

TEACH US TO PRAY

Week Two | October 22, 2017 | How to Pray in Bad Times

PREPARATION

MONDAY THROUGH WEDNESDAY

Spend some time alone in God's Word reading through Habakkuk 3:1–19. Pray that God, through His Spirit, would bring to life the truths of this text and allow you to teach it well to those in your care.

THURSDAY THROUGH SATURDAY

Read through the questions included in the guide this week. Many questions have been included in this lesson for discussion. Determine which questions will work well to encourage, push, and grow your group in the best way.

DAILY

As you prepare, pray for the preaching of God's Word this coming week at the corporate church gathering. Pray also for your time together as a group, that the Spirit would make effective your teaching and bring gospel clarity, gospel change, and a heart for gospel mission to those who are present.

THIS WEEK

KEY BIBLICAL REALITY

In the "bad times," remembering God's past deeds, revering Christ's work on the cross, and waiting for God in our prayers produce joy even in darkness.

THEOLOGY APPLIED

When we learn to properly pray during the bad times, we are freed from a bitter, complaining attitude and receive a joyful perspective instead.

MEDITATE

"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" (Habakkuk 3:17–18a).

GETTING STARTED

+ Use this section to prepare your heart and mind for the truths of this week. This section will help to introduce the focus of this week's lesson.

- Q: *When children get a painful injection to cure an allergy or infection, why do they get upset?*
- Q: *Has your earthly parent ever required you to undergo something difficult for a larger and better purpose?*
- Q: *When you pray during "bad times," what does your prayer usually sound like?*

There's probably no greater fear for a child than staring at the pointed end of a needle at the doctor's office. As we know, some particular infections or allergies have very specific antidotes that fully cure and purge the problem from a person's system. However, obtaining the cure requires a painful experience with a very large needle. Sometimes the needle itself is the worst part. Other times, the foreign content of the needle spreading through the veins is the most painful part. From a child's perspective, this immediate painful experience seems far too severe and out of proportion compared to the vague and delayed benefit it brings. What's worse, the child's parents are not only on board with this whole ordeal, they are the ones holding the child down on the table while the doctor pierces the skin with the terrifying needle! Why would a parent knowingly hold their child down to purposely experience pain? A small child simply doesn't have the perspective to see that the parents in this situation are purging something destructive out of their child's body, and the immediate pain is worth it in the long run. All a little one can think is, *Why are you letting something hurt me?* In the moment of pain, the only thing the child can do is shudder from the pain, submit to the parents' forceful grip, and look into the eyes of mom or dad, believing that they are trustworthy even though everything looks as though they aren't. For a sick child, the "needle" moment is the epitome of trusting a parent in bad times.

In Habakkuk 3, we read about something similar. Much like the child facing a terrifying and painful ordeal in the form of a needle, Habakkuk also faces a frightening situation for His people, in the form of the Babylonian army. Just as the needle's purpose (though extremely painful) is to purge the damaging infection from the child, God uses the brutal Babylonian army to purge His people from their destructive sin that is spreading far and wide. It's a dark season for God's people, and Habakkuk must sit back and watch God purposely hold them down and inject a painful experience upon them for a larger and better purpose. Through the prayer he prays

during the “bad times,” we will learn from Habakkuk how to look up at our heavenly Father during difficulty and patiently trust Him.

Q: *What “needles” or difficulties have you faced in your life that God purposefully forced you to endure? Why do you think he did this?*

|| UNDERSTANDING THE TEXT

Last week, we studied what praying in “good times” looks like. Now, in Habakkuk 3 we learn how to pray in the “bad times.” At this point, there is much corruption, hypocrisy, and moral chaos happening both inside God’s people (Judah) and outside of them (the Babylonians). Habakkuk is frustrated by all the wickedness he sees, and wonders why God isn’t punishing such obvious sin. When he asks God about it, the prophet receives a terrifying answer, as we will see. In this dreadful news, illustrating one of the most distressing types of “bad times” for God’s people, Habakkuk chooses to pray. His prayer shows us three features that should mark our own prayers during dark seasons:

- 1. REMEMBER GOD: RECALL HOW HE HAS WORKED IN THE PAST**
- 2. REVERE GOD: STAND IN AWE OF HIS WRATH AND MERCY**
- 3. WAIT FOR GOD: PATIENTLY TRUST HE WILL WORK IN THE FUTURE**

GOING DEEPER

+ *This next section will help show what God’s Word says about this week’s particular focus. Read through the Scripture passages and connect the text to this week’s biblical truth.*

REMEMBER GOD: RECALL HOW HE HAS WORKED IN THE PAST

|| HABAKKUK 3:1-15

♀: *What is Habakkuk's big request in verse 2? How is this similar to the things we often request of God today?*

♀: *What various mighty works of God does Habakkuk recall from the past? Who was God doing these past works for (v.13)? Explain why you think Habakkuk clings to these powerful moments.*

At this point in the book, Habakkuk's has already laid out his primary complaint before the Lord (Hab. 1:1–4). Much like the wicked Babylonians, the leaders of God's people are morally corrupt, spiritually dead, violent towards their own people, and negligent toward the vulnerable. Habakkuk's complaint is that the sin of these religious elite seems to go unpunished by God. They are getting away with it all! The covenant terms seem to be totally backward. The innocent and marginalized are perishing while the wicked seem to be blessed! As he watches many evil acts go unpunished all around him, among his own people, Habakkuk accuses God of being *unjust*.

The Lord, though He doesn't have to, chooses to let Habakkuk in on His divine plan. In His own timing, and with an ironic twist, He is going to use the force of the famously brutal Babylonian army to punish His people's blatant sin (Hab. 1:5–11). Then, after He uses Babylon to discipline His people, He will punish Babylon itself with terrifying judgment (Hab. 2:6–20). Though His time-table and methods are different than Habakkuk's (Hab. 2:3), God's plan proves that when it comes to sin, "getting away with it" is not an option. Understanding God's plan of justice gives us proper context as we move into Habakkuk's prayer in chapter 3.

♀: *During the "bad times," why is it easy to forget the mighty works God has done in your life?*

Habakkuk has moved beyond the mere *frustration* of not understanding God's timing in times of much-needed justice to severe *anguish* after receiving the worst of news. The cruel Babylonians are coming for his people, and God's judgment is going to be brutal. Justice will be served, to both God's people and the surrounding wicked nations. This season is no longer one of cloudy confusion, but one of total despair. While last week we saw what the "good times" looked like for God's people, Habakkuk's situation is the epitome of the "bad times."

Coming into chapter 3, though Habakkuk has been given frightening news from God, the first and most striking observation is that the prophet *continues to pray*. At this point, his primary question had been answered, and with a response that was both awesome and terrible. The prophet could have simply walked away now that he had his answer. But, as chapter 3 shows us, Habakkuk keeps praying in the bad times. His persistence reveals that he wanted *God* more than an answer to his complaint. This is an important lesson for us all. Even when we sometimes get an answer from the Lord about specific issues (many times not hearing the answer we originally hoped to hear!), we must push forward to continue engaging with God in prayer. An answer shouldn't be our ultimate goal; communion with God should be!

🔗: *What barriers keep you from continuing to pray after you get a certain answer from God? What does this say about your ultimate goals in prayer?*

Now that we know Habakkuk is intent on continuing to pray in the bad times, we must observe the content of his prayers so we can learn how we too should pray during bad times. As we read, we notice that Habakkuk spends the majority of his prayer recalling the *miraculous ways God has worked for His people in the past*. He knows the incredible things God has done throughout history. In this great time of need for his nation, he begs God to help them again just as He did years ago.

He specifically recalls the times when God shared His powerful presence with the people (pictured by a mighty thunderstorm), judged sin rightly (through plagues), revealed His incredible power (illustrated by shaking mountains), demonstrated His control over the entire earth (through His power over the seas), held the sun and moon in their places (referring to Joshua's prayer and God's intervention), fought as their mighty warrior in battle (pictured by the Lord holding a bow and spear), and liberated the oppressed (harkening back to the exodus). These verses are not just random poetry; they are Habakkuk's way of recalling what the Lord has done for His people already and what he is capable of doing in the future. In short, this is the prophet's way of remembering God in the midst of hardship. We have a great deal to learn from this part of Habakkuk's prayer, namely, that when we are in the middle of the "bad times," we must specifically recall all the ways the Lord has moved in the past to remind us that we serve a God who is always on the move for His people. Instead of walking away or giving up, we must remember God.

Q: *What characterizes your prayers during difficult seasons? What takes up the most content in your prayers during dark seasons: God's past miraculous deeds, or complaints?*

Q: *What specific mighty works has God done throughout your life? In what ways has He clearly moved in the lives of your friends or family? What would "remembering God" look like in your prayers during dark seasons?*

REVERE GOD: STAND IN AWE OF HIS WRATH AND MERCY

■ HABAKKUK 3:2, 16A

Q: *Habakkuk prays that in God's wrath for sin, He would "remember mercy" [v. 2]. What do you think the prophet means by this?*

Q: *How are wrath and mercy tied together on the cross of Christ?*

Surprisingly for Western believers in the 21st century, the prophet does not pray for God to totally withhold His wrath for sin. Instead, in verse 2, Habakkuk begs God to "remember mercy" as He rightly pours out His wrath. The type of sin happening within His own people and outside of them is horrific and deserves justice and judgment. His entire plea is for God to be *just*, and dole out consequences where they are due, even if it's within the leadership of his own tribe. However, in Habakkuk's frail and fearful humanity, he can't help but ask for mercy during this horrible ordeal as well. He hopes God, in His deep love for His people, will offer some sort of way to pour out the wrath that is due for the sins of many while also remaining merciful.

In verses 12–16, Habakkuk ponders the mighty works of God in the past that were once used to save His people, and instead of worshipping and rejoicing, he shudders. Why? Because the Lord is about to use these very same powerful measures not to *save* His people *from* their enemies, but to *judge* His people *through* their enemies! All those divine battle tactics are about to be turned against God's people due to their intolerable sin, and there's no way they will survive. Habakkuk quakes in awe, reverence, and fear. Just the thought of this coming judgment shakes Habakkuk to the depths of his soul. This is exactly why he cried out for mercy amidst the wrath soon to come to God's people!

- ♀: *Does the sin of God's people deserve judgment? What about the sins of those outside God's people? How does this passage inform your view of sin?*
- ♀: *Explain why God has the right to use the Babylonians as a tool for judgment against His people.*
- ♀: *How does knowing that the Babylonians will also be judged after they are used as God's tool for discipline encourage your view of God's justice?*
- ♀: *In what kinds of situations do you pray for God's justice to be poured out? Alternatively, in what kinds of situations do you pray for God's mercy? How does this compare with Habakkuk's prayer?*

Habakkuk couldn't quite see how God's wrath and mercy could meet in perfect harmony. However, on this side of the New Testament, we can see it very clearly through Christ. Just as in the prophet's day, there is grave sin in the hearts of all people, whether they be in the church or outside of it! Given that God is a God of justice, as Habakkuk clearly saw, He has the duty to resolve all wrongdoing and pour out His judgment on sin. He must pour out His wrath, or He's not really a God of justice. However, we know that God is also very merciful. In order to pour out all His fury on humanity's sin while still remaining merciful to them, He empties the punishment on the head of His Son as humanity's substitute. As a result, the sin is fully paid for and His people are spared eternal condemnation. The bloodiness of the cross should shake us to our very core, just as the reality of coming judgment did for Habakkuk. As we behold the cross, we stand in great fear when we see what sin truly deserves. However, we should also stand in great awe and reverence when we see that we are not the ones receiving the wrath, Christ is. While it should have been *our* arms and feet nailed to the cross, Jesus took our place and absorbed all God's righteous wrath as our substitute.

In no other place or time in history have God's wrath and mercy collided like they do on the cross of Christ. If anything fills our prayers during the "bad times," it should be the gospel. There's no greater historic moment than Calvary that we can look to to remember that God is truly just. Because of the pain and bloodiness of the cross, we can pray knowing God will always dispense justice for wrongdoing. At the same time, we can look to no greater place than the cross to remember God is truly merciful. He gave us an option to be spared through Christ, and we can pray knowing that God will always continue in His mercy to us during dark seasons. The cross, where God is most just and most compassionate, should be the anchor of our prayers, especially in "bad times."

Q: *Does Jesus' sacrifice on the cross make you tremble at God's holy justice? Why or why not?*

Q: *Do you often look back to Christ's death for you in your prayers during the bad times, to help you remember that God is truly just and merciful to you? If not, why do you think you forget the gospel so easily during hardship?*

WAIT FOR GOD: PATIENTLY TRUST HE WILL WORK IN THE FUTURE

■ HABAKKUK 3:16B-19

Q: *What does Habakkuk resolve to do at the end of verse 16? Why does he do this?*

Q: *If you are in a difficult season, what specific things are you prayerfully waiting for God to do?*

First the prophet prayed through the past deeds of the Lord. That practice rekindled his belief in God's power. Then, Habakkuk focused on the wrath and mercy of God in his prayers, which helped him finally take a posture of awe and reverence instead of bitterness or complaint. Now that he has *remembered and revered God*, Habakkuk finally tells the Lord what he has decided to do—wait. Now that the prophet truly believes God has the power to act, the right to judge, and the compassion to offer mercy, he knows his only option is to remain patient for God to fulfill His plan against Judah's enemies. God must be the one to work out these details in His own timing. Now that Habakkuk has truth in proper perspective, he submits and “quietly waits for the day of trouble to come upon people who invade us” (v.16).

If we follow Habakkuk's example, our own prayers during the “bad times” can help us remember God by recalling His past mighty deeds and stand in reverence before Him by looking to the wrath and mercy of the cross. Recalling the past deeds of the Lord in our own lives will rekindle our belief that God is able to move in mighty ways. Looking at the cross will leave us in awe and trust that He truly cares about both justice and mercy in the ordinary dealings of our daily life. Like Habakkuk, we will be able to look up at the Lord and tell Him that we trust in His ability to move because of the ways He already has in the past, especially through the cross. Equipped by these truths in our prayers, like Habakkuk, we will also end up in a patient posture of *waiting* instead of complaining. No matter the

reason for our current dark times, as we *remember* and *revere* God, we will be able to *wait* on Him to move in the future, just as the prophet did.

Q: *What things tempt you not to wait on God's timing in difficult situations?*

Q: *Explain how remembering God's works and looking at the cross produces an attitude of patience in us.*

In verses 17–19, we see something amazing. Though Habakkuk is still right in the middle of the “bad times,” his decision to wait on God is not done begrudgingly. Instead, waiting is a great joy for him! As he looks around at all the decay of this horrible season (expressed by a severe shortage of crops and herds) and waits for God to move, he rejoices in the Lord all the more. The fig tree, herds, and olives represent his people’s very livelihood. These aren’t luxuries God is stripping away; they are the precious resources that keep his people alive. Yet even when the bare necessities are nowhere to be found, Habakkuk doesn’t lodge a complaint. Instead, he makes a staunch choice to find joy in God instead of circumstances. Here we see that though his “bad times” haven’t changed one ounce, Habakkuk surely has! Due to *remembering, revering, and waiting* on God in his prayers, his posture is totally different toward this dark season in his life. In the end, he knows his ultimate strength is found not from abundant crops or herds, but in an abundant God.

Habakkuk’s prayer inspires us all to pray like him during hard times. Perhaps, like the prophet, we will get answers we don’t want to the questions we have. Perhaps our circumstances won’t change much in this season. Regardless, we must keep engaging God and fashion our prayers in a way that remembers God’s mighty works in our past, reveres Him for His work on the cross, and waits for Him to work in the future. As we seek to incorporate these things in our prayers, we will find that what God changes most is us. If we commit to praying like the prophet during the “bad times,” we will soon see unexpected joy in an abundant God during the most un-abundant of seasons.

Q: *Share about a time you truly rejoiced in the Lord during hard seasons. How were your prayers in that time similar to Habakkuk’s?*

Q: *Does joy in God alone define your perspective during hard times? Why or why not?*

NEXT STEPS

+ *Connect the truths from God's Word to your daily life. Process how what you've learned this week will impact the way you live beyond today and into the future.*

- ♀: *In what ways do you remember God on a regular basis in your prayers? How can you ensure that you are recalling all the mighty ways God has worked in your life before now? List the past deeds of the Lord in your life, and place them somewhere nearby so you can use them in your daily prayers.*
- ♀: *How are you cultivating reverence for God's wrath and mercy as seen on the cross? Do you remind yourself of the cross often in your prayers during dark seasons? How can you incorporate reverence for the gospel in your prayers from now on?*
- ♀: *While waiting seems passive, it's actually one of the most active things a Christian does. What measures can you put in place to increase your patience in God's timing? What efforts can you make to wait well in both your prayers and your daily life?*
- ♀: *If joy in God alone does not define your perspective during the "bad times," what parts of Habakkuk's prayer are missing when you engage with God? What parts of his prayer do you need to incorporate from now on?*

PRAY

+ *Use these prayer points to connect your time in prayer to this week's focus.*

- *God, thank you for working so mightily in my past. I give you praise for moving so many mountains in my life to bring me to you, to give me your Word, to defeat my greatest enemy (sin and death), and to offer me your people to help me grow. If nothing else in my life works out, these great deeds are enough.*
- *Jesus, give me great awe and reverence for what you did on the cross. Help*

me see the great wrath that was supposed to be poured out on my head. Help me also see the great mercy of the Father pouring that wrath on your head instead.

- Father, give me the strength to wait on your perfect timing in all seasons of life, especially the dark ones.
- Holy Spirit, bear much joy in my heart as I wait on the Father to move in His good timing. Help me rejoice in the Lord alone, even when my circumstances look bleak.

COMMENTARY

HABAKKUK 3:3 “Teman” here means “south.” When pairing this with the reference to Mount Paran (Num. 13:3, 26; Deut. 33:2), it may suggest the period following Israel’s exodus from Egypt. When the biblical authors refer to God’s mighty acts in the exodus, they often use images to evoke the fear or awe of God (examples include Deut. 33:2; Judg. 5:4–5; Ps. 18:7–15).

HABAKKUK 3:6 The “eternal mountains” are references to the foundation of the earth, and thus their quaking was a sign of divine judgment. Earthquakes are frequently associated with God’s power throughout the Old Testament. (Ex. 19:18; Ps. 18:7; Isa. 24:1–3; Jer. 4:24–26; 10:10; Mic. 1:3–4; Nah. 1:5).

HABAKKUK 3:9 The “many arrows” are likely an image of thunderbolts sent by God. Similarly, “split the earth” is Habakkuk’s creative way of illustrating thunderstorms and floods cutting through the desert landscape.

HABAKKUK 3:12 “Threshing the nations” uses an agricultural practice to illustrate God’s ability to crush enemies. In ancient times, one way of separating grain kernels from their hulls was to pile the grain together and then have an ox pull a heavy wooden sledge around on the pile, crushing and splitting the grain open. Habakkuk is saying that God marched through the earth in this way for the sake of His own people, breaking and humbling any nation who came against them in years past.

HABAKKUK 3:19 With feet like a deer’s, Habakkuk can have sure-footed confidence in God and can live on the rocky heights that are difficult to navigate, even amid extreme circumstances. With God as his strength, he has confidence in dark circumstances that require careful footsteps.

**All exegetical content and commentary resourcing for this lesson was provided by the ESV Study Bible Commentary Notes and The New American Commentary Series*