Higher Interest Rates Weigh on Stocks in the Third Quarter

Clients and Friends,

The S&P 500 rose to the highest level since March of 2022 early in the third quarter, but rising global bond yields, fears of a rebound in inflation, and concerns about a future economic slowdown weighed on the major stock indices in August and September and the S&P 500 finished the third quarter with a modest loss.

Stocks rose broadly in July thanks primarily to "Goldilocks" economic data (the data showed solid economic growth, but not to the extent that would have implied that the Federal Reserve needed to hike rates further than investors expected). That solid data, along with a decline in inflation metrics, boosted stock prices as investors began looking past near-term recession risks and some of the worrisome headlines that had dominated the news.

Although the Federal Reserve increased interest rates in late July, they also signaled that it could be the last rate hike of the cycle. That tone and commentary, further fueled optimism that one of the most aggressive rate hike cycles in history was soon coming to an end. Additionally, Q2 earnings season was better-than-feared with mostly favorable corporate guidance which supported expectations for strong earnings growth into 2024. The S&P 500 rose to the highest level since March of last year and the index finished with a strong monthly gain of more than 3%.

The market dynamic changed on the first day of August however when one of the larger U.S. credit rating agencies (Fitch) downgraded U.S. government debt. While Fitch lacked any specific near-term justification for the downgrade, they cited long-term risks of the current U.S. fiscal trajectory as the main reason. This action put immediate downward pressure on U.S. Treasuries, which sent their yields meaningfully higher.

The Fitch downgrade kickstarted a rise in Treasury yields that lasted the entire month. The downgrade, combined with a rebound in anecdotal inflation indicators and a large increase in Treasury sales (stemming from the debt ceiling drama), pushed yields sharply higher. The 10-year Treasury yield rose from 4.05% on August 1st to a high of 4.34% on August 21st, the highest level since mid-2007.

That rapid rise in yields weighed on stock prices throughout August and the S&P 500 posted its first negative monthly return since February (as higher rates pressured equity valuations and raised concerns about a future economic slowdown, the S&P 500 finished August down 1.59%). The August volatility subsided in early September however, as solid economic data and a pause in the rise

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in Treasury yields allowed the S&P 500 to stabilize through the first half of the month.

Volatility returned following the September Fed decision however as the FOMC delivered markets a "hawkish" surprise, despite not increasing interest rates. The majority of Fed members reiterated that they anticipated the need for an additional rate hike before the end of the year and forecasted only two rate cuts for all of 2024, which was down from the four rate cuts forecasted at the June meeting (rate cuts are typically good for economic growth).

Then, late in the month, two additional developments weighed further on both stocks and bonds. First, the United Auto Workers labor union began a general strike, a move that would disrupt automobile production and temporarily weigh on economic growth. Second, the U.S. careened towards another government shutdown as Republicans and Democrats failed to agree on a "Continuing Resolution" to fund the government. The shutdown was avoided at the last minute however, but the funding extension only lasts until November 17th (meaning there will likely be another budget battle in the coming months). The S&P 500 declined towards the end of the month, ending September down modestly.

In sum, volatility returned to markets during the third quarter, as rising bond yields pressured stock valuations, some inflation indicators pointed to a bounce back in inflation, and the Fed reiterated a "higher for longer" interest rate outlook.

Third Quarter Performance Review

Rising bond yields were the main driver of the markets in the third quarter as high Treasury yields contributed to a reversal in performance on a sector and index basis (relative to the first and second quarters).

Starting with market capitalization, large cap stocks once again outperformed small cap stocks, as they did in the first two quarters of 2023 (although both posted negative returns). That relative outperformance by large caps is consistent with rising Treasury yields, as smaller companies are typically more reliant on debt financing to sustain operations and rising interest rates create stronger financial headwinds for smaller companies compared to their larger peers.

From an investment style standpoint however, we did see a performance reversal from the first two quarters of the year as "value" outperformed "growth" in the third quarter (although both investment styles finished with a negative quarterly return). Rising bond yields tend to weigh more heavily on companies with higher valuations, and since most growth funds overweight higher P/E tech stocks, those funds lagged last quarter. Value funds that include stocks with lower P/E ratios are less sensitive to higher yields, and as such, they outperformed in the third quarter.

In aggregate, nine of the 11 S&P 500 sectors finished the third quarter with a negative return, which is a stark reversal from the broad gains of the second quarter. Energy was the best performing sector (thanks to a surge in oil prices), while Communications Services also finished Q3 with a slightly positive quarterly return (based on the hope that the integration of advanced artificial intelligence will boost search and social media companies' future advertising revenues).

Looking at sector laggards, the impact of rising bond yields was again clearly visible as consumer staples, utilities, and real estate were the worst performing sectors in the third quarter. Although those sectors offer some of the highest dividend yields in the market, those dividend yields became less attractive with the rapid increase in interest rates (since less-volatile bond have become relatively more attractive).

US Equity Indexes	Q3 Return	YTD
S&P 500	-2.08%	13.07%
DJ Industrial Average	-1.28%	2.73%
NASDAQ 100	-1.30%	35.37%
S&P MidCap 400	-3.57%	4.27%
Russell 2000	-4.76%	2.54%

Source: YCharts

Internationally, foreign markets saw moderate declines and again lagged the S&P 500 in the third quarter as disappointing economic data in Europe and China bolstered regional recession fears. Emerging markets did relatively outperform developed markets however, thanks to the announcement of larger-scale Chinese economic stimulus late in the quarter.

International Equity Indexes	Q3 Return	YTD
MSCI EAFE TR USD (Foreign Developed)	-3.22%	7.59%
MSCI EM TR USD (Emerging Markets)	-2.48%	2.16%
MSCI ACWI Ex USA TR USD (Foreign Dev & EM)	-2.96%	5.82%

Source: YCharts

Commodities saw substantial gains and were the best performing major asset class in the third quarter thanks to a significant rally in the energy complex. Oil rose throughout the quarter on continued supply concerns as Saudi Arabia and Russia extended voluntary supply cuts to the end of the year. Meanwhile, demand estimates rose late in the third quarter following the aforementioned announcement of the large-scale Chinese stimulus plans, causing prices to rise sharply late in the quarter. Gold, meanwhile, declined moderately thanks primarily to the stronger U.S. dollar, which rallied steadily over the course of the third quarter, hitting a fresh 2023 high in September.

Commodity Indexes	Q3 Return	YTD
S&P GSCI (Broad-Based Commodities)	17.06%	7.24%
S&P GSCI Crude Oil	29.85%	12.73%
GLD Gold Price	-3.10%	1.40%

Source: YCharts/Koyfin.com

Switching to the fixed income markets, the leading benchmark for bonds (Bloomberg Barclays US Aggregate Bond Index) declined moderately for a second consecutive quarter as hawkish Fed rhetoric and hints of a rebound in inflation weighed broadly on the bond market.

Looking deeper into the fixed income markets, shorter-duration debt securities posted a positive quarterly return and outperformed those with longer durations in the third quarter, as the Fed did not signal it intended to raise interest rates any higher than previously expected. Longer-duration bonds were pressured however by the combination of a rebound in some inflation indicators and as investors digested that the Fed may well delay any rate cuts in 2024, keeping rates "higher for longer."

Turning to the corporate bond market, lower-quality but higher-yielding "junk" bonds rose slightly while higher-rated, investment-grade debt declined moderately in Q3. The large performance gap reflected continued optimism from investors regarding future economic growth, as investors "reached" for higher yields offered by riskier companies amidst broadly rising bond yields.

US Bond Indexes	Q3 Return	YTD
BBgBarc US Agg Bond	-2.94%	-1.21%
BbgBarc US T-Bill 1-3 Mon	1.36%	3.71%
ICE US T-Bond 7-10 Year	-4.20%	-2.86%
BbgBarc US MBS (Mortgage-backed)	-3.84%	-2.26%
BbgBarc Municipal	-3.95%	-1.38%
BbgBarc US Corporate Invest Grade	-2.59%	0.02%
BbgBarc US Corporate High Yield	0.80%	5.86%

Source: Ycharts

Fourth Quarter Market Outlook

Markets begin the fourth quarter decidedly more anxious than they started the third quarter, but it's important to realize that while the S&P 500 did hit multi-month lows in September (and there are legitimate risks to the economic / market outlook), underlying fundamentals remain generally strong.

First, while there are reasonable concerns about a future economic slowdown, the latest economic data remains relatively solid. Employment, consumer spending, and business investment were all resilient in the third quarter and there isn't much actual economic data that points to an imminent economic slowdown. So, while a future slowdown is certainly possible given higher interest rates (and the resumption of student loan payments, the declining U.S. savings, etc.), the actual economic data suggests that it isn't happening yet.

Second, although fears that inflation may bounce back can't be ignored (given the rally in oil prices in the third quarter), the Federal Reserve and other central banks typically look past commodity-driven inflation and instead focus on "core" inflation (and that metric continued to decline throughout the third quarter). Additionally, declines in housing prices from the recent peak are only now beginning to work into the official inflation statistics, and that should see core inflation continue to move lower in the months and quarters ahead.

Finally, regarding monetary policy, the Federal Reserve's historic rate hike campaign is nearing an end. And while we should expect the Fed to keep rates "higher for longer," high interest rates do not automatically result in an economic slowdown. Interest rates have merely returned to levels that were typical in the 1990's and early 2000's (before the financial crisis), and the economy performed well during those periods. Yes, the risk of higher rates causing an economic slowdown is one that must be monitored closely, but for now, higher rates are not causing a material loss of economic momentum.

In sum, there are real risks to both the markets and the economy as we begin the final three months of the year (which is not abnormal, as there are always concerns to worry about). But these are largely the same risks that markets have faced year-to-date, and over that period the economy and markets have remained impressively resilient.

As we begin the final quarter of 2023, we are reminded that a long-term, well diversified financial plan can withstand virtually any market surprise (i.e., bouts of volatility, “higher for longer” interest rates, stubbornly high inflation, geopolitical tensions, recession risks, etc.). We remain focused on both opportunities and risks in this environment, and we value your ongoing confidence and trust.

As always, please don’t hesitate to reach out to us if you have any questions.

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