

How Big is Your God?

SCOTT HOEZEE

The preacher, Fred Craddock, once preached a sermon in which he lamented how small God seems to be in so many sermons. In too many sermons, Craddock said, preachers give the impression that they had walked all the way around God and took pictures. The God who comes across in sermons seems tame, tidy, our good buddy, our divine chum with whom we can casually share a cup of coffee during the worship service; but this kind of god is not big enough to fit the God of the Bible, Craddock claimed. Our faith needs to have more size to it. Habakkuk would agree. In the song Habakkuk sings in the first part of his third chapter, the prophet confronts us with one powerfully big God. Today on Groundwork, we dig into this song. Stay tuned.

DAVE BAST

From Words of Hope and ReFrame Media, this is Groundwork, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Dave Bast.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And I am Scott Hoezee; and Dave, today we are on part four of a five-part series on the little book of Habakkuk, one of the minor prophets in the Old Testament. A great deal of this book, in fact, most of Chapters 1 and 2, were filled with laments, questions, woes, judgments, because the people of God in Habakkuk's day were spiritually a mess and God is declaring that judgment is coming.

DAVE BAST

Right; but when we get to Chapter 3, Habakkuk, instead of condemning or criticizing or expressing even faith, he begins to sing, and the whole third chapter is a kind of poem or psalm or song that moves in very interesting ways from incredibly powerful beginnings to a wonderfully peaceful close; and in this program we are going to just look at the first part of that song. We will jump right into it now from Habakkuk 3, beginning at verse 2:

Lord, I have heard of Your fame; I stand in awe of Your deeds, Lord. Repeat them in our day. In our time make them known in wrath. Remember mercy. ³God came from Teman, the Holy One from Mount Paran. His glory covered the heavens and His praise filled the earth. ⁴His splendor was like the sunrise. Rays flashed from His hand where His power was hidden. ⁵Plague went before Him. Pestilence followed in His steps. ⁶He stood and shook the earth. He looked and made the nations tremble. The ancient mountains crumbled; the age-old hills collapsed, but He marches on forever. ⁷I saw the tents of Cushan in distress; the dwellings of Midian in anguish.

SCOTT HOEZEE

⁸Were You angry with the rivers, Lord? Was Your wrath against the streams? Did You rage against the sea when You rode Your horses and Your chariots to victory? ⁹You uncovered Your bow. You called for many arrows. You split the earth with rivers. ¹⁰The mountains saw You and writhed. ¹¹Torrents of water swept by. The deep roared and lifted its waves on high.

So clearly, Dave, here is a picture – it is a little snapshot of cosmic history – some hints of creation in there, but also salvation history...

DAVE BAST

A little bit of the Exodus, I think.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Exodus, Red Sea maybe. So clearly, Habakkuk is sketching for us one big, sovereign, majestic God.

DAVE BAST

I always think of the wonderful incident in *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*; you know, the first of *The Chronicles of Narnia* by C. S. Lewis, where the children are just coming into Narnia and they learn of the existence of this great lion, Aslan, who of course is the Christ figure; and they are speaking with Mr. and Mrs. Beaver, who have taken them in. One of the children says, you know, on being told it is a lion: Well, is it safe? And Mrs. Beaver replies: Of course he is not safe, but he is good. And in fact, that is the story of the God that Habakkuk describes here. Of course He is not safe!

SCOTT HOEZEE

And here, of course, He is not little. Habakkuk here pictures God as taking giant strides over the earth like some giant, majestic figure, and the earth shudders at every footfall of God as He steps over the mountains; and He is so majestic that even when Mount Everest sees Him it starts to shiver, right?

DAVE BAST

Yes, right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

God is so big that the tallest mountain shivers.

DAVE BAST

They shake in their boots at God's approach.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Now, we know that the psalms talk about God this way, and we also know... Fred Craddock said: In the Church today, about the only place where you get this kind of language are in songs and hymns and sometimes in older songs, although not always – there are some contemporary songs and hymns that talk about God this way, too – but we don't do it so much in sermons, and we don't usually do it in casual conversations with fellow believers or at Bible studies or at prayer meetings. We don't talk about God in these majestic terms. We do it in the hymns – we will use very exaggerated, almost hyperbole-like speech in our hymns; but we don't always do this in our ordinary talking about God; but for Habakkuk, there is something comforting to be found in the fact that God is just this powerful.

DAVE BAST

Well, I think for many modern Christians, and many modern Christian worship services, God is not a lion, He is more of a kitty cat. He has been sort of reduced and declawed. He is not dangerous any longer and He does not make anybody tremble with fear or with awe – with the kind of holy fear that the Bible speaks of over and over and over. You know, the Bible says that the beginning of wisdom is the fear of the Lord. Even when we say that and quote scripture in all of its many references to what it means to fear the Lord, we quickly fall all over ourselves to say: Well, it does not mean we are afraid of Him; of course, it does not mean we are afraid of Him. My reaction to that is: Oh, really? It doesn't? I think I might be if I saw or experienced this. I mean, I remember a time years ago when I was camping in a tent and a great thunderstorm rolled through. I had pitched my tent perilously close to a big tree, and all I could think of was, you know, a bolt of lightning coming down and toppling that tree. I mean, that is just a hint of the power and force of God. Imagine the pictures – the images that we see from the Hubble telescope of these galaxies exploding – and that is just like – poof – the tip of His finger, you know, doing that. This is the greatness of God that all the great prophets want us to see.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And interestingly, also, Dave, another thing the Bible does, and there are hints of it in Habakkuk, here, too, is it connects those powerful spectacles with almost the creation's reaction of awe of God. So, thunderstorms are songs of praise to God. Windstorms when tree branches are clacking are the applause for God, right? We do not always think about that. We might fear thunderstorms, or we have meteorologists to explain them and put up thunderstorm warnings on our television set, but when the storm comes through, we don't do what the Israelites did and cry Glory; boy, this is evidence of what God...

DAVE BAST

And in His Temple all cry glory; that is Psalm 29*, when the storm lays the trees flat. So my question, Scott, really is: Why have we done this to God? Why do we no longer see God or view God the way the prophets did? Or do we? Perhaps we do.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Well, let's ponder that question next; but first, here are a few words about the Words of Hope devotional.

DAVE BAST

You are listening to Groundwork, where we are digging into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Dave Bast.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And I am Scott Hoezee, and we are digging into, specifically, Habakkuk Chapter 3 today, Dave, as we are in the fourth part of a five-part series on that little prophetic book; and we were just talking about the phenomenon that today, whereas the Israelites and Habakkuk and many of the psalms and many of the other prophets reveled in depicting a huge and powerful and awesome and almost scary God in terms of how big He was; and even as Habakkuk and the psalms also looked at the grand spectacles of nature as being very, very powerful representations of God – thunderstorms and waves on the ocean – do we do that today, or have we lost touch with that particular part of a biblical way of describing God and of the world?

DAVE BAST

You know, there is an interesting statement that Habakkuk makes early on in Chapter 3. It is verse 2. Let me repeat that. We read it earlier, but Habakkuk says:
Lord, I have heard of Your fame. I stand in awe of Your deeds, Lord. Repeat them in our day. So, Habakkuk is kind of like saying: Hey, you know, I heard about when You were great during the Exodus and all the things You did. Do it again now. Let us see that. But then he says: In wrath remember mercy. There has been a lot about God's wrath to this point in Habakkuk – a lot about His judgment that He is going to unleash on the sins of Israel by means of the Babylonians. There are all those woes in Chapter 2 for people who exploit or take advantage or abuse others; and so Habakkuk says: Okay, I get all that, but please remember to be merciful, too; and in our day, we are more likely to flip that and think only about mercy and forget the wrath altogether. I mean, it used to be the great question people had was: How could God save anybody; you know, as sinful as the world is. Today it is more likely to be: How could God condemn anybody, really; you know, I mean, doesn't He just accept everybody? He is God. He is so merciful.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And I think that is exactly right; and although there are contemporary songs like *Awesome God*, and traditional hymns like *How Great Thou Art* that we still sing, a lot of the focus today goes exactly where you said. We have sort of flipped the whole sensibility. In fact, one of the keenest observers of the American religious scene right now is... Christian Smith is his name, and he has identified, especially among millennials, as they call them – 20-somethings, maybe early 30-something-year-old people – he has identified a trend, even among people who go to church, much less those who very rarely frequent the church – he calls it “moral, therapeutic deism – moral therapeutic deism.” Deism, of course, is one of the oldest heresies, which is the belief that, yes, there is a God, but He is not local. He is a long way away. The whole

universe is like an alarm clock. He wound it up at the beginning of time and now He is just letting it tick down on its own and He is off doing other things. That is deism – God is far away; but moral therapeutic deism is the belief that a lot of people have that, yes, God is pretty far away. He just wants us to be good. He wants us to feel good, to be good, to do well in life; and you know, He will grade on the curve and when you die if you were a decent person you will go to heaven; but God is not local and He is not really involved, and there is not a lot of majesty to a god who is off in some other corner of the universe playing solitaire or something. There is no majesty there; there is no imminent sense that we have a really powerful God who is close and who is watching and who is interested in how life goes.

DAVE BAST

A corollary of this view of God that is so prevalent today is that He is on call, so to speak, to solve your problems when you have a life problem. You know, He is not dangerous. There is nothing that could be scary about Him. There is nothing, you know, that would be off-putting; but, you know, if you have a relationship problem or you have a career problem, you can call on this – or a health problem especially, you know... so that, as someone said, the modern church's prayer meeting is often an organ recital.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, right.

DAVE BAST

And this spills over into all aspects of our worship, so worship becomes sort of chatty and casual, and sermons are often how-to talks about improving your life or solving your problems of one kind or another, or having a better marriage or being a better dad, or whatever the case may be; and the character of God, the grandeur of God, and more importantly, the story – the drama – of how, in wrath, God remembers mercy, as Habakkuk puts it. Mercy is not even mercy unless it is set against the backdrop of a wrath that is real.

SCOTT HOEZEE

You know, this line has been widely quoted, and many of our listeners have no doubt heard it more than once, but it was an observation that the writer Annie Dillard made recently. She would go to a lot of Evangelical churches in particular and noticed they had gotten pretty casual. People are walking in with their Starbuck's coffees and their lattes and they are sitting around just kind of chatting...

DAVE BAST

Water bottles.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, and Annie Dillard made the line: We come to church carrying coffee cups; we ought to be going into church wearing crash helmets because if we really knew the God we were encountering in worship, we would be a little afraid. We would be a little more cautious in how we would approach such a majestic and holy God; particularly since we are sinful people who come to church every week with sins to confess. So, Habakkuk 3, in a sense, does offer kind of a theological corrective for over-compensating... So, right, nobody wants to only proclaim hellfire and brimstone, doom and gloom every single week. That is not the Gospel either; and we will want to talk more about the New Testament in the final segment of this program; but we have over-corrected – we have gone too far that way, so maybe you need a bracing dose of something like Habakkuk 3 to swivel you around and say: Wait a minute. This is who God is. He is the one who strides the earth, who causes mountains to quake and nations to tremble. He is awesome, all right; but not just, you know, everything is awesome like in that Lego movie song...

DAVE BAST

Oh, gee; awesome!

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, but, He is awe-full in the sense that He fills you with dread if you could actually see Him.

DAVE BAST

Yes, well, if He makes the mountains shake, what ought He to do to us, you know? You did mention the New Testament though, and I guess that raises the question understandably. Isn't this a little bit too much of an Old Testament picture of God, and doesn't the New Testament present us with a God who is, in fact, gentle and who woos... He does not just hammer... He offers promises and He invites. How do we balance these two things; and that is a very important and legitimate question, which we will address in just a moment.

SCOTT HOEZEE

I am Scott Hoezee, along with Dave Bast, and you are listening to Groundwork, where we dig into scripture, and today, Dave, specifically digging into Habakkuk Chapter 3; and as we closed the previous segment of this program, Dave, you asked the question: Well, how do we bring this awesome, majestic, fearsome, and almost fearful God that Habakkuk and a lot of the Old Testament often sketches – how do we bring that into contact with the New Testament and with the revelation of Jesus as our savior; Jesus as sort of the ultimate revelation of God? How do we get those two things to talk to each other, and what is the conversation like when they do?

DAVE BAST

And that is what we want to explore in the time that we have left, but first let's listen to a little bit more of Habakkuk Chapter 3, to this great song or psalm that he writes. Speaking of God:

¹³You came out to deliver Your people, to save Your anointed one. You crushed the leader of the land of wickedness. You stripped him from head to foot. (This sounds like Exodus language, like maybe the destruction of the Egyptians in the Red Sea.) ¹⁴With his own spear You pierced his head when his warriors stormed out to scatter us, gloating as though about to devour the wretched who were in hiding. ¹⁵You trampled the sea with Your horses, churning the great waters.

So God is not only the creator God, He is the redeemer God who uses His great power to rescue His people.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And Habakkuk responds: ¹⁶I heard and my heart pounded. My lips quivered at the sound. Decay crept into my bones and my legs trembled. Yet I will wait patiently for the day of calamity to come on the nation invading us.

So, Habakkuk is basically saying: You know, I kind of reviewed our own history and what You did in the Exodus and what You did to Pharaoh and his hosts, and it scared me a little. I realized that when You are against somebody, it is a pretty fearsome thing. The Babylonians are going to be against Israel very, very soon, but God ultimately will also turn on the Babylonians to bring judgment also on their wickedness; but the whole thing is fearsome, it is awesome; it is awe-full, as we said in the last segment; and it certainly seems like a long cry from what a friend we have in Jesus or softly and tenderly Jesus is calling. So how do we square stained glass windows of Jesus gathering the lambs in His arms with this God of splendor, majesty, and awesome might, enough to make you tremble?

DAVE BAST

Well, what is the picture? I mean, big, scary God, or loving, tender savior Jesus? Actually, it is quite true that throughout the course of Church history, and even today, you tend to find people fall into one or the other of those two camps. It is very difficult to kind of hold these two things together. Either it is all wrath and sinners in the hands of an angry God kind of stuff or it is downplaying that completely and just comfort and assurance and peace and salvation. So, to hold both things is difficult, but that is always the case, I think, with biblical faith. We do try to do that to maintain a balanced picture.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And a lot of history... We have said this in other Groundwork programs, the way to heresy in Church history – false teaching – has often been down the path of either/or where people make a choice; but the way to orthodoxy – to true faith – is often the path of both/and. There was an early Church teacher named Marcion who went either/or. He said: Now, the God of the New Testament has to be a different God than the God of

the Old Testament. We don't get any angry, fiery, flashing eyes, lightning coming out of His mouth... That is a different God; so, Jesus is a different God. Well, no, that is wrong. We want to embrace the tension of both/and; and it is true on the surface of it. Most of the New Testament – the Gospels – you kind of have to get to the book of Revelation before you get back to some fiery images and scary apocalyptic stuff. Most of the New Testament does not read like Habakkuk Chapter 3 does, but I think that just means we have to sort of adjust our eyes a little bit to see where in the New Testament all of that is still there. It is still there in Jesus, and certainly it is still there on the cross. God is battling evil!

DAVE BAST

All you have to do is read the story of the Gospels closely and carefully, and listen to Jesus all the time, not just to the things that are appealing. It gets back to that whole idea of editing out parts of the Bible, you know? We mentioned it in the last program – taking the woes out of Habakkuk Chapter 2. So, you have Jesus saying things like: Don't fear the one who can kill the body, but fear him who has the power to cast body and soul [into hell]. In other words, God – fear God. The whole element of fearing God throughout the Old Testament and the New Testament... There is a lovely verse tucked in the middle of Acts Chapter 9, where it says... This is after the conversion of Saul of Tarsus, who becomes Paul the Apostle. There have been a lot of ups and downs; the Church has been blessed; they are filled with the Holy Spirit and all that, but then – Boom – here comes Acts 5 and the story of Ananias and Sapphira, and suddenly they are terrified again. Whoa. Dealing with God is like playing with dynamite – with nitroglycerin. He is not a *safe* God. But then in Acts 9, this wonderful verse that says of the Church:

³¹They had peace for a time, and walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, the Church was multiplying – it grew. So, there they are, both things together, you know; right foot, left foot. Fear the Lord – yes, He is not safe; but comfort of the Holy Spirit; in Christ we become His children. He is our Father. He wants to have a close relationship with us.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And of course, another reason that you don't read as much wrath and calamity and anger stuff in the New Testament is because Jesus has now come to this earth to bear all of that in Himself. He does not need to talk about it. It is going to all fall on Him on the cross. He is going to go to hell for us; and so, this is God's way of dealing with it. So, it is all still there, it is just by grace it all falls on Jesus instead of on us; so Jesus does not have to talk about it as much; although, of course, whenever He encountered demons and the demon possessed, they shrieked in terror because they knew He was the Son of the Living God. This is serious business. You do not trifle with this God. Jesus is God in skin who is here to deal powerfully and cosmically and galactically with evil, and it does all fall on Jesus; so, it is all still there; it is just so concentrated in Jesus that it is not on as grand a display as it was often in the Old Testament.

DAVE BAST

I have heard of Your fame; I stand in awe of Your deeds, O Lord. What a wonderful phrase that Habakkuk uses; and surely, that is something we can echo as well. When we know the greatness of God's mercy and all that He has done in Jesus and the way He has – can we put it this way – pacified His own wrath against evil, our awe is only increased; and no, we don't take God for granted; we don't treat Him casually; but we do worship Him with love and gratitude and we feel that incredible closeness that only a child of God can.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Well, thanks for joining our Groundwork conversation. I am Scott Hoezee, along with Dave Bast, and we always want to know how we can help you to dig into the scriptures. So go to our website; it is groundworkonline.com; and there you will have an opportunity to suggest topics and passages for future Groundwork programs.

**Correction*: The audio of this program misstates the reference for this passage as Psalm 13. The correct reference is Psalm 29.

<https://groundworkonline.com/episodes/how-big-is-your-god>

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