

How Do You Pray When You Really Need To Pray
Habakkuk Series

How do you pray when you really need to pray? I'm not talking about a "God is great, God is good" or a "Now I lay me down to sleep" prayer. It's not a "bless this food" or "give us safety" or "help Auntie Em to get out of the hospital soon" prayer. It's the kind of prayer that you pray when you really need to get a hold of God, when you need to do business with God. It's the kind of prayer believers in South Korea are praying, as they see their country edging closer to the brink of war. It's the kind of prayer that you pray if you're livelihood is fishing in the Gulf of Mexico off the coast of Louisiana. It's how you pray when the doctor says, "I'm sorry. It's cancer. It's metastasized."

We've been in the book of Habakkuk for the last few weeks. It's a great book and I trust that you have enjoyed it. Habakkuk is a series of conversations between the Prophet Habakkuk and God. In this little book of Habakkuk we witness a spiritual revolution, a divine transformation that takes place in the life of this prophet.

We opened up Habakkuk 1 to discover a very disgruntled prophet, upset and tired of all of the sin and evil around him. He basically asks God, "Are you tired of it yet, too? What's your plan?" Habakkuk felt that God needed to judge and deal with the evil that was present in Judah. So he complains to God and asks "How long O Lord? When are You going do something?"

God replies, "Yes, I'm going to deal with it. I do have a plan. There are these mean, nasty Snoop Dog type people, called the Babylonians who I'm going to send to deal with Judah's sin. I'm going to let the Babylonians come and straighten your people out." Habakkuk doesn't like that answer so he cops a 'tude. He doesn't like what God is going to do, his people may be bad but they're still his people...and they're also God's people. He believes God is making a mistake sending a vile nation to correct a not as good as they should be Judah. In essence he says, "Hello God! You don't use evil to do good! The end does not justify the means!"

Habakkuk lays out his case before God. Then, we find him in Chapter 2 waiting in silence for God's response. When God does decide to answer Habakkuk He chooses not to answer Habakkuk's questions. Instead He tells Habakkuk that He will judge all sin and the Babylonians will be held accountable which is summarized in five woes of judgment, and that the righteous will live by faith. In other words God tells him, "Habakkuk I know what I am doing and you need to trust the path that I have chosen to correct and restore My people unto Me."

All of that's brings us to chapter 3. There's been a wonderful transformation in Habakkuk's heart. There's a noticeable difference in his tone and the attitude as he prays to God. He fleshes out that phrase by C. S. Lewis, "*He is helpless, and prayer doesn't change God...it changes him.*"

And now we're in the really good stuff. In chapter 3 we find Habakkuk praying, pondering and ultimately praising God. He's a model for us of a believer who matures in

his prayer life. He demonstrates for us how to pray in difficult, perilous times. This morning we're limiting our study to these first two verses. Please turn to again to Habakkuk 3:1-2 (p. 664).

The word *Shiginoth* is a mystery to us, even today. It probably refers to musical instruments. It's possible that Habakkuk was one of the choir members in the Temple, because chapter 3 ends with "*For the director of music. On my stringed instruments.*" Many scholars think that *Shiginoth* alludes to an excited, energized, ecstatic kind of worship. Habakkuk's heart is stirred with his new view of who God is.

Habakkuk 2:1-2 is a model prayer. Most of us don't know a lot about prayer. We don't pray like we should. I know I don't. While there are no "do overs" in life, there are always opportunities to learn, correct and improve. Most of us need to learn to pray more and depend on God more. We need to listen less time listening to the news about what's happening in the world and instead spend more time sharing our concerns with God about what's happening in this world.

Some of you are relatively new believers and prayer makes you uncomfortable. Prayer is simply talking to God. If you can talk on your cell phone, you can talk to God. It's not complicated, it's very simple.

Having said that though, let me add that prayer can be very formal. Habakkuk 3 is that kind of prayer. It's very carefully constructed. In fact, it's a poem. It's Hebrew poetry.

After Habakkuk received the revelation from God of His coming judgment on the Babylonians and the instruction to live by faith, he collects his thoughts and composes this beautiful, powerful and careful expression of what his heart wants to say to God. Now if that kind of prayer bothers you, please just stick with just chatting with God. Know though that there is a place in your walk with God for a carefully composed prayer where we even put down in writing the deepest thoughts and insights of our hearts.

Habakkuk 3 then is a formal prayer that was set to music and used in the worship of God at the temple in Jerusalem. From these opening verses we discover **the essential elements of prayer** of **How to pray when you really need to pray**. We're going to discover that this prayer expresses **five essential elements** of prayer: **We are to pray focusing first on God; We are to pray based on the truth of God's Word; We are to pray with an attitude of humble reverence; We are to pray for God to work again as He has in the past; We are to pray for God to restrain His judgment**. Notice with me then...

1. We are to pray focusing first on God, "*LORD, I have heard of your fame*" (vs. 2a). In the early days of Microsoft, Bill Gates was so focused on his work that instead of hiring a secretary, he basically hired a mother. Her name was Miriam Lubow and she adopted a motherly attitude toward her abstracted young boss, setting up barbering appointments, make sure his hair was combed, straightening his tie. She fretted over his erratic sleeping habits, arriving for work she'd find him curled up on the floor after a

hard night at the terminal. Gates had a tendency to skip meals. She'd buzz him and say, "Bill, you know it's way past one-thirty. I think your people would like to have lunch." And he'd say, "oh, thank you," and they'd traipse out to lunch. But he was oblivious to all of that. I think that we could safely say that Bill Gates was focused. Microsoft was his total focus. It was his dedication to his mission that made Microsoft what it is today.

Typically, when we pray, our minds tend to wander or if we are focused, our focus is on ourselves – our needs, our wants, our "shopping list." Recently, I read that we've gone from the "Me Generation" to the "Me, me, me, me – did you notice me yet?" Generation. Our tendency is toward a self focus in our prayer life and our time alone with God.

Wayne Jacobsen refers to these as "twisted prayers." I found his words convicting. He writes, *"During most group prayer times a host of requests are made, then a handful of people offer quick prayers until the list is covered. Rarely do we stop to ask if a particular prayer request is in line with what God is doing. Rarely do we follow up to find out if God answered. We are often left praying a list of wishes, as though if we throw enough darts at the balloons on the wall, we're bound to hit one of them. And while the exercise of prayer itself offers comfort for the moment, I'm afraid many prayer requests encourage us to use God like a genie in a bottle."* Jacobsen then goes on to share some types of prayer requests that reflect more of our human desires than the desires of God. I was convicted as I found them a tad too familiar in my own life:

The trivial: "Pray I get over this cold" or "Give us a rain-free day for the church picnic." Our comfort and our plans seem important to us, but might God have something larger in mind? Might the farmers around us desperately need the rain? While God is concerned about every aspect of our lives, even the small and mundane, our requests need to reflect things we truly expect God to do, not just our thoughtless hopes and whims.

The self-motivated: "My brother's unit just got called up to go to Iraq. Pray he won't have to go." While I can understand the emotion behind the request, it's still misplaced. If he's in the military, why shouldn't he go? God's purposes frequently include hardship and risk. Should we ask him to trump His purposes for our comfort and convenience?

The controlling: We're spitting into the wind if we ask God to make other people act according to our agenda and will. He doesn't even force people to adhere to His will, why should He make them act according to ours?

The manipulative: Not all prayer requests are directed at God. We're usually more diplomatic about it than one four year-old tyke who knew exactly what she wanted. "Jesus, would you help Bob and Laurie learn how to spank their children, so their kids won't hit me when I come over?"

The blaming: One small group was praying for an infertile woman. They thought she wasn't getting pregnant because her husband wasn't godly enough to be a good father, so they asked God to change him. She blamed him and tried to manipulate him to change.

None of us qualify for God's gifts and if God waited until everyone was ready to have a baby, no one would ever give birth.

The mass-produced: For some reason we think we have a better chance of getting prayers answered if more people are in on it. With the advent of the Internet most of us continually receive prayer requests begging us to pray for people we don't know, about needs we're not involved in. But God's answers to prayer are not based on a tally sheet. Prayer was designed for two or three faithful believers to focus on, agree, and fervently intercede, rather than enlisting large numbers of uninvolved people.

The first word of this psalm by Habakkuk is “*Yahweh*.” It’s also the first word of the last verse. What we discover here is a literary device called an *inclusion* – this entire psalm is bracketed by the covenant name of God. Habakkuk is not calling on some generic name that might refer to a number of deities, but on the self-reveled name of the God of Israel (Exodus 3).

Our prayers need more worship or adoration in them. We tend to rush through the first part of prayer, “Lord, we’re thankful that you’re a wonderful God and that You sent Jesus to die for us.” But then we settle down on the requests, “Lord, here are sixteen things that I need from You.”

That’s the way that Habakkuk prayed at the beginning of this book. He was totally self-absorbed but as we saw, it’s not effective prayer. When our prayers are self-focused, they won’t be God’s desire for us and most will go unanswered. On the other hand, if we focus first on God and Who He is – then our requests will change. They’ll be more in line with God’s desires. There is much more potential then that God will hear and answer our requests. **We are to pray focusing first on God.**

2. We are to pray based on the truth of God's Word, “*I have heard of Your fame.*” The King James renders this, “*O LORD, I have heard Thy speech.*” Habakkuk had heard the Word of God. Previously, Habakkuk had been doing so much talking that He was doing very little listening. He begins to get it and determined to “*watch and wait*” (2:1).

We’re beginning to grow spiritually when we learn to hush, close our mouths and open our ears and listen for the voice of God. Every believer must learn to say, “*Speak, LORD, for your servant is listening*” (1 Sam. 3:9). Habakkuk wanted to hear the Word of God and God spoke to him. Chapter 2:2 says, “*Then the LORD replied...*” God told him about impending judgment and He shares His promises. Habakkuk heard the Word of God, which is what he desired to do.

Hearing God’s Word then generated faith. Faith never comes through feelings—faith comes through the Word of God. “*Consequently, faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the Word of Christ*” (Rom. 10:17). Now that Habakkuk had heard the Word of God, he was able to pray.

Christians who struggle with worry and doubt are usually not in the Word. The same is true of prayerless Christians. The Word of God cannot be divorced from prayer to God because the Word of God reveals the will of God...and prayer means asking in the will of God. You also cannot separate the Word of God and prayer, because the Word of God gives us promises, and prayer depends on God's promises not explanations.

Habakkuk had power in prayer because he heard the Word of God, but when he heard the Word of God, he was troubled. Verse 16 gives us a glimpse of how frightened he was, *"I heard and my heart pounded, my lips quivered at the sound; decay crept into my bones, and my legs trembled."* When you look at the anatomy lesson we have here, it's rather interesting. His heart trembled, his lips quivered, his bones weakened, and his legs wobbled. From head to toe, the prophet was stirred by the Word of God. Sadly, we don't see a lot of that today. We have people *studying* the Word of God but most of us are not *stirred* by the Word of God.

"Fame" is generated by hearing news relayed by another. The Hebrew literally says, *"I have heard of the hearing of You."* It's describing the fact that God's people in the Old Testament continually rehearsed for each succeeding generation the works that God had done. Throughout history God's people had spoken of His mighty deeds. It was this rehearsing that Habakkuk had heard. He'd heard it repeated often. His father had told him what he had heard from his father, who had heard from his father, of the mighty deeds of God.

Recounting the mighty deeds of God is an essential element in prayer and worship. Throughout the Old Testament the prophets rehearsed the mighty deeds of God. The word translated *"deeds"* in verse 2 is used throughout the Old Testament to refer to the work of God specifically at the time of the Exodus. There God led the children of Israel out of Egypt, and through mighty deeds He sent plagues upon Egypt; through mighty deeds He worked through Moses as he raised his rod and the waters were parted and the nation of Israel was delivered. These mighty deeds were rehearsed in the ears of each succeeding generation. The Exodus came to be as important to the Old Testament believer as the Cross is to the New Testament believer. They both are symbols of God's delivering power.

As New Testament saints, we too need to recount the works of God in the ears of those who follow us. We need to do it in our church and in our homes. So how do you recount the works of God in your home? Let me suggest two ways: 1) By teaching the Scriptures, gathering the children around you, reading Bible stories and working through Biblical principles in them. 2) Sharing what God is doing in your life. Personal testimony is so powerful. Our children need to hear us share what God is doing in our lives, in the life of the family, and in your children's lives. As we talk about God, a biblical worldview begins to develop from this ongoing conversation.

So do you talk with your children about the Biblical record of what God has done? Do you discuss with your children the daily works of God through His providence in your lives? How real to you are the truths of the Word of God in day to day living? They will

only be real if you rehearse them from day to day, if they are a part of your daily dialogue.

Prayer is meaningful when we pray focusing first on God and when we pray based on the truth of God's Word. Not only does Habakkuk say, I have heard of your fame, but he says, *“I stand in awe of your deeds, O LORD.”*

3. We are to pray with an attitude of humble reverence, *“I stand in awe of your deeds, O LORD”* (vs. 2b). Amazing things begin to happen when God is worshipped; we change and our outlook changes.

Previously, Habakkuk had been pressing God with his questions. That had all ceased, for Habakkuk's eyes were now open to see God as the good, sovereign King of the Universe, ruling over all things from His heavenly throne to accomplish His perfect purposes—even those things in Habakkuk's life that just didn't make sense or even seemed unfair at first sight. Habakkuk now finds himself standing before God in reverence. He's no longer questioning God like before. He's progressed from being intellectually perplexed over his problems to a position far above that. He's matured so that he has an attitude of reverence before God and a submission to God's perfect will. That's why, rather than badgering God with questions, we now find the prophet singing a prayer to God.

“I stand in awe,” literally means *“I fear.”* Throughout the Old Testament, the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. It's a virtual synonym for being part of the people of faith. Deuteronomy shows that “hearing and fearing” may be regarded as the natural reaction to an experience with God. When one has heard God's Word and knows of His mighty work, the appropriate response is fear and awe and a desire to see God's work from the past repeated in the present.

Hebrews 12:29 says, *“for our ‘God is a consuming fire’.”* Would you say that there is a lot of fear of God in our day? Sadly, no! Ours is not the first generation that has shaken its fist at God. After delivering one his defiant speeches the 19th century atheist, Robert Ingersoll, pulled his watch from his pocket and said, “According to the Bible, God has struck men dead for blasphemy. I will blaspheme Him and give Him five minutes to strike me dead and damn my soul.” The crowd was silent while one minute ticked by; two minutes passed, and you could feel the nervousness in the audience; three minutes, and a woman fainted; four minutes and Ingersoll curled his lip. At five minutes, he snapped shut his watch, put it in his pocket, and said: “You see, there is no God, or He would have taken me at my word.” The story was told later to British preacher, Joseph Parker, who said, “And did the American gentleman think he could exhaust the patience of God in five minutes?” God is patient toward sinners but sadly, we know that if Ingersoll never repented, he certainly did meet his challenge. Upon his demise, Ingersoll met God... *“for our ‘God is a consuming fire’.”*

There is too little fear; too little reverence for the things of God; too little reverence for the person of God; and there is far too much easy familiarity with the Most High. On one

hand, we never want to lose sight of the fact that because of what Christ has done we can come with boldness into the presence of the God of the universe. But we must not let that fact diminish our reverence and our godly fear, for God is still a consuming fire.

We read our Bibles, we study our Bibles, we mark them up, we even memorize our Bibles – yet we are rarely awestruck by the Bible. Habakkuk was troubled at what he heard. It was a good sign. It was proof that he really believed God's Word. Perhaps we're so frequently casual with Scripture because we don't really believe God's Word.

"I stand in awe of your deeds, O LORD." Habakkuk **prayed with an attitude of humble reverence** and his prayer instructs us that we must approach God with humility and with awe-filled praise. **We are to pray focusing first on God. We are to pray based on the truth of God's Word. We are to pray with an attitude of humble reverence and...**

4. We are to pray for God to work again as He has in the past, *"Renew them in our day, in our time make them known"* (vs. 2c). Egypt had tried to annihilate the Jews but God protected His people. As God had preserved His people, even though Babylon was coming to conquer Judah, though it looked like it was curtains for the people of God, Habakkuk is praying that God would preserve a remnant. He's praying that God, in the midst of judgment, would save and deliver a remnant of His people.

Please note, this is not a prayer for deliverance. Habakkuk doesn't pray that God would conquer the Babylonians or change His mind, and not send them. His prayer is now in sync with God's plan, even though it meant personal suffering. He realizes that judgment of Judah was both inevitable and well-deserved, so he doesn't pray that God will change His plan.

Habakkuk's one burden now is God's cause, God's work and purpose in his country and the entire world. In effect he says, "No matter what I have to suffer and my countrymen may have to suffer is no longer a concern – as long as God's work is revived and kept pure." He's praying that while these terrible things are taking place, that God would revive His work.

Friend, what's worrying you today? Are you concerned with the world around us? The stock market? War in Korea...the Middle East? The future of America? Or, are you concerned with God's reputation? Are you concerned about what God is concerned about? The purity of God's people, the lost repenting and turning to Jesus, the health of His Church. For Habakkuk there was only one concern, in spite of what he knew was going to happen, he prayed for the reviving of God's cause in Israel.

History records that revival usually begins in bad times, not good ones. The Reformation took place at one of the darkest moments in human history. The revivals of Moody took place right after the devastation of the Civil War. D.M. Lloyd-Jones says that revivals start when we begin to pray *"outside the ordinary."* We have to go out of our way.

Del Fehsenfeld Jr., founder of Life Action Ministries, used to ask this convicting question: *“If revival in this land depended on your prayers, your faith, your obedience, would we ever experience revival?”* Here’s the question that we need to impress upon our minds: Are we just content to come to worship services and do routine things? Do we just want “church as usual”? Or, are we willing to pay the price if it means God’s Kingdom advances, if it means revival and renewal of Christ’s Church? **We are to pray focusing first on God. We are to pray based on the truth of God's Word. We are to pray with an attitude of humble reverence. We are to pray for God to work again as He has in the past and finally...**

5. We are to pray for God to restrain His judgment, “in wrath remember mercy” (vs. 2c). His prayer isn’t quite finished. He knows God is going to punish His people and they fully deserved God’s judgment. He knows then that He cannot plead with God for revival and renewal, unless he pleads for God to remember mercy in the midst of His wrath. He knows God is a God of wrath and mercy. He knows that the behavior of his contemporaries deserves God’s wrath, but Habakkuk has the faith to pray that God’s mercy will permeate and temper His wrath. And he was theologically correct. Habakkuk knew God. The love of God is so strong that even when He is flagrantly ignored, spurned, disobeyed and rejected – God is drawn as a husband to his wife or as a mother to her child. The wickedness is real but so too is the compassion and God’s desire to forgive, if the condition for restoration – a renewed desire to acknowledge God – is present to allow the floods of God’s mercy to be unleashed.

The Hebrew word for “*mercy*” is a form of the same Hebrew word used for *womb*. It signifies a warm love of great depth. It’s counterpart in Greek is consistently used to describe the way that Jesus was moved with compassion in the face of all kinds of human condition. Like Habakkuk, we have a firm basis on which to appeal to God, *“in His just wrath, to remember mercy.”*

My parenting years are over. I now have three adult children but I never enjoyed disciplining my children. And when there was a spirit of repentance, I loved to show mercy. I’d explain to them that they deserved a spanking. I’d explain that we all deserve God’s punishment but God shows us mercy, and I was going to show mercy.

What’s mercy? It’s a release from immediate consequences! You see, when they disobeyed, often they weren’t fully aware of the full extent of their sin. It was still sin, and they were responsible, so punishment was in order. However, they simply didn’t understand the long-term consequences of their wrong behavior. But we did. And so to correct it, we would go to the root of the problem. As we did, they would sometimes cry out for mercy. Essentially, they would intercede for themselves and ask for one more chance to “get it right” so to speak. They were begging for a delay in judgment so that they would have one more opportunity to repent. They were looking for compassion and promising to change. They were hoping for mercy and, in return, showing repentance. That’s what Habakkuk was praying for, *“in wrath remember mercy”*

Habakkuk's prayer models for us **the Essential Elements of prayer: We are to pray focusing first on God. We are to pray based on the truth of God's Word. We are to pray with an attitude of humble reverence. We are to pray for God to work again as He has in the past and we are to pray for God to restrain His judgment.**

Conclusion: We have to open the New Testament to learn that Habakkuk's prayer was answered, more powerfully than he could ever have even dreamed. It was answered on an old rugged Cross, when God gave His only Son – and He poured out His wrath on His own Son so that He could show mercy to our world, to you and to me!

The mother of a nine-year-old boy named Mark received a phone call in the middle of the afternoon. It was the teacher from her son's school. "Mrs. Smith, something unusual happened today in your son's third grade class. Your son did something that surprised me so much that I thought you should know about it immediately."

The mother began to grow worried as the teacher continued, "Nothing like this has happened in all my years of teaching. This morning I was teaching a lesson on creative writing. And as I always do, I tell the story of the ant and the grasshopper: "The ant works hard all summer and stores up plenty of food. But the grasshopper plays all summer and does no work. Then winter comes. The grasshopper begins to starve because he has no food. So he begins to beg, 'Please Mr. Ant, you have much food. Please let me eat, too.'"

Then I said, "Boys and girls, your job is to write the ending to the story." "Your son, Mark, raised his hand, 'Teacher, may I draw a picture?' "Well, yes, Mark, if you like, you may draw a picture. But first you must write the ending to the story." "As in all the years past, most of the students said the ant shared his food through the winter, and both the ant and the grasshopper lived. A few children wrote, 'No, Mr. Grasshopper. You should have worked in the summer. Now, I have just enough food for myself.' So the ant lived and the grasshopper died.

"But your son ended the story in a way different from any other child, ever. He wrote, 'So the ant gave all of his food to the grasshopper; the grasshopper lived through the winter. But the ant died.'

"And the picture? At the bottom of the page, Mark had drawn three crosses."

Ah my friend, that's what a holy God did – He gave His Son for us when we didn't deserve it. He poured out His wrath on Jesus so He could show mercy to us. His Son died so that we could live. Habakkuk's prayer was powerfully and eternally answered, *"in wrath remember mercy."*

As we tie this up this morning, let me ask...

- Have you accepted God's gift of mercy? Have you asked Jesus Christ to be your Lord and Savior?

- Will you share that wonderful news with someone this week? That Habakkuk's prayer was answered, that God poured out His wrath on Jesus so that we could be forgiven and have eternal life?
- How's your prayer life? ***Is your focus first on God? Do you pray based on the truth of God's Word? Do you pray with an attitude of humble reverence? Are you praying for revival, asking God to work again as He has in the past? Are you asking for Him to restrain His judgment?***