

5) GOD WILL JUDGE THE WICKED (SUNDAY, SEPTEMBER 13, 2020)

Scripture reading – 2 Thess. 1:1-10; Habakkuk 2:4-14

INTRODUCTION

Here is a loaded question, what do you think of conspiracy theories?

There is no doubt that wicked men and women seek to plan and conspire to achieve their own wishes and fight against God's purposes.

Satan led the first conspiracy and continues to animate men into rebellion against God.

There are several dangers when it comes to this subject.

First, there is a lot of misinformation that you can come across when you study these matters.

Second, a lot of time can be consumed studying about conspiracies, things that we have little ability to do anything about, that can steal our focus and time from work that can be done for Christ and His kingdom.

Third, there is the danger to attribute to man or to Satan a sovereignty and control that they don't possess.

We must not think that any conspiracy is sovereign and in control.

We fully acknowledge that evil exists. Men and women are capable of committing evils that are beyond description.

Our belief that God is sovereign does not mean that we ignore evil or downplay suffering.

We also by faith must believe that God will bring judgment in His perfect timing.

The ultimate judgment comes in the return of our Lord Jesus Christ and the final judgment.

But God also does bring judgment in this present age.

As concerned as we are about evil, God is even more concerned with the wicked and will bring His judgment in His time.

We will focus our attention on Hab. 2:5-14.

We will begin with a review and introduction to this part of Habakkuk's prophecy.

1) REVIEW AND INTRODUCTION, HAB. 2:4-5

As I have mentioned before, the book of Habakkuk has a fairly simple outline.

There are two opening prayers and responses by the LORD. Then there is a final prayer and response of praise that ends the book.

The first prayer: Hab. 1:2-4.

The first response: Hab. 1:5-11

The second prayer: Hab. 1:12 – 2:1

The second response: Hab. 2:2-20

Three weeks ago, we looked at just the first part of God's response as we looked at chapter 2 and verses 2-4.

Look at verses 2-4 again.

God would bring a clear answer.

God's answer would not be delayed but would surely come.

The bottom line is whether we will live based on our own understanding or by faith in God and in His revealed truth.

Hab. 2:4 really does stand out both in this book and as we have seen is a key verse for the rest of Scripture.

John Calvin said of the word faith in verse 4:

It is indeed certain that the Prophet understands by the word *amunat*, that faith which strips us of all arrogance, and leads us naked and needy to God, that we may seek salvation from him alone, which would otherwise be far removed from us.

In verses 6-20 we have five woes pronounced against Babylon and all who boast in themselves.

Before that we have verse 5 which we can call a transition verse.

Verse 4 contrasts the proud man with the upright, justified, man of faith.

Verse 5 also speaks of the proud, powerful man, drunk on wine, success, and power.

As we look at these verses, we are confronted with language that is challenging in that it is not common in how we speak today.

We may not understand every single word in detail, but the basic message is quite clear.

Let's focus on verse 5.

It speaks of an individual man, but we can understand that there is a special application to the Babylonian empire and the rulers of Babylon who were men of great pride.

One article I found gives some background to the city and empire of Babylon.

Located about 60 miles (100 kilometers) south of Baghdad in modern-day Iraq, the ancient city of Babylon served for nearly two millennia as a center of Mesopotamian civilization.

One of its early rulers, Hammurabi, created a harsh system of laws, while in later times the Babylonian language would be used across the Middle East as a way of communicating across borders. Another great accomplishment, if the ancient stories are true, is the construction of the Hanging Gardens, a wonder of the ancient world, which some believe was built by the biblical king Nebuchadnezzar II.

The ancient scientists who lived in the city made important discoveries in mathematics, physics and astronomy. Among their many accomplishments, they developed trigonometry, used mathematical models to track the planet Jupiter and developed methods of tracking time that are still used today. Ancient Babylonian records are still used by modern-day astronomers to study how the rotation of the Earth has changed.

"Babylon, in all its manifestations, is at once remote to us and all around us. Like no other city, its history has become bound up with legend..." write researchers Irving Finkel and Michael Seymour in the book "Babylon" (Oxford University Press, 2008).¹

Nebuchadnezzar II, described in Scripture, was Babylon's greatest ruler.

He built for himself three major palaces in the city, one of them was 1065 by 720 feet in size.²

Verse 5 then is a very accurate description of this mighty, ancient empire.

The reference to wine could be either literal or figurative, drunk with greed and success. The more success they found, the more they wanted.

Verse 5 is also a frightening picture of ruthless ambition,

Desire like hell.

Like death, never satisfied,

Babylon achieved an incredible expansion of power through the area of the Middle East, from the Persian Gulf all the way to the borders of Egypt.

At its peak the empire controlled nearly 200,000 square miles – almost the size Illinois, Wisconsin, Iowa, and Indiana.³

That might not sound so massive, but it was the largest empire of the day.

¹ <https://www.livescience.com/28701-ancient-babylon-center-of-mesopotamian-civilization.html>

² Ibid.

³ <https://www.biblestudy.org/maps/babylonian-empire.html>

We go back to the opening message of this book.

The Lord was going to raise up the Chaldeans, the Babylonians.

They would be the means of God's punishing His own people and other nations.

This wicked nation would serve a purpose, but she would not be given the final word.

2) THE FIRST THREE WOES AGAINST BABYLON, VV. 6-14

As you look starting in verse 6 through the end of the chapter, there are five woes pronounced against proud Babylon and any like her.

But as you see in verse 6, the statements of judgment are also described as a proverb which can mean a **taunt**.

And then further, a taunting riddle or scoffing and riddles.⁴

What is the purpose of these woes?

Israel was warned that she would herself be mocked if God's people did not keep God's commandments.⁵

Deut. 28:37 And you shall become a horror, a proverb, and a byword among all the peoples where the LORD will lead you away.

In this case, these five woes show that the LORD rules over the nations. He shames the wicked and vindicates the righteous.⁶

The Word Biblical Commentary states:

This series of woes is designed to show that ultimately sin, evil, crime, greed, oppression, debauchery, and idolatry are doomed to destruction. Often people look at the power and structures of evil and become depressed. Is this really God's world?

⁴ ESV Translation

⁵ O. Palmer Roberston, 185.

⁶ Ibid., 185.

Has it gotten away from him? Does he still have control over the world and its inhabitants? Habakkuk says, “Yes.”⁷

Another question that we should consider is who is speaking these woes against Babylon?

Who is the subject of “will not all these take up a proverb against him...”?

It might seem strange, but the answer has to be the nations that at one time were conquered by Babylon, but eventually would be delivered.

What is strange is that these nations would speak the words of verse 14 for example.

So ultimately it is God who speaks these words of judgment though they are written as being expressed by the nations and peoples of verse 5.

As we look further at these statements of woe, we observe that each has a structure.

1. The sin
2. The judgment
3. The reason for the judgment

We should further consider the meaning of the word “woe” that is used five times in this chapter.

The NET Bible notes that the word was used in funeral laments and has the idea of death associated with it.

The commentator O. Palmer Robertson states that the word is used to express mockery – ha, ha! **God is mocking the mockers in other words.**⁸

We notice also that although the woes are not all identical, the first part of each woe is similar.

Woe to him who increases what is not his.

⁷ Word Biblical Commentary,

⁸ Chantry, 47.

Woe to him who covets evil gain for his house.

Woe to him who builds a town with bloodshed.

These three woes build upon each other as they describe the evil power and reach of Babylon.

As I mentioned before, there is a challenge for us in appreciating the language that we have here.

There is a richness in these three descriptions.

The language may sound awkward in English, but there is a real beauty in each word and expression.

The first woe, verses 6-8, declares God's judgment that the nations Babylon pillaged would come back to pillage Babylon.

Babylon was ruthless with other nations militarily and in terms of financial practices.⁹

All of her wickedness would be brought against her.

The second woe, verses 9-11, describe God's judgment in terms of crumbling fortresses.

Wealth and riches are wickedly gained with the hope of building lasting security.

But God declares that these fortresses of protection will crumble and even more the stones and beams will speak words of judgment against those who used them to build their places of safety.

I think the third woe and central woe, verses 12-14, stands out.

It begins similar to the first two, a mocking judgment on those who build towns and cities with bloodshed and iniquity.

But then we have verse 13.

⁹ Chantry, 47.

It is the judgment of the LORD of hosts that the peoples labor to feed the fire and the nations weary themselves in vain.

The name Lord of Hosts is Lord Sabaoth, as we sing in the great hymn A Mighty Fortress is our God.

The LORD who commands an innumerable angelic army can easily bring judgment to the nations who boast of their own power.

I like here the translation of the NET Bible:

Be sure of this! The LORD of Heaven's Armies has decreed: The nations' efforts will go up in smoke; their exhausting work will be for nothing.

We consider this truth in light of the record of ancient history.

Look at how many of the world's most beautiful cities were burned, destroyed, leveled, and then later completely forgotten.

Most of the world's great cities have had to be unearthed, dug up from the ground.

These incredible cities for a time were completely lost and almost entirely forgotten.

And then what also stands out in this third woe is the beautiful truth of verse 14.

14 For the earth will be filled
With the knowledge of the glory of the LORD,
As the waters cover the sea.

This precious truth connects back to two similar verses written before this verse.

Num. 14:21 But truly, as I live, and as all the earth shall be filled with the glory of the LORD,

Is. 11:9 They shall not hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain; for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea.

Babylon attempted to display through her armies, art, and architecture her own glory.

But the Lord would bring this all to ruin.

In the place of the glory of man, God declared that knowledge of His glory will fill the earth as the waters cover the sea.

O. Palmer Robertson wrote:

Obviously it cannot be said that this great prophetic expectation found its fulfillment at the point of Babylon's destruction in 539 B.C. God's uprightness certainly was manifested at that time. People through all the ages have been reminded of the dramatic 'handwriting on the wall' that declared the end of this most oppressive regime. But Habakkuk's word expects more...

As Habakkuk's announcement that the just shall live by faith travels among the nations, the earth shall be filled with the knowledge of the glory of God as the waters cover the sea. The words of Habakkuk must await the consummation for their final fulfillment. Yet the events contemporary with Habakkuk's day must not be discounted. Babylon's destruction gave great relief to a troubled world, **just as God's continual exercise of his righteous judgments serves to advance his glory.**"¹⁰

We are reminded by this important verse that God's greatest goal is His glory.

We are naturally self-centered.

We naturally think of things in terms of what we want.

What is central is the glory of God.

J. I. Packer in the New Dictionary of Theology wrote:

1. God's goal in all that he does is his glory, in the sense of a. displaying his moral excellence to his creatures and b. evoking their praise for what they see and for the benefit it brings them (cf. Eph. 1:3).

¹⁰ O. Palmer Robertson, 199-199.

2. Man's goal in all his actions must be God's glory in the sense of doxology by word and deed.

3. God so made us that we find the duty of doxology to be our supreme delight, and in that way the furthering of our own highest good. This coinciding of duty with interest and devotion with fulfilment was classically formulated in the first answer of the Westminster Shorter Catechism: 'Man's chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him for ever.'

Verse 14 is both for us a challenge and encouragement.

While we must keep in mind God's glory as our central focus, we realize that it is not we who makes God glorious.

It is God who will fill the earth with the knowledge of His glory!

May we bow the knee and confess His glory through the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Heb. 1:3 who being the brightness of *His* glory and the express image of His person, and upholding all things by the word of His power, when He had by Himself purged our sins, sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high,

CONCLUSION

As concerned as we are about evil, God is even more concerned with the wicked and will bring His judgment in His time.

1] Let us make sure that we are not dishonoring God as we wait for Him to bring judgment.

We can cry out to God.

Let us not think we are more concerned than He.

2] The absolute necessity of patience and faith.

We see that the message of Habakkuk is not one of despair even though God does not answer to us and does not answer our prayers as we demand.

The message of Habakkuk is ultimately one of hope, but that doesn't mean ease.

God's people would experience 70 years of testing and trial.

John Calvin in his prayer at the end of his lecture on Habakkuk prayed:

... may we also so learn to console ourselves in all our distresses, that though we may be justly oppressed by the wicked, we may yet rely on thy providence and righteous judgement, and patiently wait until thou deliverest us, and makes it manifest that whatever the wicked devise for our ruin, so cleaves to themselves as to return and recoil at length on their own heads; and may we so fight under the banner of the Cross, as to possess our souls in patience, until we at length shall attain that blessed life which is laid up in heaven for us, through our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Prayer

Closing Hymn: 57

BENEDICTION – 1 COR. 15:57-58

But thanks *be* to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your labor is not in vain in the Lord.