When I heard, my belly trembled; my lips quivered at the voice: rottenness entered into my bones, and I trembled in myself, that I might rest in the day of trouble." There is a physical element to this fear, not of undoing us, but in trembling in our rightful place before God. Are we listening for the voice of God to give us the proper perspective in the midst of this crisis? As long as we maintain our own voice, we will not hear the voice of God speaking. As long as we maintain our own voice in this crisis, we will not hear the voice of God speaking in the midst of trial.

Without this submissive faith, submissive silence, and submissive fear, we cannot properly approach God in praying for revival. It is essential to recognize God's

sovereignty so that we begin to pray for His agenda, not our own. In recognizing God’s sovereignty over everything, we will begin to pray for God to be glorified first of all. It will bring peace in the midst of the storm because we know that God is in control. God is on the throne. I will keep silence. It will put our troubles in perspective because we recognize that God is in control. And so let our recognition of God’s sovereignty bring us to the throne of grace for God to work in the midst of COVID-19. A prayer for revival recognizes God’s sovereignty and it cries out for the revival of God’s people.

The Revival of God’s People

Submission to God’s sovereignty in judgment is not mere resignation to what God is doing. A recognition of God’s sovereignty moves us to bend the knee crying out in repentance and faith. It puts God on the throne of our lives, and puts His priorities as ours. And one of His priorities is the holiness of His people. This priority is seen throughout the Scriptures in the admonition, “Be holy as I am holy” (Lev. 11:45; 19:2; 20:7; 20:26; 1 Peter 1:15–16). When God sends judgments, it ought to make His people sit up and take notice and examine their lives. This is why He was sending judgments upon Judah—to purify and refine her, to make her more like Himself. Likewise, we see that the church today is not exempt from God’s judgments. There is much to learn for the church in this crisis. This is not only for our church, but for the worldwide church. God’s judgments are refining judgments, not annihilating judgments. That’s what we need to understand. They are refining judgments for His people. He has His purposes and one of them is discipline—for the purification and holiness of His people and church. There is this principle that runs throughout Scripture and human history—as the church goes, so goes the nation. When the witness of

the church and the people of God begins to wane and the church's voice is lost to the shrill voice of wickedness and sin, to the culture's pleasures and gods, the nation will become unhinged from its moral compass. This principle is emphasized in God's words to Solomon in 2 Chronicles 7:14, "If my people, which are called by my name, shall humble themselves, and pray, and seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways; then will I hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin, and will heal their land." As the church goes, so goes the nation.

This is what Habakkuk prays for—the awakening and reviving of God's people in the midst of Judah, "O LORD, revive thy work in the midst of the years." He invokes the covenant name of Yahweh, calling to mind God's faithfulness to His people. In the midst of calamity, God will not forsake His people, but He does call us to repent of our lukewarmness, shallow theology, false worship, and even backsliding lawlessness and immorality. And so we are called to cry out to God for Him to revive His work in the midst of the years, in the midst of calamity and judgment, for the revival, the quickening, and the awakening of His people, to cry out for the restoration of the joy of God's salvation, to put Christ at the forefront of our minds and hearts again. The word *revive* can be understood in several different ways in this passage. In the first place, it speaks of God preserving His work. And so we can pray, "O LORD, preserve Thy people, Thy church to be a reflection of Thy holiness and Thy saving grace in Christ Jesus. Preserve the church to be a leavening witness in the world so that others will be drawn in. Do not let Thy work die in this church, in this heart. Preserve Thy work that Thou hast begun." It also speaks of keeping alive or making alive. And so we can pray, "O LORD, keep alive Thy people, Thy church in the midst of calamities. Let the world see the abundant life of Jesus in Thy people, their

love for Thee and neighbor, their love and zeal for Thy holiness. Make Thy people more alive than they have been to this point. Make sinners alive outside of the church and bring them into the fellowship of the saints so they can see Thy holiness.” The word can also mean *to purify*. And so we can pray, “O LORD, in the midst of Thy judgment, purify Thy people. Help Thy people to be a mirror of Thy holiness, to reflect more accurately who Thou art to the world. Redeem the failures, the sin that we have committed in this area, of not reflecting who Thou art.” We need to pray for God’s revival of His work in His people.

Why pray for the revival of God’s people? Why pray for your own soul to be revived in this crisis? Because God’s great concern is the holiness of His people and of His church. The apostle Peter points out God’s priorities in line with Habakkuk’s prayer, “For the time is come that judgment must begin at the house of God: and if it first begin at us, what shall the end be of them that obey not the gospel of God” (1 Peter 4:17). God was coming to purify Judah, beginning at the house of God; what would be the end of the Chaldeans who did not obey the gospel of God? God was going to reckon with them. But Peter continues, “Wherefore let them that suffer according to the will of God commit the keeping of their souls to him in well doing, as unto a faithful Creator” (v. 19). God’s great pursuit is not the stop of the virus. God’s great pursuit is the pursuit of your holiness, of your spiritual vitality and life in Christ Jesus. The pursuit of God is to awaken you from your lethargy and bring you to the throne of God to cry out for revival. The revival of God’s people is part of the work of God in this generation. And if this is the pressing need, then we need to urgently pray, confessing our sins —individual, corporate, national, and global sins— and seeking God’s mercy afresh for our generation and

that which follows, for God to revive His people and our witness, even if it means that we go through this calamity.

The Revelation of God's Work

The prayer for revival also calls for the revelation of God's work. Habakkuk is not only concerned with the revival of God's people, but He wants God's work to be known and revealed. There is a universal aspect to Habakkuk's request when He prays, "in the midst of the years make known." Even in the midst of the worst calamity that is going to come upon Judah, Habakkuk prays for God's work and glory to be revealed. Here is a man who has learned submissive faith. Judgment is coming, judgment is here, and in the midst of the years, in the midst of that calamity he is praying for God's glory to be revealed. Indeed, God's work will be revealed especially through challenging times. Because in God's economy, nothing is ever wasted. He will work. He will use COVID-19 for His own glory, even if we can't see it yet. The world is gripped by fear, but the church should not be gripped by the fear of disease or even death; rather, we should be gripped by the fear of God and the desire that God would be known and would make Himself known in the world around us.

And so this request for revival on Habakkuk's part is not only limited to the people of God, but it extends for God's glory to be known around the world. That is what we are called to pray for as a church, as believers. As God purifies and revives His people through the judgments that come upon the world, this often spills over into the world at large. When we come to terms with the sovereignty of God, we learn to pray big and think big. If God is on the throne of heaven and earth, surely He can glorify Himself throughout the entire world in revival and spiritual awakening. Habakkuk prays big. He prays for the knowledge of God to fill the world, and so should

we. In the verses following our text, Habakkuk calls to mind the redemptive acts of God in leading Israel from Egypt through the wilderness. This was displayed to the nations around them. In the midst of judgment, the world is watching the church and what the church will do in response to this trial. What will your response show to the watching world, believer? Will your response be one primarily for the glory of God, “O LORD, let your work in the church be known to the world, so that others would be drawn to Christ and know the life that is in Jesus”? Within our own families there are those who are unsaved, those who do not know this Christ. We pray for them with renewed zeal and purpose.

This request for God’s work to be revealed has evangelistic implications as well. God’s purposes begin with the church, but certainly don’t end there. As He refines you and me and revives His work in us again with spiritual awakening and renewal, calling us to follow Him with fresh zeal by His Spirit, His purpose is for that work to be revealed in the world around us. This is how revival begins and spreads as the glory of God is exalted around the world. Spiritual awakening and revival are the work of the Holy Spirit, heightening in His people a conviction of sin against a holy God, a holy love for Christ and His saving love, and a heightened zeal for the souls of others, through which God reveals His work in the midst of judgments. Will you pray for the revelation of God’s work even in the midst of judgment, beginning with you and spreading far and wide for the glory of God? When we recognize God’s sovereignty and cry out for God’s work of revival, it is such prayer that should move us to feel the heaviness of souls that are living under the wrath of God and their own sin. Reading the news, the thing that tore at me the most is that people are dying alone. There is no one to tell them of Christ, no one to share a prayer with them, a word

of compassion. There are doctors and nurses who do that, but there are many who are dying alone, left to themselves. That is a picture of what is happening in the world around us, dying inwardly without anyone to tell them about the need of repentance, without anyone to tell them of Christ. Such prayer should move us to pity our fellow human being who is without Christ. Such prayer should move us to bring the message of the gospel to them that the wrath of God against sin is fully satisfied in the cross of Jesus Christ. That's where we need to be ourselves, and that is also the message we need to bring to others.

The Remembrance of God's Mercy

The prayer for revival also calls to pray for the remembrance of God's mercy. And yet the fact remains that we are living in times of difficulty and affliction, under the hand of God's judgment. This raises the question: isn't it crazy only to pray for revival? Should we not be praying for God's wrath to dissipate, for the virus to go away? Should we not pray for the judgment to cease? Yes, we can certainly pray for those things. But a person who lives by faith recognizes that the judgments of God are necessary in His sovereignty. A person who lives by faith does not murmur against the judgments of God, but submits in faith, silence, and fear, and then cries out for God to use that trial for spiritual good. Habakkuk's final petition in verse 2 again demonstrates a life of faith: "In wrath remember mercy."

What is Habakkuk doing? He is reminding God of His own character. On the one hand, he reminds God of His perfect righteousness and holiness, expressed in His wrath against sin. On the other hand, he asks God to temper that wrath with mercy, with pity, and with compassion. These two things are not incompatible. Habakkuk asks God to temper His strange work of judgment with His familiar work of mercy. He is not asking for the judgment

to be removed, but he uses this as an opportunity to pray for mercy, to pray for pity. We can do the same. Habakkuk can only pray these words because he had learned to humble himself before God. He was silent at first, recognizing His own sin. He humbled himself for his own sin before a holy God. He humbled himself before God for the sins of Judah and then he prayed for God's mercy. This prayer for mercy does not come apart from humbling ourselves. This prayer for mercy comes as a result of humbling ourselves. If we are just praying for mercy, then we are missing the point; we are again dictating to God what He should be doing to alleviate our concerns. But if we are praying for God's people to be revived, for God's work to be revealed, for God's agenda to be done in this trial, then we can pray for mercy.

So many are praying for God to remove the virus and let them move on from the calamity. That is important, but it does not take into account the holiness and judgment of God, nor does it reckon with our sin. Some of us are already moving beyond this trial and saying what we are going to do when this is all over. I confess that I did that too, thinking ahead. But let's pause for a moment, recognizing the holiness and sovereignty of God. Without repentance and humbling for our sin, we will not rightly recognize our need for mercy. Our need for mercy begins in front of the cross, for our souls. Our need for mercy begins at the revelation of Jesus Christ. Our desperate need is for God's reviving work and for His mercy revealed in Jesus Christ. Without that mercy we would be utterly undone. We would not know where to turn.

So how can we intercede for the church, for our own hearts, for our nation, for our communities, and for our neighbors? By recognizing God's sovereignty in judgment, by crying out for the revival of God's people and church, including you and me, by asking God to reveal

His preserving, saving, and reviving work in the midst of judgment, and finally by asking God to remember mercy in the midst of wrath and judgment, to show mercy on sinners. For God to turn things around. In the midst of wrath, LORD, remember mercy. The parallels are interesting between this prayer and Noah's situation in the ark. Habakkuk prays for God to remember mercy. When Noah was in the ark, we read that God remembered Noah, and the flood waters began to recede. God turned things around for Noah. God would eventually turn things around for Judah. Christ would come in the glorious revelation of the gospel. The hope of Judah would come for salvation. We read of this in verse 13, "Thou wentest forth for the salvation of thy people, even for salvation with thine anointed; thou woundedst the head out of the house of the wicked, by discovering the foundation unto the neck. Selah." This is messianic, speaking of Christ who is going to come as a result of all this. Salvation comes through judgment. God will turn things around, when He remembers His mercy, and so we can pray for His mercy in the midst of this judgment. But let's be careful to remember that God is on the throne and we are sinful human beings, undeserving of His mercy and blessings.

How can we do this more effectively? On Wednesday, April 1st, the elders and pastors of the denomination are calling for a day of fasting and prayer. This prayer is designated for the examination and humbling of ourselves before God, for Him to purify His church, to make her alive, purifying her of deadness and making her alive unto God. It is designated for us to pray for God's intervention and to begin His work of revival in the days in which we live. I leave you with this question as we turn to prayer: When will the church begin to pray for awakening?

- When the church becomes disgusted with our sin.
As we come together for prayer and fasting, may our

sin become disgusting before a holy and righteous God.

- When the church becomes passionately concerned for the next generation—the generation that is far ahead of us in immorality and the things that come their way. As we come together to pray and to fast, let us intercede for the next generation, who, if God will not work now, will face an onslaught of evil that we have never seen before.
- When the church becomes convinced of God’s displeasure. Like Habakkuk, may we be convinced of God’s displeasure against sin.
- When the church becomes submissive to Christ. As we pray and as we fast, may we submit to our holy Lord who sits on the throne, who does all things well, who will come to judge the living and the dead.
- When the church becomes aware of God’s promises. When we come together for prayer and fasting, let us not only humble ourselves, but also take hold of the promises of God in His Word and cry out, “It is time for thee, Lord, to work: for [we] have made void thy law” (Ps. 119:126).
- When the church becomes jealous of God’s work in the past.² There’s a pattern throughout history—calamities, revivals. Actually first, there is moral declension, then calamities, and then revivals. Are we jealous of the revivals of the past? Are we jealous of the Great Awakening that swept this land? Are we jealous of the Reformation, crying out to God to revive His work in the midst of the years?

Will you pray and fast for spiritual awakening so that God will be recognized as God? This is our greatest need.

2. These thoughts are collected from Terry Schlachter’s book, *The Next Great Awakening*.

May God grant an outpouring of His Spirit upon us, upon our church, upon our families, upon the church at large, upon our denomination, upon our nation, upon our seminary, upon our schools, upon our communities and the churches within them. Because God is on His holy throne, let all the earth keep silence and then let us pray. Amen.