

What the World Is to Know

Habakkuk 2:6-14

August 1, 2010

We are now in the second week of looking at God's answer to Habakkuk's second complaint. Even though Habakkuk was upset that evil people seemed to be running things in Judah, he was just as upset at God's plan to use the even more wicked Babylonians to be the instruments of His justice. We saw last week that God wants us to know what He is up to, finding that in God's command to write down His words and get the message ready to be carried by runners. We also saw that God said the righteous will live by faith. This morning's text follows God's statements there.

God is speaking of the wicked as the text begins. God has mentioned their arrogance and the trust in things of this world instead of the things of God. The Babylonians were never satisfied and sought domination of the whole world, capturing the people around them on the way.

With verse six we see a shift in the fortunes of the Babylonians. Until now, even though God was opposed to their attitude, the prophecy was one of success in their goal. God was using them to punish the nation of Judah, and so they were to be allowed temporary success, but their greed and desire to rule over those around them were not to have the last word. Indeed, those they had taken captive will taunt them and ridicule them.

This shift is marked by five woes which the captives will declare against the Babylonians. We will look at the first three today, and then the other two next week. The first **woe** is to those who pile up stolen goods

and who build their wealth simply by taking from others. There are two ways to become wealthy. You can apply your mind, time, and talents to hard work and creating a service or product that was not there before, or you can merely take the fruit of another's labor. God rewards the first, as Jesus pointed out in the parable of the talents. God despises the second as theft and thuggery.

One of the principles of scripture is that we usually end up having to live with the consequences of our decisions. Since the Babylonians had chosen to make enemies out of everyone, then they would eventually pay the price. Those who owed them would get their payback. The people who had been run over by the Babylonian military machine would rise up and make them tremble in fear. Then, God said, the situation would be reversed. Because they had plundered many, they would be plundered. They would be plundered because they had killed others and destroyed the nations around them for their own glory and power.

The second woe is pronounced against those who build their realm on unjust **gain**. Again God refers to arrogance. The goal in this for them was to escape the fate of those they had attacked. They wanted to be in a safe place free from the harm of attack.

God said, however, that the plotting they had done against others had already led to shame for their house and the forfeiting of their lives. God had not missed anything they had done. Even the stones and beams of their houses, purchased with loot stolen from others, testified to God against them.

The third woe is to one who builds a **city** with bloodshed and establishes a town with crime. The

Babylonians had put themselves in a position where all they had was the result of the work of others and had been stolen from them through unjust practices and outright theft. God says that He has already determined that the work of the people is merely fuel for the fire, it is tinder that is smoldering at the foundations of all that they had. All the work that the Babylonians were requiring of the people around them would amount to nothing because it would all go up in flames. As Solomon had discovered centuries before, it was a chasing after the wind.

As I studied this text I was reminded of its similarity to part of the history of our nation early in the last century. I was born in the Philadelphia area, but I was raised in West Virginia. When I was a child in that state there were still people who remembered living and working in the old coal towns.

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries the mining companies would buy large tracts of land in order to mine coal. They would hire miners, build them homes, and build a general store. The company owned everything. The men who worked the mines and their families received their paychecks from the same people from whom they rented their homes and bought their groceries. The men in charge of all this set the salaries of the miners, the amount of the rent, and the prices of the items in the store (charging a premium for the convenience of having the store close even though there wasn't an alternative). The numbers were carefully adjusted so that things cost a little bit more than the men were paid. Of course, the company was happy to let the men borrow money since they knew the men had jobs.

The end result really was that each day the men worked they ended up owing the company a little more money. It was a new form of slavery. I had a teacher in school whose father was a miner. As a boy this man joined the Navy, even though he couldn't swim, just so he wouldn't have to work in the mines.

Just as God had warned the Babylonians, the debtors rose up and the ones who had been living off of them trembled. For a time Logan county in West Virginia had the highest murder rate in the nation as the miners rebelled against the practices of the mining companies. The result was the labor union movement.

Getting back to our text, God points us from the vanishing work of the captives to something that would matter and would have a lasting impact. When God would overthrow the Babylonian empire it would be obvious **He** had done it. First the Babylonians themselves would be forced to acknowledge His power and glory. Then the world would see it as He took Babylon's power and might and gave it to another.

Many of the events that mark the closing of the Old Testament are part of the fulfilment of this prophecy. Time and again we see God working within Babylon to show them His power and might and to try to get them to seek Him and acknowledge Him. This is one of the main themes of the book of prophecy by Daniel. At its beginning, God speaks directly to king Nebuchadnezzar in dreams. God tells the instrument He had used to bring judgement on His people to stop being cocky and start acknowledging him. God knows what lies ahead and even Babylon's fate is in God's hands. Nebuchadnezzar worships God, but only for a time. This

cycle repeats itself with God showing His power each time, the king acknowledging that power, but then seeking it for himself again: God preserves Daniels' friends in the fiery furnace, God makes Nebuchadnezzar insane and then restores him, God's hand writes on the wall of the king's successor, Belshazzar, telling him his reign is to be cut short, God preserves Daniel from the lions. In each case God's power and glory are demonstrated. In each case they were too set on their own superiority and the supposed superiority of their false gods to follow the one true and living God for long.

Just as God ruled over ancient Judah and Babylon, just as His power and authority determined what happened to them whether or not they believed or acknowledged it, God is in control of this nation and this **church**. It's a good thing too, because if we were really in charge there would be little hope. Our nation is in serious trouble as we continue to move away from God and the principles of His word, as we move deeper and deeper into debt, and as we develop a culture of blaming everybody else for our mistakes and failings. Our society is moving away from the God of the Bible and toward a god of our own making who just wants us to be good and happy instead of repenting and seeking His forgiveness.

Likewise, our church has been in decline for many years as we have sought to return to the things God gave us before instead of following God into the future He has set before us. As we have sought to do things our way our situation has gotten worse and we have gotten more desperate. It echoes the situations in which Judah, and later, Babylon found themselves. The key is to turn to

God and acknowledge Him, holding fast to His way. As we follow God's way the world will see the glory of God worked out in **us**. I am already beginning to see it! I pray you can too!

About the earth being filled with the knowledge of the glory of God, Habakkuk borrowed the phrase from Isaiah. Isaiah had used it in a more positive sense as he looked to the end of time and the coming Day of the Lord. For Isaiah, the earth would be full of the knowledge of the Lord when the shoot comes up out of Jesse. We have already seen the beginnings of this prophecy as well. We know who the root is. His name is Jesus of Nazareth, the Christ, the Anointed One of God. The rest of the prophecy, the fullness of Jesus' reign, belongs to a time yet in the future. In speaking of His reign and His glory and majesty, Isaiah wrote, "*The wolf will live with the lamb, the leopard will lie down with the goat, the calf and the lion and the yearling together; and a little child will lead them. The cow will feed with the bear, their young will lie down together, and the lion will eat straw like the ox. The infant will play near the hole of the cobra, and the young child put his hand into the viper's nest. They will neither harm nor destroy on all my holy mountain, for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea.*" (Isaiah 11:6-9)