

Sunday, March 14, 2021

Woe!

(Tears, Ashes, and Trumpets; Message 4)
(Lent, 2021)
Habakkuk 2:6-20

Scripture:

⁶ *“Will not all of them taunt him with ridicule and scorn, saying,*

*“Woe to him who piles up stolen goods
and makes himself wealthy by extortion!
How long must this go on?”*

⁷ *Will not your creditors suddenly arise?
Will they not wake up and make you tremble?
Then you will become their prey.*

⁸ *Because you have plundered many nations,
the peoples who are left will plunder you.
For you have shed human blood;
you have destroyed lands and cities and everyone in them.*

⁹ *“Woe to him who builds his house by unjust gain,
setting his nest on high to escape the clutches of ruin!*

¹⁰ *You have plotted the ruin of many peoples,
shaming your own house and forfeiting your life.*

¹¹ *The stones of the wall will cry out,
and the beams of the woodwork will echo it.*

¹² *“Woe to him who builds a city with bloodshed
and establishes a town by injustice!*

¹³ *Has not the Lord Almighty determined
that the people’s labor is only fuel for the fire,
that the nations exhaust themselves for nothing?*

¹⁴ *For the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord
as the waters cover the sea.*

¹⁵ *“Woe to him who gives drink to his neighbors,
pouring it from the wineskin till they are drunk,
so that he can gaze on their naked bodies!*

¹⁶ *You will be filled with shame instead of glory.
Now it is your turn! Drink and let your nakedness be exposed!^[e]
The cup from the Lord’s right hand is coming around to you,
and disgrace will cover your glory.*

¹⁷ *The violence you have done to Lebanon will overwhelm you,*

*and your destruction of animals will terrify you.
For you have shed human blood;
you have destroyed lands and cities and everyone in them.
18 "Of what value is an idol carved by a craftsman?
Or an image that teaches lies?
For the one who makes it trusts in his own creation;
he makes idols that cannot speak.
19 Woe to him who says to wood, 'Come to life!
Or to lifeless stone, 'Wake up!
Can it give guidance?
It is covered with gold and silver; there is no breath in it."
20 The Lord is in his holy temple; let all the earth be silent before him.*

Message:

This second part of Habakkuk chapter two appears anticlimactic when compared with some of the powerful material we've been dealing with in Habakkuk.

We're going from "*The Just shall live by Faith*" - one of the best-known phrases of Scripture - to five woes no one has ever heard. The passage concludes with another well-known phrase.

Some see these verses as an interlude between Act One and Act Two; but it is far from insignificant.

The prophet has been complaining about the suffering of the righteous and the prosperity of the wicked, about how pervasive injustice seems to go unpunished, and how what he knows and what he sees are incongruent. And now, finally, God seems to come through.

John Calvin says these verses assist the just in living by faith because no one can live by faith unless they're convinced God cares for them, still sits on the throne, and still rules the world.

God has spoken to the righteous who have been waiting intently for his word, now he has something to say to and for the "other side."

This second part of Habakkuk's Chapter Two poem is divided into five stanzas - each beginning with or containing the word "woe!"

This part is introduced as a "taunt" to be sung "*in scoffing derision/sarcasm*;" it is directed against a world-conquering tyrant and their captive people

The Hebrew "*hoi*" traditionally translated "*Woe to You!*" sounds like a **threat**. It is traditionally understood as a statement of "curse," a **prophetic**

condemnation or a divine threat in which God points his finger and says, “*I’m coming after you!*”

But another way of understanding this is as a “*cry of dismay or grief*” and some newer translations use the word, “*alas.*” There are examples of this word being used as a cry of grief by mourners (e.g., in **Jeremiah 22:18; 34:5** and **Amos 5:16**).

Cries of grief can reflect both sorrow and anger; both are evident here. So some see these verses as a parody of a Hebrew funeral song or dirge (cf. **2 Samuel 1:19-27**); i.e. a mock funeral song; pretending to be saddened by the demise of an enemy while inwardly rejoicing.

No doubt in the prophet’s mind all of these emotions are going through his head and his heart as he once again calls his people to **repentance** and prays they’ll respond in obedience.

WHO

Habakkuk doesn’t specify the people against whom these words are spoken. It’s often understood to be the **Assyrians** or **Babylonians**, also known as Chaldeans.

Habakkuk says people will sing a mock funeral song at Assyria/Babylon’ demise (i.e., people should [and generally do] mourn one’s death; but no one will mourn this death).

But unfortunately, this song is premature; the tyrant isn't dead yet; people are still squirming under his thumb of oppression.

Some think the tyrant here is the prophet’s **own king**, a Judean ruler such as Jehoiakim (cf. **2 Kings 24:1-9; Jeremiah 22:18-23**)

The Qumran community, in their commentary on Habakkuk, identifies the tyrant with their enemies (i.e., the Romans) - but it could be anyone we see as an **enemy**.

Others suggest we’d do well to reflect on **our own complicity** in these sins Habakkuk identifies – they suggest it includes us as well and we should grieve our involvement. This is where the ashes, the mourning, comes in.

This discussion is made possible because there are no historical references here. As we get into these “woes” we’ll realize these descriptions are (intentionally) not limited to any one king, any one nation, any one people group, or any one period of time. Fact is, they can be applied over and over and over to tyranny in many forms.

Sadly, the subjects about which Habakkuk sings lament are depressingly familiar. **So to whom do these woes apply? Answer: “If the shoe fits...”**

WOES

This chapter exposes five of Babylon's most notorious sins. Ironically and interestingly, while these woes were likely initially directed at Babylon, they are proclaimed and prophesied to Judah. (It is a reminder we all fall under God's rule; we should all take notes – write it on tablets!; the list will make all of us uneasy!)

What Habakkuk is doing here for his people (and us) is diagnosing the times (his, but ironically, ours as well; last week preached on “When” in Habakkuk, numerous people commented on how timely the message was!)

We might ask “But what does Habakkuk know about technology, health care, a world-wide pandemic, terrorism or foreign policy?” But those are [all] surface issues; underneath are the deeper issues; prophets are always interested in the deeper moral and spiritual issues that impact people.

The first woe deals with **exploitation (2:6-8) (i.e., violations of the 8th command).**

Habakkuk writes that those who pursue power by preying on and victimizing the weak will find themselves victimized. Woe to those who **enrich themselves** on the backs of those who have not.

For example, it is not uncommon for employers taking advantage of their employees (e.g., the trucking industry in Southern California; companies exploiting cheap labor in underdeveloped countries; employers offer only unlivable wages...)

Those with money tend to get richer because of other's debts (e.g., check cashing stores; exorbitant credit card interest rates; rent to own businesses; this pandemic has hit minimum wage earners and the service industry far harder than the middle and upper classes).

Since we have been created in the image of a just God, we must be concerned about all the **matters of injustice** we encounter - not just pick and choose the ones we like: Persecuted Christians; unborn children; abused women, spouses, and children; racism, the hungry; victims of violence and the senseless killings; sadly, there is a long list.

These exploited groups – the Bible includes them in the word, “poor” - must weigh heavy on our heart.

The second woe deals with **greed (2:9-11) (More violations of the 8th command).**

The Babylonians accumulated the wealth of other nations by force and used it to make their own nation more powerful in order to gain more wealth from more nations. Greed perpetuates greed.

Babylon's greed led them to arrogantly exalt themselves - *like a nest high in a tree or cliff (2:9)* - and to develop a false sense of security (as did the rich fool in **Luke 12:13f**); their arrogance leads them to believe life is solely about themselves.

Greed is an unhealthy measure of **self-preservation** where people hoard goods that might otherwise benefit or help **others**: What do we have - that we hold on to tightly - that might help someone else?

God, Habakkuk reports, will judge the Babylonians and Israel's enemies by turning their very sense of protection ("*stones and rafters*") against them (**2:11**). After plundering nation upon nation, the Babylonian leaders had accumulating more than they could possibly use in a thousand lifetimes...but it still wasn't enough.

God thinks quite differently; he will bring down the **greedy** and **arrogant** - those that demand and think they deserve more than anyone else.

Matthew 23:12 - "*Those who exalt themselves will be humbled...*"

Are you a sharer or a hoarder? Humble or self-important? A giver or greedy?

The third woe deals with violence (2:12-14) (i.e., violations of the 6th command). In addition to their wickedness, the Babylonians had a reputation for violence, for **killing** and maiming, both literally and physically.

Much of Habakkuk relies on parallelism (i.e., parallelism is a common Hebrew literary form where the same concept is repeated two or more times using different words). In **2:12**, the woe is to those who build their personal empire through unjust means. In **2:13**, the woe is to those who work hard their entire life just to build a personal empire; Habakkuk says it's not worth much more than firewood

Notice also in these verses the word LORD is in small caps. That is an indication that the original Hebrew is using God's covenant name ("Yahweh," Lord Almighty). This is God's personal name, his relationship name.

This is the name the Jews refused to say aloud because they considered it too holy to cross their lips, so they substituted "*adoni*" (meaning, Lord, which we transcribe as LORD)

This is also his name that often pictures Him as the commander in chief of his army of heavenly warriors (**2:13**). This is his name that frequently occurs in passages describing God's judgment.

Habakkuk is reminding his listeners it is futile for a nation to focus on their continuing existence and reputation because the day is coming when everyone will recognize the enduring glory of the Lord!

It is natural to seek revenge against those who've harmed and done violence to us. But Paul reminds us our revenge is **unnecessary**; **God** will do it for us (**Rom. 12:19**). Those who seek revenge, sin; those who commit the sin will become victims of the sin.

The fourth woe deals with intimidation (2:15-17) (i.e., a violation of the 7th command).

Habakkuk 2:15 paints a picture of **indignity**, embarrassing treatment, and **sexual hazing** - all of which Babylon imposed on their victims. What does God say to those who shame others or rejoice in another's shaming?

He says, "*The cup in the Lord's right hand is coming around to you*" (**2:16c**). The cup in the Lord's right hand is the outpouring of his wrath (cf. **Jer. 25:15**).

Remember when James and John asked Jesus if they could sit at Jesus left and right side; *Jesus said "You do not know what you're asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I am to drink?" They said to him, "We are able."* (**Matthew 20:22**).

Again, Habakkuk reminds us, "*What comes **around**, goes **around***" (this is a common theme throughout these woes; how we treat others is how we will be treated).

What you did to Lebanon - killing its people, striping its forests bare and destroying the animals that occupied them - will happen to you (This indictment is a repeat of the indictment in **2:8**).

Watching the news, we've all seen and heard about the doctor(s) who abused and humiliated young girls; they are now humiliated and incarcerated. There have been movie moguls, senators and congressmen, and television anchors who were inappropriate with women losing their reputation and employment - the governor of New York is currently dealing with a list of such accusations.

Intimidation and bullying in our world come in many forms: sexual, financial, political, militarily (cf. North Korea, Russia, U.S. all play the game: "*Our rockets are bigger and better than your rockets!*"). None of this is **acceptable** to **God**!

The fifth and final woe deals with idolatry (2:18-19) (i.e., a violation of the 2nd commandment).

As we know already from **Exodus 20:3**, we may place **no** gods before the one **true** God. Doing so constitutes idolatry.

What good is an idol that has been carved out by a craftsman? How can something made by human hands be considered superior to the one who created the hands.

Most of our current idols haven't been **fashioned** or carved to be idols; our idols are a bit more sophisticated (if idols can be sophisticated). Our money, large homes, fancy cars, iPads and iPhones, great vacations, passion for sports (football, for example), our job, fashionable clothes brands, popularity, power and influence - can easily become things we value more than God. Truth is, we tend to spend a whole lot more time pursuing these things than pursuing God and his kingdom.

Yet none of them speak. The idol's silence underscores its **powerlessness** and **uselessness**; idols are small and for small souls; idols are not only a waste of our time, but they also impair our relationship with God.

Sadly, as people continue to worship little things in little ways, they finally lose sight of the **greatness of God** who is greatly to be praised.

WONDER

Let's lay the problem out on the table: it looks like evil is winning. Churches are closing; families are being ripped apart; God is basically ignored.

Meanwhile alcohol and gambling addictions are up; formerly prohibited drugs are now legal; road rage has increased; domestic violence is commonplace. All of these have increased dramatically during the pandemic. Only 23% of the crimes reported in this country are solved. Truth has become relative. Sure seems like evil is winning.

And God says, for the moment, I'm going to allow an evil nation to gain ascendancy and dominate my people because they must be **purged of their sin.**

- God: *"My people have been sinful, have forsaken my covenant and are spiritually impotent"* (Translated: they've ignored me, haven't obeyed me, and have left the spiritual harvest to rot)
- God: *"That doesn't mean I'm favoring the Babylonians over my people. It does mean I'm not longer going to protect my people from the logical consequences of their sin"*
- God: *"And yes, the enemies of my people will also face judgment - as they should; I will met out justice fairly according to my sovereign will."*

May we be forgiven for thinking future judgment offers little comfort today. What comfort is it for people who are **suffering** and **oppressed** NOW (today) to know that **someday** - actually a day in the distant future - our oppressor will come to justice?

What is Habakkuk really trying to accomplish here? Did these kings to whom this was addressed ever hear this message? Did any of these kings ever

believe the words of this prophet? Historically, few did. So, if it doesn't make any difference, what's the **point**?

The point is when the oppressed hear God's **promise**, when the weak who can't stand up to the power of the tyrant are assured there is a **greater power**, when those who suffer are given a ray of hope and they believe it, they can stand and testify, "*The righteous [can, will] live by faith.*" Habakkuk offers this as a divine word of encouragement.

Then Habakkuk puts all of this in proper perspective... in a one verse conclusion. Don't forget, Yahweh, the Lord Almighty, the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ is greater than any **army** and all their bombs, treasuries of gold and silver, coercion and manipulation techniques of bribery and torture.

Don't forget, evil has been unsuccessful in **overcoming** good even though it has been trying since the beginning of time. Good is still here; good has and will ultimately persevere.

And don't forget, Habakkuk concludes, "*the Lord is in holy temple*" (2:20) (i.e., "*the Lord is on his heavenly throne;*" **Psalm 11:4**).

The day is coming when "*the whole earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord!*" (2:14). His glory will come like a tidal wave and cover the whole land. And we live by **faith** - in great hope and expectation - not by **sight**.

Our God is incomprehensibly big! Habakkuk recreates a picture of a big God in a big world. Jesus came to save and set people free; we tend to chain them up in little hyphens and adjectives; a-millennial Christians; born-again Christians; pro-life Christians; Christians against things; Christians for things...

Jesus sent us out into his world as sheep among wolves; we prefer to find comfort in our huddles and try to enhance them with casseroles, cookies, and crafts.

But here, in the midst of a world that seems to make little sense to him, Habakkuk cries out: "*Make God God! Make God big! Make the glory of the Lord known!*"

Quiet everyone.

Let us stand before God almighty in holy silence. Let us Listen! For the day is coming...