

WOEFUL SINNERS
Habakkuk 2:5-20
January 4, 2009 – Grace Covenant Baptist Church

To this point in our study in Habakkuk, we have seen how Habakkuk the man represents a believer who at times loses their way. They lose their way by falling to one of the greatest ploys of the wicked one, that being to coerce a believer, one who is saved by faith, to focus on circumstances of this life, particularly those circumstances that are not going so well. The tendency of our flesh is to panic, to have fear in times of turmoil, rather than trust in God's promises. So what we have in the book of Habakkuk is one man's journey from fear to faith.¹

Because of his focus on his present situation, a situation which was not from his perspective at all favorable to God's people to whom he was called to be a prophet of God, Habakkuk falls into despair and questions God's approach in His dealings with His chosen. In fact, Habakkuk insinuates that God does not know their plight, that somehow He had lost touch. Further, in questioning God Habakkuk assumes that he knows more than God does. After God sets Habakkuk right by reminding him of His sovereignty, Habakkuk then approached God in a more humble manner, still asking God questions, not in a way as to doubt God's sovereignty but in an attempt to know more so that he could better grapple with his struggle in the midst of adversity.

God's second round of answers, as we will see in chapter 3, does in fact comfort Habakkuk and strengthen his faith. He turns from questioning God to firmly believing and trusting God in the circumstance. His focus changed from the turmoil to the God who was over and in the turmoil. Habakkuk is led by God to remember whose he was, God's, and who he was, a child of God and a prophet of God with all the promises that come with being His child.

It is God's response to Habakkuk's second round of questions that we turn tonight, His response that comforted Habakkuk and grew his faith, moving him from fear and doubt to faith and assurance. God's answer is set forth by contrasting the lifestyles of the faithful with that of the wicked. In Habakkuk 2:4 we read, "Behold, as for the proud one, His soul is not right within him; but the righteous will live by his faith." Here God asserts two things: 1) The proud person is not upright and by implication is destined to die, and 2) the just shall live through his faith. Here are then three contrasts either stated or implied between the two categories of men:

1. The proud is contrasted with the person of faith.
2. The unjust is contrasted with the just.
3. One is destined to die, the other to live.²

In the remainder of chapter 2 that we look at this evening, God expands upon the lifestyle of the wicked, the proud, and the unjust in pronouncing five "woes" upon them. What I would like to do tonight is set forth these woes in a contemporary framework and suggest how the just should live when we are in the midst of such perverseness.

1. Woe to the extorter (vv. 5-8)

Verse 5 describes the plight of the proud. In a word, they are intoxicated with conquest. Babylon, the proud oppressors of God's people on this occasion, are compared to strong drink and drunkenness in other places. (Jer. 51:7; Dan. 5:1-30).

¹ To borrow from Martyn Lloyd-Jones book titled, *From Fear to Faith*.

² Walter Chantry, "A Revelation for All Time: Habakkuk 2:2-4," *The Banner of Truth*, Issue 524, May 2007, 30.

Jeremiah 51:7 – Babylon has been a golden cup in the hand of the LORD, intoxicating all the earth. The nations have drunk of her wine; therefore the nations are going mad.

It is a picture of never being satisfied. Once the desire is gained, it goes to the head and the process is continued until the next appetite is satisfied. That is the pride and greed that we see in the rest of this text.

Verses 6-9 bring the first of God’s taunts upon Babylon. As O. Palmer Robertson points out, the word **“Woe!”** is better translated, **“Ha!”** In each of these instances, God is mocking the mockers. Psalm 2:4, “He who sits in the heavens laughs, the Lord scoffs at them.” Here, God said that the plunderer is plundered, the extorter is extorted. Throughout the history of the world, conquering nations often impose unjust terms financially on those they oppress. They practice a policy of “taxation without representation,” unlike one of the protections we have constitutionally in our nation, however much it is misinterpreted or ignored. They charge excessive interest on loans as a means to greedy gain.

How fitting a warning this is in our day? The past weeks we have seen our financial institutions crumbling for this very reason. I am not suggesting that this is God’s judgment. However, we must admit that the financial institutions have reaped massive profits by doing exactly what these in Babylon did to those they conquered. They have made themselves **“rich with loans.”** Of course, those that sought to finance their homes with what they thought was a “good deal” are left to suffer. And while there are exceptions, some were really taken advantage of, others must share the responsibility in biting off more than they could chew, regardless of the deal. However, if these easy loans were not available, they could not have mortgaged their life away. The financial institutions knew this, yet they were greedy, willing to take from those they knew would not be able to pay. They gambled, and they lost, and now our nation’s leaders continue to debate who will pay for it, how much will be paid, and who will receive it.

In contrast, those who are living by faith do so without victimizing anyone, without coveting or gaining wealth at someone else’s expense.³ Even if the vehicle is in place, much like the loan system in our nation which when used properly is not evil in and of itself, the believer must live biblically and look to treat others biblically. Debts that are accumulated by cheap gain and fraudulence always come due—and someone will have to pay. This is a general principle whether it be individuals or nations. The believer must faithfully live within and according to their means. You realize, of course, that many a man has profited by those who have not managed their resources wisely. Dave Ramsey has made a career in counseling people to live according to their means and get out of debt. There are those that bought into unfortunate ways, whether it is credit cards or loans, and over-extended themselves. Neither I nor Ramsey is against loans as if they are unbiblical—they are not. But the counsel is to live according to your means and never seek to make a quick buck at the expense of another. Extortion, in whatever form, is greed and judgment awaits the extortioner.

2. Woe to the exploiter (vv. 9-11)

Similar to the extorter is the exploiter, those who pursue evil gain to provide protection for their houses. They are building their futures by taking advantage of the less fortunate. They are money-grubbers who seek to pad their accounts in any fashion. James Montgomery Boice called this ‘injustice.’ He wrote:

³ James Bruckner, *The NIV Application Commentary: Jonah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah*, 244.

Here is a man who has tried to accumulate as much as he can by more or less honest means, but when he finds he cannot get enough, resorts to unjust means to enlarge his portfolio and place himself beyond the possibility of ruin. But ruin comes.⁴

Again, this should sound all too familiar to us in recent days. The exploiter begins rather innocently, I stress rather innocently because they stretch the bounds a bit. They look for loopholes in the law in order to make a quick profit, forgetting those they are gaining from. However, materialism is like a narcotic. One can never get enough. They are never satisfied. When their fix wears off, they must have another. So in the end, the exploiter becomes an extorter.

However, what we must realize is that the exploiter is deceived. In his mind, his charades are OK because he is trying to provide for his future and the future of his family. He is building a nest egg, or feeding a college fund, or planning for retirement, etc. These are certainly noble, loving, and appropriate goals. But the exploiter uses less than noble means to accomplish his goals. Here one writer reminds us that the capacity for both good and evil resides in each person, simultaneously.⁵ The Babylonians resorted to violence as a means to an end. And within us lies the capacity for both violence and love and for them to be expressed concurrently.

The faithful, however, do not live this way. Their dependence and trust is that God will provide, in His way in His time. This does not mean that we are not to pursue financial security and stability on this earth. However, the believer knows that it is the meek, not the exploiter, that will inherit the earth (Mt. 5:5). Therefore, the just who live by faith “store up” for themselves “treasures in heaven” (Mt. 6:20) and “seek first His kingdom and His righteousness” (Mt. 6:33) without worrying for tomorrow, “for tomorrow will care for itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own” (Mt. 6:34). Do you see the contrast? God’s financial system is spiritual, not temporal. Those who exploit others have their hearts and minds set on this world, not the eternal. God told Habakkuk, and all those who act this way, “You are sinning against yourself” (v. 10).

3. Woe to the promoter of violence (vv. 12-14)

The sins of the extorter focused on the individual; the woes of the exploiter on the house. This woe focuses on the city, in this case the city that has been built upon bloodshed. Here the Lord introduces violence, a trait particularly related to the Babylonians. Notice the progression from individual and corporate greed to that of bloodshed. So great was their desire to have things and satisfy their appetites that they would not stop short of violence, killing for gain, comfort, or convenience.

While this sort of violence might not be apparent to us in our culture, Walt Chantry points out that just as the Babylonians did it with bloodshed, so do many nations today by aiming at proud human goals. He asserts, “Secularism (in which man, not God, motivates their efforts) leads to goals of materialism, hedonism, and feminism. All such building will be burned in the fires of God’s judgment. It will prove to be vanity (emptiness).”⁶

This individual secular humanism manifests itself, to note one issue, in the countless abortions that take place in our country every day. While there remains disagreement among believers as to whether abortion should be allowed in cases where the mother’s life is at stake or

⁴ James Montgomery Boice, *The Minor Prophets*, vol. 2, 413.

⁵ Bruckner, 245.

⁶ Chantry, 30.

in cases of rape or incest, the greatest number of abortions continues to be for matters of convenience: a mother's career is at stake, or the sex of the child is not what was desired, or the color of hair, etc. This is nothing short of bloodshed, the murder of an unborn child. No matter the spin put on it, when a life is taken for mere convenience, it promotes violence and bloodshed.

But this sin, according to Boice, also has its tentacles in a more subtle way in the church today. He wrote:

We can even apply this to the building of the church. It is possible to build a large church by secular means. That is, you can prosper externally by using good marketing, advertising, and other secular techniques. Find out what the people want, then give it to them—that is the secret. If they want bowling alleys or gymnasiums, give them bowling alleys or gymnasiums. If they want classes on how to fulfill themselves as individual people and get ahead in business, give them those classes. If they want soothing, reassuring sermons, give them such sermons. Give them anything they want. Above all, do not confront them with harsh statements or demanding standards of the Bible. A church built along these lines will grow, as I have said. But it will not endure! When hard times come or tastes change, it will fade away.⁷

The believer, on the other hand, seeks to build the right way, God's way. They build in such a way that God's glory is revealed and so that God receives the glory. Their hope is in the blood that has already been shed, and they love others in the way that Christ loved, who died an unjust death for those whom He loved. They understand that God is the Creator of life and that the human bears the image of God. They also know that the church, the body of Christ, is God's creation and seek to grow it in His time in His way. Only then can it stand against the assault of the evil one who seeks to build his kingdom by evil means, whether it be destruction from without or destruction from within.

4. Woe to the shameless (vv. 15-17)

Here we see that luxurious living and wild entertainment, what we might call "shameless living" at the expense of others, will make you disgusting not only in their eyes, but God's as well. Boice calls this 'seduction,' and "seduction is fairly far along the slippery slope of moral decline."⁸ This seduction leads to outright perversion. Left unfulfilled by the security of things, they now turn to personal relationships through love. One problem: this person does not know how to love. Their love is built on what they can gain from a relationship. They do not know what a real, intimate relationship really is because their relationship is defined by lust. So their relationship is perverted from the start.

For those such as these, there is no shame even in nakedness! This is the progression of sin and wickedness. The heart is so hard that it cannot even look on itself and blush. After our first parents sinned, they knew that they were naked and were ashamed. But as sin progresses, even the shame disappears. The hardened sinner is like the daughters of Lot who got their father drunk on consecutive nights so that they could lie with him and "preserve the family" (Gen. 19). Their unseemly actions are the beginnings of the Moabites and the Ammonites who would be thorns for God's people throughout the Old Testament.

But this is not the case with the righteous. The righteous understand the basis of a loving relationship because it is built upon the love of God shed abroad in their hearts. They are

⁷ Boice, 414.

⁸ Boice, 414.

ashamed by sin because they have offended a loving Father. They are ashamed by sin because they know the price that was paid so that their sins could be forgiven and their unrighteousness made righteousness. They understand that seduction is the way of the evil one, not the way of those who have life in Christ and have been delivered from the wrath of God. For the wicked, they will receive their glory, and it is called “**utter disgrace**” (v. 16). The believer, however, will receive their glory, and it will be according to God’s grace. The wicked man’s glory is vain glory; the righteous man’s glory is full in God and Christ!

5. Woe to the idolater (vv. 18-20)

Idolatry is the foundation of all sin. It is to glory in the creature rather than the Creator. What we see in these “Woes!” is really the Ten Commandments in reverse. The first four woes deal with man’s relationship to one another. This final one deals with man’s relationship to God. The first four commandments are given to protect us from the sin of idolatry. To cherish anything or anyone other than God is idolatry.

The righteous understands that true worship is reserved for the One alone who has worth. God alone is worthy of our worship. Anything else is sheer idolatry. That is why the Apostle Paul attached what he labeled the greatest of sins, covetousness, to that of idolatry (Rom. 7:7; Eph. 5:5). Covetousness places our dependence and affections on the things of this earth rather than on God.

Martin Luther understood the devotion that rightly belongs to God alone. He wrote:

I believe that God has created me and all that exists. He has given me and still preserves my body and soul with all their powers. He provides me with food and clothing, home and family, daily work, and all that I need from day to day. God also protects me in time of danger and guards me from every evil. All this he does out of fatherly and divine goodness and mercy, though I do not deserve it. Therefore I surely ought to thank and praise, serve and obey him.

There is a man who serves God! The righteous will live by faith in God for all things at all times, trusting that God will provide for him in His way in His time. We must recognize that we have appetites that are unhealthy for us spiritually. If we fail to realize this, then we go off in hot pursuit to satisfy our own desires. Solomon’s assessment of such a life, “All is vanity!” May we heed his words, and the woes of Habakkuk, and trust God with our entire lives.