

“PAYBACK TIME FOR BABYLON”

**I. Introduction**

- A. I noted last week that one of the things that distinguishes this book from the other Old Testament prophetic books is that it is a dialogue between Habakkuk and God.
1. It begins with the prophet complaining to the Lord about the disgraceful condition of the nation of Judah in his day.
  2. Though Habakkuk had seen the revival that took place under the reign of Josiah, things went downhill quickly after Josiah's death.
  3. So Habakkuk asked God, “Why do you make me see iniquity, and why do you idly look at wrong?” (1:3)
  4. God answered Habakkuk's complaint by telling him that he was going to do something about Judah's iniquity.
  5. He was going to send the wicked Babylonians to judge his people for their sin.
  6. This left Habakkuk utterly perplexed, and he asked how the Lord could allow such a wicked nation to swallow up those who are more righteous than they are.
- B. The second chapter of Habakkuk is God's answer to this question.
1. He tells Habakkuk that he is going to bring judgment upon Babylon as well.
  2. This is the main emphasis in this passage.
  3. It is about the eventual downfall of Babylon.
  4. But interspersed among the woes that are pronounced here we find three positive statements about the Lord and his

people.

5. Verse 4 says, “the righteous shall live by his faith.”
6. Verse 14 says, “the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the LORD as the waters cover the sea.”
7. And verse 20 says, “the LORD is in his holy temple; let all the earth keep silence before him.”
8. These three statements set forth the realities that necessitate the eventual downfall of Babylon, together with all who walk in unrighteousness.
9. The Babylons of this world cannot stand in the presence of the God who rules over his world with holy justice.

## **II. The Righteous Shall Live by His Faith (vv. 2-5)**

- A. Our passage begins with God instructing Habakkuk to write down the vision that he is about to receive.
  1. God wanted this message to be preserved and passed on to future generations of God’s people.
  2. As our Confession of Faith states in its opening chapter, God had his special revelation committed to writing “for the better preserving and propagating of the truth, and for the more sure establishment and comfort of the church against the corruption of the flesh, and the malice of Satan and of the world.” [WCF 1.1]
  3. The statement “so he may run who reads it” indicates that this message is to be proclaimed and disseminated, as by a herald.
  4. This reminds us that this passage was not only relevant for Habakkuk’s day but for ours as well.

- B. The Lord tells his prophet that the vision is certain, even though it “awaits its appointed time.”
1. God had decreed that his judgment would come upon Babylon, but that judgment did not come in Habakkuk’s lifetime.
  2. It did not take place until the year 539 BC, when Persia conquered Babylon.
  3. This is why God instructed his people to wait for the fulfillment of his Word.
  4. We need to do the same thing today.
  5. The Scriptures tell us that judgment is hanging over the world in which we live.
  6. A day is coming when the wicked will be called to account for their sins, a day when they will face God’s holy justice.
  7. We do not know when that day will be, but we can be absolutely certain that it will come at God’s appointed time.
- C. This brings us to Habakkuk 2:4, which is an extremely important verse both in Scripture and in church history.
1. It is cited three times in the New Testament, twice by Paul and once by the author of Hebrews (Rom. 1:17; Gal. 3:11; Heb. 10:38).
  2. Here in its original context in Habakkuk, it sets a contrast between the one who trusts in himself and the one who trusts in God.
  3. Unlike the proud Babylonians, the souls of the righteous are not puffed up.

4. The righteous acknowledge their poverty of spirit and trust in the Lord for a righteousness that is external to themselves.
  5. This is the point that Paul makes when he cites this verse in Romans 1, where he writes, “the gospel is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes... For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, ‘The righteous shall live by faith.’” (Rom. 1:16-17)
  6. In other words, spiritual life does not originate in anything that we do.
  7. It comes by faith alone.
- D. We find something similar in Galatians 3, where Paul cites Habakkuk 2:4 to show that this principle extends all throughout the Christian life.
1. He says, “all who rely on works of the law are under a curse; for it is written, ‘Cursed be everyone who does not abide by all things written in the Book of the Law, and do them.’ Now it is evident that no one is justified before God by the law, for ‘The righteous shall live by faith.’” (Gal. 3:10–11)
  2. We cannot begin the Christian life by faith and then live it out by relying on our own ability to perform God’s law.
  3. We have to live by faith in the Son of God.
  4. Jesus is both the Alpha and the Omega.
  5. He is the beginning and the end of the Christian life.
- E. When God told Habakkuk that the righteous shall live by his faith, he was calling Habakkuk to trust him in spite of how things appeared at that particular point in time.
1. This is why Habakkuk 2:4 is cited in Hebrews 10, where it says this: “For you have need of endurance, so that when you have done the will of God you may receive what is

promised. For, 'Yet a little while, and the coming one will come and will not delay; but my righteous one shall live by faith, and if he shrinks back, my soul has no pleasure in him.' But we are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who have faith and preserve their souls." (Heb. 10:36–39)

2. God's sovereignty and justice are not always evident in what takes place in the world around us, but we need to trust that he is still in perfect control.
  3. We can be certain that Christ will return and punish the wicked for their evil deeds.
- F. As far as the historical significance of Habakkuk 2:4, this verse was used by God to launch the Protestant Reformation.
1. Martin Luther spent a great deal of time pondering this verse prior to his conversion.
  2. It stuck in his mind as he struggled to understand how a sinner can be accepted by God.
  3. When Luther fell ill during a pilgrimage to Rome, he repeated Habakkuk 2:4 over and over to himself.
  4. The verse also came to mind once he got to Rome.
  5. He remembered it when he was performing a rite that would have earned him a papal indulgence.
  6. Listen to how his son explains what happened that day: "As he repeated his prayers on the Lateran staircase, the words of the prophet Habakkuk came suddenly to his mind: 'The just shall live by faith.' Thereupon he ceased his prayers, returned to Wittenberg, and took this as the chief foundation of all his doctrine." [cited in Boice, 409];
  7. That was the beginning of the Reformation.

8. In Luther's words, "Before those words broke upon my mind I hated God and was angry with him because, not content with frightening us sinners by the law and by the miseries of life, he still further increased our torture by the gospel. But when, by the Spirit of God, I understood those words -- 'The just shall live by faith!' 'The just shall live by faith!' -- then I felt born again like a new man; I entered through the open doors into the very Paradise of God." [cited in Boice, 409]
9. Isn't it amazing that the heart of the gospel is set forth so clearly in this tiny and oft-neglected book of prophecy?

### III. The Earth Will Be Filled with the Knowledge of God (vv. 6-14)

- A. We turn now to consider the remainder of this passage, which consists of five oracles of woe pronounced upon Babylon.
  1. In literary terms, this is what is known as a "taunt song."
  2. The people whom the Babylonians conquered are being depicted as lifting up their voices to sing a song about Babylon's eventual fall.
  3. It is important to note that these woes were not just about the nation of Babylon in the 6<sup>th</sup> century BC.
  4. The statement in verse 14 about the earth being filled with the knowledge of God's glory makes it clear that this also has an application across history.
  5. These woes are being pronounced upon the entire world system that lives in rebellion against God and his ways.
  6. They apply to the forces of evil and oppression in our day every bit as much as they applied to literal Babylon in Habakkuk's day.

- B. The first woe focuses upon Babylon's greedy pillaging of the nations.
1. They heaped up what was not their own.
  2. Their greed caused them to amass the wealth of many nations for themselves.
  3. There are plenty of examples of greed and exploitation in our world.
  4. And the Bible assures us that people will one day have to answer to God for heaping up what is not their own.
  5. One day, the tables will be turned on those who use people to enrich themselves.
  6. One day, the exploiters will become the spoil.
- C. The second woe begins in verse 9, and it addresses Babylon's many injustices.
1. Babylon builds itself up and makes a name for itself by trampling on others.
  2. Like birds of prey that build their nests high up in the sky, Babylon used the wealth that it amassed by plundering the nations to make itself secure.
  3. The Babylonians thought that by doing this they could keep themselves safe from the reach of all harm.
  4. They surrounded the capital city of Babylon with a wall that was wide enough for a four-horse chariot to ride on top of it.
  5. They thought that they were secure.
  6. There are many in the world today who make themselves secure by perverting justice.

7. This song of woe assures us that the fate that befell Babylon will eventually come upon all who practice injustice today.

D. In the third woe Babylon is condemned for using violence to achieve its goals.

1. They build their towns with blood.

2. They found their cities on iniquity.

3. Of course, there is nothing inherently wrong with trying to build things.

4. Human beings were created to be productive.

5. The problem comes when people will do anything in order to achieve their goals.

6. We do not have to look very far to see examples of this in our world.

7. Think of the terrorists and militants who try to advance their cause by murdering civilians.

8. When we see such things happening, we need to remember the teaching of this passage: "peoples labor merely for fire, and nations weary themselves for nothing".

9. On the last day, all of man's violent accomplishments will be laid bare and consumed in judgment.

10. On that day, the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the LORD as the waters cover the sea.

#### **IV. The Lord Is in His Holy Temple (vv. 15-20)**

A. This brings us to the fourth woe, where Babylon is condemned for seducing others into sin.



1. Verse 15 says, "Woe to him who makes his neighbors drink -- you pour out your wrath and make them drunk, in order to gaze at their nakedness!"
  2. In Hebrew, looking upon a person's nakedness is often a euphemism for sexual intercourse.
  3. The idea here is that the Babylonians used alcohol to seduce others into committing acts of sexual immorality.
  4. We are living in a culture that is dominated by seduction and sexual immorality.
  5. We need to remember that in due time, God will pour out the cup of his wrath upon all who practice such things.
- B. The fifth and final woe addresses Babylon's idolatry.
1. The focus of this woe is upon the lifelessness of manmade gods.
  2. Idolatry is a matter of the maker trusting in his own creation.
  3. Idolatry is illogical, but it is always popular.
  4. It is popular because people want to have a god that they can control, even if they know that that god isn't real.
  5. In our day, the gods in which many people profess to believe are nothing more than pale reflections of themselves.
  6. As one writer puts it, gods like those of New Age religion are merely "gods as accessories, and hence are merely masks by means of which the [person's] one true god -- [his or her own] will -- at once conceals and reveals itself." [Hart, *Atheist Delusions*, 24]
  7. Idolaters have a lot to say about their manmade gods, but the fact of the matter is that such gods always remain silent.

8. This stands in sharp contrast to the fact that one day, the world will shut its mouth and stand in silence before the one true and living God.

## V. Conclusion

- A. Habakkuk wanted to know how God could permit the Babylonians to conquer his covenant people.
- B. God doesn't really answer that question in this passage.
- C. What he does instead is assure his prophet that Babylon, and all who share in her wicked deeds, will one day be repaid for all their atrocities.
- D. The thing that we need to remember is that this will unfold in God's time, not ours.
- E. As God tells Habakkuk, "If it seems slow, wait for it; it will surely come".
- F. The Lord will be faithful to his Word, regardless of how things appear in the world around us.