

Goodness Gracious Great Chariots of Fire
Habakkuk 3:1-19, 2 Kings 6:14-17

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The Bible is God's Word. I hope you believe that. The Bible was inspired by the Holy Spirit to human beings who wrote down, without error, what God wanted them to say.

It's a collection from different authors over many years who wrote in different forms to communicate God's Word to us.

The Bible includes different types and forms of literature which include laws and rules, history, poetry and songs, wisdom sayings and proverbs, Gospels, letters, apocalyptic writings, prose narratives, prayers, parables, prophecies, and genealogies.

The laws and rules include laws that forbid things and laws that encourage things. They were given to the people of Israel in order to help them worship correctly and treat one another with respect and care.

History books and passages describe the activities of such important figures as the prophets Elijah and Elisha, and the kings of Israel and Judah. These books include information about the events of the two Israelite kingdoms.

Poetry and songs are a large category that includes many different forms.

Psalms, Job, and the Song of Songs are in this category, but poetry and songs are also found in other books of the Bible like Exodus, Luke and Philippians. Songs are important.

Wisdom sayings and proverbs are a large division of the Old Testament and there's even some in the New Testament.

Wisdom sayings and proverbs have a unique style which makes them read like common sense sayings and reflections about the world and God. They even ask moral questions about human life.

The Gospels are unique books in the New Testament that are autobiography, biography, history, teaching, and prophecy all rolled into one. Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John share all about the life and ministry of Jesus.

We also find letters which are mostly in the New Testament and used a particular letter-writing style of the first century AD.

Within each letter a number of different kinds of literature can be found, including prayers, instructions, teaching, wisdom, warnings, hymns or songs, and personal news.

Then there is apocalyptic literature which is symbolic, cryptic and poetic writing meant to show the future and reveal spiritual truths in repeating and strange ways to encourage the readers to whom they were written.

This morning, as we continue our journey in “Minor Prophets Major Message,” I want to focus on the prophet Habakkuk and his third chapter.

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Habakkuk is a small book at the end of the Old Testament with just three chapters. The last chapter of the Book of Habakkuk begins with...

Habakkuk 3:1, *“A prayer of Habakkuk the prophet. On shigionoth. (shig-a-noth)”*

What does that small verse tell us? First, it tells us that this chapter is a prayer. Secondly, it tells us that it was written by a prophet of God so we should listen to his words.

Thirdly, it tells us that it is *“On shigionoth.”* Now here is where chapter 3 gets interesting and we’re only eight words into the chapter! What does that word *“shigionoth”* mean?

“Shigionoth” is a musical term which means *“a wild passionate song with rapid changes of rhythm.”* The end of Habakkuk 3 has the words *“On my stringed instruments.”*

So, what we can extrapolate from the first and last verse, is that Habakkuk 3 is a prayerful song played on stringed instruments with wild passion and rapid changes in rhythm.

What does that sound like to you? It’s a rock n’ roll, hip-hop, or rap! Regardless of the style, Habakkuk chapter 3 is still a prayerful rock song written by a faithful prophet of God. It makes me think of Lin-Manuel Miranda’s musical *Hamilton*.

As Habakkuk is singing, praying and jamming with his stringed instruments, he shares with us a vision of God Almighty that we need to take to heart.

Verse 3, *“His glory covered the heavens and his praise filled the earth.”*

Verse 4, *“His splendor was like the sunrise; rays flashed from his hand.”*

Verse 5, *“Plague went before him; pestilence followed his steps.”*

Verse 11, He has *“a flashing spear.”*

God Almighty, Whom Habakkuk envisions and writes to us in this chapter is a powerful God riding in on a chariot of salvation, conquering and crushing all enemies.

This chariot is very significant and is at the center of his vision and message.

Habakkuk 3:8b says, *“Did you rage against the sea when you rode your horses and your chariots to victory?”* I like the English Standard Version, *“When you rode on your horses, on your chariot of salvation?”*

In the ancient Near East, chariots were not owned by ordinary people. They were expensive. They could, of course, be used for show, but their main use was in war. They provided a mobile platform.

So, when chariots occur in connection with God appearing, we should think first of God waging war against evil.

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Now, many of you probably don't remember or even know who Jerry Lee Lewis was, but when I came to the church the other day, there Bill was playing Jerry Lee's *“Great Balls of Fire.”*

The vision and picture that Habakkuk gives us of this chariot is a significant. Which got me thinking, instead of *“goodness gracious great balls of fire,”* this morning, Habakkuk is singing *“goodness gracious great chariots of fire!”*

There are other passages in the Bible where God shows up in His blazing chariot or there are blazing chariots and horses from God.

So, when we take all these passages as a whole, we get an important message: God's presence is power!

In 2 Kings 6, there's a situation that seemed terrible for the people involved.

The King of Syria was trying to attack Israel, but the prophet Elisha would always warn the King of Israel of the Syrian king's plans causing his attacks to fail.

The King of Syria was told that Elisha kept tipping Israel off, so he sent an army after the prophet. The king wanted Elisha dead.

2 Kings 6:14-17, "So he sent there horses and chariots and a great army, and they came by night and surrounded the city. When the servant of the man of God rose early in the morning and went out, behold, an army with horses and chariots was all around the city. And the servant said, "Alas, my master! What shall we do?"

Needless to say, Elisha wasn't captured, killed or even inconvenienced in any way on that day. The presence of God's fiery chariots surrounding Elisha and his servant was a reality.

But his servant couldn't see and didn't know about this spiritual battle that was being waged. He only saw the physical battle that was going to take place all around him and was afraid.

He feared because he didn't think God was present. He feared because of what he could see. Then Elisha tells him in verses 16-17:

"Don't be afraid," the prophet answered. "Those who are with us are more than those who are with them." And Elisha prayed, "Open his eyes, Lord, so that he may see." Then the Lord opened the servant's eyes, and he looked and saw the hills full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha."

Elisha's words were very important because they're backed up by holy chariots of fire. God's presence is power, assurance and insurance. Habakkuk shares with us the same truth: God's presence is power.

In Habakkuk 3, as Habakkuk sings with stringed instruments, he describes that the nations shake, mountains are scattered, hills sink low, rivers dry up, and nothing can stand before God because nothing and no one is greater than Him.

The blazing chariot is a symbol that God is absolute power and there's nothing greater than Him, either visible or invisible. Paul shares with us the same truth in Colossians 1.

Colossians 1:16-17, *“For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him. And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together.”*

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There's a song in Psalms which uses the same kind of language, Psalm 68.

In Psalm 68, we have a verse from David that helps us understand what happened to Elisha and his servant in 2 Kings 6. It even foretells what Habakkuk will sing about in chapter 3.

Psalm 68:17, *“The chariots of God are twice ten thousand, thousands upon thousands; the Lord is among them; Sinai is now in the sanctuary.”*

David reflects in this song that God's power and might are limitless. The phrase *“twice ten thousand, thousands upon thousands”* is a way of saying “gazillion” or “quadrillion” or “googolplex.”

Don't laugh, a googolplex is a real number. A googol is a 1 followed by 100 zeros, a googolplex is a 1 followed by a google of zeros.

There's no way to count the power of God. There's no way to weigh the massiveness of His armies. There's no way to count the servants in the heavenlies that serve God and do His bidding.

Yet it's not the number to which we should pay attention. Notice what the chariots of God do. It's the same thing they did for Elisha.

The chariots of God signal that God is among His people and more importantly, He brings His holiness with Him.

"Sinai" is a reference to the holy mountain of God where God spoke with Moses from a burning bush and, where later, He gave Israel the Ten Commandments and His Law.

The *"sanctuary"* is a reference to the place among the Israelites known as the "Holy of Holies" where God promised to dwell among them and where He received their offerings.

When God's countless, boundless and innumerable armies show up, they bring not only victory but His holiness with them. They signal the presence of God and His holiness.

Remember, Holy means set apart for God's use. Holy means morally perfect and righteous. Holy means the righteous power of Heaven.

Habakkuk shares with us that same truth. Verse 3 calls Him the *"Holy One"* and talks about *"His splendor"* and *"His praise."*

The *"splendor was like the sunrise"* and *"rays flashing"* in verse 4 are a symbol of His holiness. The *"lightning of your flashing spear"* in verse 11 is fueled by His holiness.

The statement in verse 13, *“You crushed the leader of the land of wickedness, you stripped him from head to foot”* is a statement of God’s holiness and His judgment against wickedness and everything that’s NOT holy.

The chariots of God are a symbol of God’s absolute power and holiness.

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We have other words from a different prophet which uses the same kind of language.

In Isaiah 66, the prophet sees God coming in fire and with chariots. God’s bringing His judgment on sin with Him. How do we know this? Verses 15-16 says it plainly.

Isaiah 66:15-16, *“For behold, the Lord will come in fire, and his chariots like the whirlwind, to render his anger in fury, and his rebuke with flames of fire. For by fire will the Lord enter into judgment, and by his sword, with all flesh; and those slain by the Lord shall be many.”*

Isaiah not only sees something similar to Elisha and David, but also what Habakkuk will see. Fire and chariots are all part of properly envisioning God.

Isaiah sees a holy, mighty God coming in fire and wants us to remember that two things happen with fire. First, fire purifies. Second, fire destroys. God always does both in His judgment.

Those that are His are purified and those that are not His are destroyed. It’s a fearful thing to fall under the judgment of God.

This isn’t the only place where God, fire and judgment are connected. There are plenty in the Old Testament, but there are also examples in the New Testament.

2 Thessalonians 1:8-9, *“He will punish those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. They will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might ”*

Hebrews 10:26-27, *“If we deliberately keep on sinning after we have received the knowledge of the truth, no sacrifice for sins is left, but only a fearful expectation of judgment and of raging fire that will consume the enemies of God.”*

2 Peter 3:7, *“By the same word the present heavens and earth are reserved for fire, being kept for the day of judgment and destruction of the ungodly.”*

Habakkuk shares with us the same truth: God’s presence is judgment. In verse 2, Habakkuk prays and sings, *“in wrath remember mercy”* and knows in verse 6 that God *“stood, and shook the earth.”* His entire song is about the Holy God Who judges.

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Conclusion

So, what do we do with Habakkuk 3 and the vision of an Almighty God rolling in on His flaming chariot of salvation, filled with holiness and power and bringing judgment? What do we do with *“goodness gracious great chariots of fire?”*

The vision and picture that Habakkuk gives us is a significant one. The other passages in the Bible clue us in, but none more than Elisha’s passage in 2 Kings 6.

You see Elisha knew and believed what Habakkuk sang about much later. Elisha believed that He was on God’s side, surrounded by the holiness and boundless power of God and because of that, it changed his perspective.

It changed his faith. It improved his outlook. It formed his prayers. It gave him new vision. It gave him an understanding of the circumstances that surrounded him.

Are you facing something physical that's challenging or it's breaking down your resolve day after day. Are you surrounded by pain and aches and maybe even constant doctor visits?

2 Kings 6: 16b, *"Do not be afraid, for those who are with you are more than those who are with them."*

Are you facing a terrible emotional time when anxiety and worry and fear or maybe depression seem to be the order of the day?

"Do not be afraid, for those who are with you are more than those who are with them."

Are you in the dark night of the soul, struggling spiritually and you aren't sure where God is or when your soul will ever see light again?

"Do not be afraid, for those who are with you are more than those who are with them."

You see God rides into our lives with His flaming chariot of salvation, which is humming with holiness and bursting with power, purifying sin wherever He goes. His countless charioteers are around you.

"Do not be afraid, for those who are with you are more than those who are with them."

We must constantly pray for God to open our eyes that we may see His presence among us; for God to open our ears so we can hear that we are surrounded by God's presence, and for God to open our hearts in order that we will feel His holy presence.