

Scripture Reading: Habakkuk 1:

“The burden which the prophet Habakkuk saw. 2 O Jehovah, how long shall I cry, And You will not hear? Even cry out to You, "Violence!" And You will not save. 3 Why do You show me iniquity, And cause me to see trouble? For plundering and violence are before me; there is strife, and contention arises. 4 Therefore the law is powerless, And justice never goes forth. For the wicked surround the righteous; Therefore perverse judgment proceeds. 5 "Look among the nations and watch-- Be utterly astounded! For I will work a work in your days Which you would not believe, though it were told you. 6 For indeed I am raising up the Chaldeans, A bitter and hasty nation which marches through the breadth of the earth, to possess dwelling places that are not theirs. 7 They are terrible and dreadful; Their judgment and their dignity proceed from themselves. 8 Their horses also are swifter than leopards, And more fierce than evening wolves. Their chargers charge ahead; their cavalry comes from afar; they fly as the eagle that hastens to eat. 9 "They all come for violence; Their faces are set like the east wind. They gather captives like sand. 10 They scoff at kings, And princes are scorned by them. They deride every stronghold, For they heap up earthen mounds and seize it. 11 Then his mind changes, and he transgresses; He commits offense, Ascribing this power to his god." 12 Are You not from everlasting, O Jehovah my God, my Holy One? We shall not die. O Jehovah, You have appointed them for judgment; O Rock, You have marked them for correction. 13 You are of purer eyes than to behold evil, And cannot look on wickedness. Why do You look on those who deal treacherously, And hold Your tongue when the wicked devours A person more righteous than he? 14 Why do You make men like fish of the sea, Like creeping things that have no ruler over them? 15 They take up all of them with a hook, They catch them in their net, & gather them in their dragnet. Therefore they rejoice and are glad. 16 Therefore they sacrifice to their net, And burn incense to their dragnet; Because by them their share is sumptuous And their food plentiful. 17 Shall they therefore empty their net, And continue to slay nations without pity?" 2:1 I will stand my watch And set myself on the rampart, And watch to see what He will say to me, And what I will answer when I am corrected. 2 Then Jehovah answered me and said: "Write the vision And make it plain on tablets, That he may run who reads it.

God's Precious Promises

I am doing a short series of sermons this year taking us from Epiphany Sunday until next week when we remember the Roe v. Wade decision by lifting up imprecatory prayers before the just judge of heaven.

You might think I have chosen a strange sermon title for the text I have read this morning, but I trust you will see the point in the end. But first I want to do something that I do not usually do...

Can anyone tell me what one of the major lessons was from my opening sermon last week?

- That's right, it is OK and even good to have honest conversations with our God and Savior.

This is what the prophet is doing in this short book, and it can be very instructive for us today. As we saw last week, this conversation begins with the prophet's complaint about the condition of Israel in his day.

Habakkuk cries out to God because he sees violence & iniquity in the land, he sees injustice in the land, and he sees strife and contention in the land. I made the case for him being America's prophet because starting with the sin of abortion and continuing on with our economic and other social problems, we are in the same place today here in America.

- It is not hard to find Christians who are concerned for the state of our nation & bring such cries before God today.

This conversation continues with a surprising answer from God, a startled response from our prophet and further assurance from the Lord that He is very serious about His solution.

I trust we will remember that the principles I am reviewing in these messages to help us understand our national situation also apply to many of our personal situations as well:

- **Perhaps we cry out to God because we have loved ones who have left the faith.**
- **Perhaps our marriages are not all that we thought they would be.**
- **Perhaps your job is not the vocation that you desired or thought that you deserved.**
- **Perhaps your finances are a mess.**
- **Perhaps we are facing debilitating medical problems in ourselves or our family.**

Any and ALL of these situations can cause us to cry out, Why O Lord, or how long O Lord, which can be a very good thing if it is done humbly & respectfully. We must also remember that God's perfect answer to our prayers may not be exactly what we had in mind! In fact, as we learn from the Book of Habakkuk it might be quite shocking!

As we continue our short series from this important book, we will consider the Lord's extended explanation of His plans today with a focus on the sin of idolatry and look at the Prophets final prayer and response next week. I will not be going through the remainder of chapter one which we read this morning verse by verse but I trust that you saw how the conversation between the prophet and God continued. Habakkuk brings his legitimate concerns to the Lord asking how long it would be before God set things right. God says, don't worry, the Babylonians are coming and gives a dreadful description of who and what they are. It is hard for us to even imagine a modern equivalent for America!

It could be the Red Chinese or perhaps the Muslims.

- **God might even punish us as he did the once faithful nation of Germany with a tyrannical ruler who rose from their own ranks to commit unspeakable atrocities.**

As Americans we tend to think such things could not happen here and as Christians we tend to think that God would not use such evil means. That was certainly the Prophet's first reaction to the news that the Babylonian hoards were coming as God's judgment on His people... To paraphrase, 'Lord we are in bad shape, but the Babylonians are REALLY BAD... In fact they are so bad you cannot even look at them.'

- **As we begin chapter two we see more evidence that the Prophet Habakkuk is carrying on this honest conversation with God with the proper respect and humility...**

2:1 "I will stand my watch And set myself on the rampart, And watch to see what He will say to me, And what I will answer when I am corrected."

We see the same attitude here that we see with Jesus in the Garden or Paul with his thorn in the flesh... They cry out honestly asking for relief and then humbly submit to God's will.

- **IF we are honest, we know that we often do the first and seldom do the second...**

If we think that God is not answering our prayers in any of those areas that I mentioned in our personal lives, or for us as a nation right now, perhaps it is because He is waiting for us to be truly willing to accept His answer. IF we come with the humility and respect that we see here with Habakkuk then God will not only answer our prayers, but will give us greater understanding of what He is doing or planning to do... This means that we must stand with the prophet when he says, "I will stand my watch And set myself on the rampart, And watch to see what He will say to me, And what I will answer when I am corrected." John Calvin shares these thoughts about our need to 'watch what He may say': "The metaphor seems incongruous, and yet there appears a reason for it; For the Prophet intended to remind us, that we ought to employ all our senses for this end, -- to be wholly attentive to God's Word. For though one may be resolved to hear God, we yet find that many temptations immediately distract us. It is not then enough to become teachable, and to apply our ears to hear His voice, except also our eyes be

connected with them, so that we may be altogether attentive. We hence see the object of the Prophet; for he meant to express the greatest attention, as though he had said, that the faithful would ever wander in their thoughts, except they carefully concentrated both their eyes and their ears, and all their senses, on God, and continually restrained themselves, lest vagrant speculations or imaginations should lead them astray. And further, the Prophet teaches us, that we ought to have such reverence for God's Word as to deem it sufficient for us to hear His voice. Let this, then, be our understanding, to obey God speaking to us, and reverently to embrace His Word, so that He may deliver us from all troubles, and also keep our minds in peace and tranquility."

- That is truly how to have a humble and respectful conversation with our God and Savior!

God goes on in Chapter two to give the Prophet an extended answer that tells him yes, in fact, God is going to use the Babylonians, but also assures Habakkuk that His justice will be maintained because they will come under His just judgment as well. God's answer begins in verse two:

2 "Then Jehovah answered me and said: "Write the vision And make it plain on tablets, That he may run who reads it. 3 For the vision is yet for an appointed time; But at the end it will speak, and it will not lie. Though it tarry, wait for it; because it will surely come, It will not tarry. 4 "Behold the proud, His soul is not upright in him; But the just shall live by his faith."

God is about to give Habakkuk many disturbing details about the Babylonians and how his nation will be judged by them. But he wants him, and all of us, to see that the salvation of His people is central to what God does in history. The New Testament often references how 'the just shall live by faith' and we should learn here that we do so because Jesus did come at His appointed time and that He DID solve the problem of sin which is at the root of all these troubles.

- In a sense God is telling the prophet, don't let all that I am about to tell you discourage you, but rather keep your eye on the ball and know that in the end I will deliver my people and set all things right.

God then proceeds to show that He is not oblivious to the many sins of Babylon, just as Jesus knew the heart of Judas when He told him to go and do what he was ordained to do quickly.

- God can and does use wicked individuals and even nations for His righteous purposes.
- This is the great lesson of this little book!

God begins with Babylon's great sin:

2:5 "Indeed, because he transgresses by wine, He is a proud man, And he does not stay at home. Because he enlarges his desire as hell, And he is like death, and cannot be satisfied, He gathers to himself all nations And heaps up for himself all peoples."

It was the sin of pride, 'we shall be as God,' that brought forth the fall of Lucifer and Adam introducing sin and death into God's creation. Babylon is a vicious enemy that will not be satisfied, just like death. But just as Jesus came to defeat death, so God assures the prophet that He will bring judgment upon Babylon. God gives what are often called five woes that Babylon will face and I will leave most for your further study...

- In verses 6-8 we see that Babylon will be judged for plundering other nations.
- In verses 9-11 we see that Babylon will be judged for establishing their dynasty by force
- In verses 12-14 we see that Babylon will be judged for building their city through bloodshed and iniquity.
- In verses 15-16 we see that Babylon will be judged for having wicked rulers

Now obviously I could do a whole series of sermons on how these same judgments could be brought on most modern nations, including our own, but for this morning I will just focus on the final woe dealing with idolatry:

18 "What profit is the image, that its maker should carve it, The molded image, a teacher of lies, That the maker of its mold should trust in it, To make mute idols? 19 Woe to him who says to wood, 'Awake!' To silent stone, 'Arise! It shall teach!' Behold, it is overlaid with gold and silver, Yet in it there is no breath at all. 20 But Jehovah is in His holy temple. Let all the earth keep silence before Him."

As we learned last week the sins of Manasseh were rooted in idolatry.

➤ I would argue that the sins of our nation today are also rooted in the sin of idolatry.

But wait, you say, we don't have many idols in our nation today. You might find a few Buddhas here and there but there are no statues of Moloch in the public squares. Especially here in America we have left those old religions with spirits and idols behind: We are a nation that looks to man's reason and the material world for ALL our answers...

However, we should remember the wisdom that C.S. Lewis brought us with a bit of humor in his classic *The Screwtape Letters*. It is a fictional collection of letters written to a young demon from the veteran *Screwtape*. In the 7th letter, the young demon asks whether his client should be kept in the dark about his existence. *Screwtape* responds, "Our policy, for the moment, is to conceal ourselves. Of course this has not always been so. We are really faced with a cruel dilemma. When the humans disbelieve in our existence we lose all the pleasing results of direct terrorism, and we make no magicians. On the other hand, when they believe in us, we cannot make them materialists and skeptics. At least not yet! I have great hopes that we shall learn in due time how to emotionalize and mythologize their science to such an extent that what is, in effect, a belief in us [though not under that name] will creep in while the human mind remains closed to belief in the enemy [that would be God in this case]. The "Life force," the worship of sex, and some aspects of Psychoanalysis may here prove useful. If once we can produce our perfect work – the Materialist Magician, the man, not using, but veritably worshipping what he vaguely calls 'forces' while denying the existence of 'spirits' – then the end of the war will be in sight. In the mean time we must obey our orders... If any faint suspicion of your existence begins to arise in his mind, suggest to him a picture of something in red tights and persuade him that since he cannot believe in that... he therefore cannot believe in you."

The material magicians had of course already stolen the show by the time that Lewis penned these words in the 1940's. Darwin's evolution put the material universe in the place of God's creativity, Sigmund Freud had put man's mind in the place of God's wisdom and Karl Marx had put man's weapons in the place of God's strength. These men and those who influenced them created the idols needed for our destruction and we worship them all today without giving it a second thought. The warnings that God gave to Babylon as they bowed down to literal idols can certainly be applied today:

18 "What profit is the image, that its maker should carve it, The molded image, a teacher of lies, That the maker of its mold should trust in it, To make mute idols?"

The ancients wanted their idols to give them answers and to protect them, but in the end they were just material that by nature could only be silent.

It is the same today as man looks only to the material universe for answers. [relate the Martian water story]

In the end the material, whether a small idol on someone's shrine or the entire universe is mute.

God continues, "19 Woe to him who says to wood, 'Awake!' To silent stone, 'Arise! It shall teach!'"

With the modern foundation of evolution, man becomes part of the machine and yet our philosophers and analysts say to the human mind, 'arise! It shall teach' but in the end our minds left to themselves can come up with no more true morality or meaning than those dumb idols could.

So in the end Marx and his followers building on the foundation of the French revolution simply turned to force in an effort to make these mute and dumb idols more attractive and workable... “Behold, it is overlaid with gold and silver, Yet in it there is no breath at all.”

At a cost of perhaps a hundred million lives, man learned in the 20th Century that God’s Laws of economics and justice cannot be violated. These humanistic forces seem as overwhelming today as those Babylonian hoards would have to the Prophet Habakkuk in his day, but our hope has not changed:

20 “But Jehovah is in His holy temple. Let all the earth keep silence before Him.”

We will be reminded of this today as we are commissioned with the singing of Psalm 2 and it is something that we must always keep in mind, whether we are struggling with our personal problem or our national sins. The Book of Habakkuk is a brutal book in many ways, but as I said last week, I want to convince you that it is a book of hope: Our hope is in the Lord, even in the midst of the most trying circumstances.

And that brings me to my sermon title which may have seemed a bit strange while listening to our text. Yes, there are some precious promises to be found in this book, like the promise that Jesus would come at His appointed time and that Jehovah is in His holy temple. But there are other promises as well about the judgment of Israel at the hands of Babylon and the judgment of Babylon for their many sins.

➤ **Do we want to claim those promises for our families or nation?**

We certainly do NOT! But we must remember that they are just as much God’s promises as those others, so be careful about saying you want to claim all of God’s promises. Last year as we remembered the Roe v. Wade decision we considered the blessings and curses that are found in Deuteronomy chapters 27 & 28. While we certainly should pray for and look for the blessings that are found there, I don’t think it would be a good idea to pray for and look for the curses! What would you think if one of our men prayed, “Lord bring upon us ALL of your precious promises found in these chapters!”

Sadly, I saw an real life example of this in a newsletter I received just after Christmas using the very text we are studying. It was from a dear couple that Linda and I have known for many years and they were very excited about some new mission opportunities they were going to have in the New Year. On the outside of the newsletter, in bold type they included a verse from Habakkuk that I am sure was intended to get people excited about their work. “For I will work a work in your days which you would not believe, though it were told you.” Now that sounds good for a missions effort and is great teaser copy to get you to read what is inside... BUT it does great violence to the text of the Scriptures!

I am pretty sure this lovely couple is not asking God to bring the modern equivalent of the Babylonians to the shore of America to judge us for our sins. Now we may certainly have such judgment coming and that will bring us to our next installment, but for today we must remember to be diligent with our study of the Scriptures and know them well if we are going to carry on humble and honest conversation with God about whatever problems we must be facing. We should strive to understand and seek God’s blessings and make sure that we do not inadvertently bring His curses into our lives.

Our cry and desire should be that of the Prophet Habakkuk:

“I will stand my watch And set myself on the rampart, And watch to see what He will say to me, And what I will answer when I am corrected.”

Communion Meditation: Isaiah 26:13

“Then the commander stood and called out in Hebrew, "Hear the words of the great king, the king of Assyria! 14 This is what the king says: Do not let Hezekiah deceive you. He cannot deliver you! 15 Do not let Hezekiah persuade you to trust in Jehovah when he says, Jehovah will surely deliver us; this city will not be given into the hand of the king of Assyria.' 16 "Do not listen to Hezekiah. This is what the king of Assyria says: Make peace with me and come out to me. Then every one of you will eat from his own vine and fig tree and drink water from his own cistern, 17 until I come and take you to a land like your own--a land of grain and new wine, a land of bread and vineyards.”