

VII. “The Just Shall Live by His Faith”

20-Apr-03 Habakkuk 2:1-20

Theme: The justified person shall live by faith, regardless of circumstance.

Key Verse: Habakkuk 2:4 “Behold the proud, his soul is not upright in him; but the just shall live by his faith.”

Review

Last week we began our study of the book of Habakkuk. We saw that Habakkuk had questions for the Lord to answer. Habakkuk was concerned about the injustices he saw being perpetrated upon the faithful. So he cries out to God. Habakkuk had asked “How long?” and the Lord had promptly answered, “Very suddenly and very soon.” Habakkuk had asked, “Why is not justice upheld?” and the Lord had answered, “My impartial justice shall bring awesome vengeance even on My own people.” **God was going to bring chastisement upon Judah for their sins by raising up the Babylonians to invade and ultimately destroy Jerusalem and take the people into captivity.**

This portion of Scripture does not represent the first time in which **a person’s faith received greater challenge even as he was granted fuller insight into the plans and purposes of God.** Although the answers of the Lord dealt precisely with the issues raised by his prophet, they ended up troubling him more than his original questions. Habakkuk takes up another lament psalm when he hears Yahweh’s response. Habakkuk cries out, “Wait! Wait! Hold on just a minute! I understand why You are judging us. We deserve it. But what I cannot understand is how you can use the Babylonians as agents of that judgment. They are even more wicked than we are.” Although approaching his subject cautiously by expressing confidence in the nature and purpose of God he ends up by questioning God and His program.

Introduction

Consider the current state of the visible church in America. Perhaps you might be quite critical of the failures of God’s people. You can point to lax theological standards and even open heresy in some places, to lack of discipline and open immorality. You may continually be praying for a renewing movement of God’s Spirit and may be distressed that your prayers had gone unanswered for such a long time. And then suppose a revelation for God comes. He is going to destroy the American church by an Islamic jihad that invades our country. Wait a minute! That seems a bit too much! After God answers your prayer by saying that He is going to destroy the church through an invasion of utter unbelievers, you might find ourselves protesting. The church may be in a deplorable state, you might argue, but surely it is not as bad as all that. The cure seems to be worse than the disease! That’s the parallel with Habakkuk chapter 1. That’s Habakkuk’s problem.

Habakkuk did not get the answer he wanted to his question about injustice in Israel. In addition to not getting what he wanted, he now had the further problem of reconciling God’s actions with what he knew of God’s moral standards. **So, the “dialogue of protest” initiated in chapter 1 must find some resolution. Chapter 2 of Habakkuk provides the resolution of divine wisdom.** God says that although the righteous may not understand everything He is doing in history, they nevertheless should live by faith in Him (Hab. 2:4).

Exposition

II. The Resolution of Wisdom (2:1-20)

A. The Prophet Diligently Watches for the Rebuke to His Folly (2:1)

- 1 a *On my watchtower*
b *I shall stand,*
b *and I shall situate myself*
a *on (my) siege tower.*
And I shall watch to see
what
He will say to me,
and what
I shall answer
to my rebuke.

1. Habakkuk is quite aware of the audacity of his most recent remarks. He has challenged the propriety of the purpose of the Lord himself. It is understandable therefore that he braces himself for a straightforward rebuke from the Lord. The prophet is right in the position he takes with respect to his own role in the resolution of this perplexing issue. He will not attempt to reconcile in his own mind the apparent contradiction between the election of Israel by God as the object of his special love and the devastation of Israel at the hands of the rapacious Chaldeans as ordered by the Lord himself. Now as he looks for the Lord's response to his further complain, **he could hardly anticipate anything other than rebuke for himself.** Though placing himself submissively beneath the divine revelation that was sure to come, he nonetheless presumed that he would be required to respond to this further word from the Lord by additional disputation.

B. The LORD Gently Discloses His Purpose for the Ages (2:2-20)

Surprisingly, the Lord's response to the prophet's challenge comes in the form of a vision of hope that the prophet must write for future generations. God does not rail against the prophet for his accusations, contrary to Habakkuk's expectations. First, he gives him a vision which contrasts the righteous by faith with the resolutely proud (2:2-5). Then he offers five proverbial bywords which ridicule the haughty (2:6-20).

1. *The Righteous by Faith and the Resolutely Proud (2:2-5)*

a. *Instructions Indicating the Significance of This Vision (2:2)*

- 2 *And Yahweh answered me and said:*
a *Inscribe*
b *the vision*
a *and make it plain*
b *on the tablets,*
c *so that he who proclaims it may run.*

2. The specific instructions to *inscribe the vision and make it plain on the tablets* underscore its **significance** not only for the crucial hour in which Habakkuk lived, but also **for the generations to come.** The context suggests an intentional allusion to the inscribing of the original "ten words" of the book of the covenant (Ex. 31:18; 32: 15-16; Deut. 9:10). Originally Israel also had

Minor Prophets: Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah

been directed to “inscribe” on whitewashed stones all the words of the law, and to “make very plain” this inscription (Deut. 27:8). Reflecting the long-established pattern of inscribing a fresh copy of covenant law as **an essential step in covenant renewal**, Habakkuk’s instructions include inscribing his vision on the tablets. These features apparently **intend to recall “the tablets” of the covenant made at Sinai**. This vision now revealed to Habakkuk compares in significance with the original giving of the law to Moses. Habakkuk is to make it plain on the tablets *so that he who proclaims it may run*. Prophets frequently are presented in Scripture as “running” with their announcement (cp. Jer. 23:21). In this utterance of Jeremiah, it is quite clear that **“running” (with a message) is equivalent to “prophesying.”** The abiding inscription of the vision suggests that the bearer of this message shall not be a single individual. Instead many through the ages to come shall rush to declare this divine word. **The vision has broad significance. It is not merely for the present generation. It is for the ages to come.**

b. Statement Concerning the Character of the Vision (2:3)

3 *For yet the vision
(is) for the appointed time,
and it yearns for the end;
it cannot lie.*

*If it tarry,
wait for it;
for it is sure to come,
nor will it delay.*

3. Not only does this vision have a significance that makes it comparable with the revelation to Moses at Sinai; this vision is also noteworthy for its basic character: **it is eschatological and it is certain**. Habakkuk in his day had to face the stark reality of the devastation of God’s people by exile. Yet he must believe that nothing would be too hard for God. For his vision would find its fulfillment at the *appointed time* (cp. Dan. 10:14; 11:27, 35). The reference to the *appointed time* of fulfillment that shall come after many messengers have run with the vision suggests that this *end* **refers to the final stage in God’s outworking of a purpose of redemption for His people**. God’s purpose is unfolding sequentially and in order in the course of historical events.

According to the writer of Hebrews, the righteous by faith must wait for “the one who comes” (Heb. 10:37). Very likely the writer to the Hebrews turned to this passage because of its stress on the necessity for patience in possessing the substance of the promises of God. God had told Habakkuk that if the vision should tarry, he must wait patiently. Now in a new covenant context, the same admonition applies to those who suffer, not seeing the promise of God realized immediately for them. They too have the need of patience (Heb. 10:36).

c. Revelation of the Substance of This Vision (2:4-5)

4 *Behold!*
a *The proud—*
b *his soul is not upright in him;*
a *But the justified—*
b *by his steadfast trust he shall live.*

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- 5 *However,*
wine deceives him—
a mighty man who boasts and will not rest,
who
multiplies
as Sheol
his soul;
and he (is)
as death,
and will not be satisfied.
- a So he gathers*
b to himself
c all nations,
a and he collects
b to himself
c all peoples.

It seems fairly clear that the “vision” promised in the previous verses now is being reported. **The fivefold “woe” concluding the chapter may be regarded as an expansion of one aspect of Habakkuk’s vision**, although not constituting the substance of the vision itself. **Three elements stand out in these verses: (1) the proud cannot be upright (v. 4a); (2) the justified (by faith) shall live by his steadfast trust (v. 4b); (3) yet the wicked continue in their boastful ways (vv. 4c-5).** The centrality of faith is picked up in the New Testament (Rom. 1:17; Gal. 3:11; Heb. 10:38), and became the goad which prompted Luther to re-examine his own theology, with momentous consequences for the Reformation.

4a. By these words of Habakkuk Scripture makes it plain that **the proud cannot be upright. As a consequence, neither can they live. They must experience condemnation and judgment.** To Habakkuk it may seem that the boisterous, boastful Chaldeans shall continue to prosper. Yet the fact that their soul *is not upright* in them should be an adequate indicator of their ultimate judgment.

4b. In contrast to the proud, notice the *faith of the just*. God says, “The just shall live by his faith.” This is a great text. **It could even be called the great text of the Bible.** To understand it is to understand the Christian gospel and the Christian life. It is so important that it is picked up by the New Testament writers, twice by Paul (Rom. 1:17; Gal. 3:11) and once by the author of the Book of Hebrews (Heb. 10:38). This is the heart of Habakkuk, the heart of the gospel, the heart of the answer to “How long?” **Regardless of circumstance, the one who is not proud, the one who is just, will stand in God’s presence, will live day-by-day, moment-by-moment through faith.**

“The *just* shall live by his faith.” What does this mean? There are two very important ideas here. The first is “justification by faith,” and the second is “living in faith.” The justified-by-faith shall live, and the justified shall live-by-faith. **Justification and sanctification;** right standing before God, right living for God. In ourselves we are not righteous. How can such a one become perfect? The answer is that nobody can attain to righteousness. No one is capable of perfect goodness. How do we get it then? It is God’s gift to us in Jesus Christ. This is what

Romans explains. **Paul displays a magnificent grasp of the prophet's message when he adopts this single phrase as a basis for constructing the entire letter to the Romans. This verse from Habakkuk permeates the whole of the epistle.**

Rom. 1:16-17 ¹⁶For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes, for the Jew first and also for the Greek. ¹⁷For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith; as it is written, "*The just shall live by faith.*"

How are we justified? How is a person declared righteous? How do we stand in the presence of God? Paul tells us it is through the gospel of Jesus Christ, which is the power of salvation. We cannot stand in our own strength, in our own power, in front of God. We do so only through the righteousness of Christ. Only those who believe the gospel of Christ, who wear the mantle of Christ's righteousness, can be considered *just*. Likewise, Habakkuk refers us back to Abraham, the father of faith. In Genesis 15:6, Abraham "believed in the LORD, and He accounted it to him for righteousness." The just of Habakkuk 2:4b are justified in exactly the same way as Abraham. **The just are declared righteous by faith through the grace of God. Justification comes as a gift of God through faith in Jesus Christ for salvation.** Thus, the source of true righteousness always remains outside the person. If continuing life is a gift received by faith, then the righteousness that is the basis of life must have the same source.

Furthermore, the just must *live* by faith. According to Hebrews 11, **faith is believing God and acting upon that belief.** Faith is more than just intellectual assent. **It is a commitment, a lifestyle.** The writer to the Hebrews cites Hab. 2:4 in Heb. 10:37-38 to stress the importance of persevering in faith. He wishes to stir his readers to claim the gift of *life* by faith, despite many obstacles. Instead, suffering believers of the 1st century needed to be reminded that God has His righteous ones, and they indeed shall live by faith! Indeed, the catalogue of the faithful in Hebrews 11 is a testimony to the just living by faith. **Standing in sharpest contradiction to the "proud" who are "not upright" in themselves and therefore must die, the one who trusts God's grace for his existence every moment shall live.** He shall survive the devastations of God's judgment. Steadfastness in *faith* is the way of receiving the gift of life. The just are sanctified by faith; they live by faith.

This commitment carries on through out life. The word does not say that the righteous shall begin by faith and then proceed on some other principle. It does not say that the righteous shall draw on faith from time to time as faith is needed. It says "the righteous will live [continuously] by his faith." That is, the righteous will operate on this principle twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, fifty-two weeks a year—so long as life lasts. The Book of Galatians stresses this principle. In Galatians 3:11 Paul contrasts different possible sources of righteousness. Rather than self-righteousness, attempted through pious acts, namely "the law" which justifies no one (*i.e.* none are made righteous before God through observing it), the true source is faith, wholehearted commitment to the faithfulness of God. The only way to live is to "live by faith."

Faith serves as the origin of righteousness in justification, and as the framework for the continuation of righteousness in sanctification. The apostle Paul develops this twofold role of faith as originally presented in Hab. 2:4, dealing with the faith that receives the gift of justification in Rom. 1-5, and the faith that receives the gift of sanctification in Rom. 6-8. Thus Paul offers a well-balanced gospel in his development of his theme that "the just shall live by his

Minor Prophets: Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah

faith.” This great message of justification and life by faith alone is eschatological in nature and shall be true to the end of the age.

5. The third point made in the Lord’s vision to Habakkuk confirms the reality of this tension with which the prophet must live. **The wicked will continue on their brutal way in apparent prosperity, despite the truth of God’s work of salvation for the righteous by faith, and His declaration of the certainty of the ultimate destruction of the wicked.** As a consequence, the proud person *boasts and will not rest*. Nothing can satisfy him. His lust for possession expands like the insatiable appetite of *Sheol*, the grave, which continues over the ages to swallow up everyone.

So the Lord’s response to Habakkuk’s complaint offers hope, but not apart from a grim prospect for the future as well. **Those who have believed shall continue to live in their faith. But the wicked also shall have their day, devouring nations by their brutality. This vision is truly eschatological in its significance. It appropriately characterizes the present age until the time of the final consummation.**

2. The Ridicule of the Haughty (2:6-20)

Introduction (2:6a)

*6a Will not all of them
hold out against him
a proverb and a byword—
riddles against him?*

6a. Having unveiled the essence of his resolution of Habakkuk’s problem, **the Lord now turns to elaborate on the certain fate of the haughty**, who stand in contrast with the humble who believe. Habakkuk uses the literary form of a dirge or a **“taunt song” to ridicule Babylon**. The boastful Chaldeans are made the subjects of wise sayings calculated to humble them. **A series of five mocking statements expresses the righteous recompense that is sure to come.** There are five occurrences of the word “woe,” each of which marks a stanza within the song. Each oracle details the crimes perpetrated and the different responses to them. These five stanzas show the misery of the person or nation that thinks it can do without God. Now the Lord declares that the day shall come when all those nations whom the Chaldeans have bullied shall mock their conqueror.

a. Ha! The Pillager Pillaged (2:6b-8)

*6b And he shall say,
Ha!
The one who multiplies
that which is not his—
O, how long (will it be)?
And makes himself glorious
by pledges—
7 will it not be suddenly?
Your creditors
will form an uprising,
and your disturbers*

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*will awake;
you will be
plunder for them.*

8 *Because you have pillaged
many nations
all that remains of the people
shall pillage you.
For the bloody gorings of men,
and the violence done to the land,
the city and all its inhabitants.*

The Ha! that marks off the five separate proverbial sayings in this section (vv. 6b, 9, 12, 15, 19) **is an onomatopoeic word that does not mean precisely “woe,”** although it is used frequently to introduce a statement of judgment. It connotes instead the broader idea embodied in an exclamatory “Aha!” or simply “Ah!” In the present context it takes on something of the tone of mockery inherent in these taunt words.

6b. The first woe is directed towards those who acquire goods dishonestly. The problem here is greed. If a person trust God, he does not need to be covetous of more and more material possessions. The Lord is the portion of the righteous. Poetic justice or reciprocity is the main point of this first byword. Injected into the treatment of the reciprocal nature of God’s judgment are questions concerning the timing of that judgment. Particularly for Habakkuk this question had relevance, *how long (will it be)* before justice shall be manifested in all its self-convincing uprightness (v. 6b)?

7-8. The answer of this divine saying is *suddenly!* The final reason for this coming divine judgment is the cruel violence done to the whole of creation. Human and nonhuman elements of the world are a concern to the Almighty. This divine proverb, set in its memorable form, makes it quite plain that **the Almighty is vitally concerned with these “nonreligious” issues of man’s inhumanity to man.**

b. *Ha! The Fortified Dismantled (2:9-11)*

9 *Ha!*
*The one who covets wickedly
for his house,
to set on high
his nest,
to deliver from the hand of evil!*

10 *You have counseled shame against your house
by cutting off many peoples
and sinning against your own soul.*

11 a *For the stone
b from the wall
c will cry out
a and the beam
b from the timber
c will answer it.*

Minor Prophets: Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah

The second oracle condemns not only exploitation for personal gain, but also for national or dynastic aggrandizement. The problem here is *injustice*. This woe is directed towards those who seek gain, not because this is wrong in itself, since the concept is morally neutral, but because it is often done in a way which is unjust.

9. The *house* about which the Chaldean is concerned refers primarily to his dynasty, although it may apply to the commoner's family line as well. The consequences of covetousness are just the opposite of what the greedy desire. His schemes only guarantee shame for his house.

10. Little did the king understand that by his covetous ways he was *sinning against his own soul*. He had thought that he was assuring the preservation of himself and his own house. But ironically he was only laying a foundation for their destruction along with his own.

11. The last phrases of the proverb return to the imagery of the "house" and its destruction. The king's dynasty crumbles despite all the efforts to secure the throne by amassing unlimited wealth.

c. *Ha! The Civilized Demoralized (2:12-14)*

12 *Ha!*

- a *He who builds*
- b *a city*
- c *with bloodshed,*
- a *and establishes*
- b *a town*
- c *with violence!*

13 *Behold is it not from Yahweh of hosts*

- a *that they will labor*
- b *the nations—*
- c *for the sake of fire;*
- b *and the peoples*
- c *for the sake of vanity*
- a *will become weary?*

14 *For the earth shall be filled*

*with the knowledge of the glory of Yahweh
as the waters cover the sea.*

This particular proverbial byword of Habakkuk is apparently quoted in turn by Jeremiah (Jer. 51:58).

The problem here is *violence*. Here are people who have gone from greed to injustice to violence. Not content with what their injustices can procure, they are now adding crimes of violence to their vices, so great is their desire to have things.

12. In accord with the purposes of God in creation and redemption, the populace of a city should work together to form a culture and a community which performs all its functions to the glory of God. The reference to the Babylonian king's building a city by *bloodshed* and *violence* is **reminiscent of Nimrod, founder of the most ancient Babylon** (Gen. 10:9-10). First named in Scripture as a powerful city builder, Nimrod's description as a "mighty hunter" may refer to the hunting, the oppressing of people who were brought under his dominion and enslaved to his

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ambitions. The early history of cities in Scripture indicates that hardly any semblance existed between the divine intention for human civilization and the concrete development of the city. The concept of excessive violence inflicted by the current Babylonian king for the purpose of building a city as described here may have been intended to recall to his readers this primal instance of brutality for the sake of establishing a civilization.

13. The entire massive endeavor will do the oppressor no good. The end, according to Habakkuk, had to be *fire* and *vanity*. So the Lord shall come with fire at the last judgment, utterly destroying all His enemies (Is. 66:15; cf. 2 Pe. 3:10).

14. It is the oath of Yahweh Himself that *the earth shall be filled with the knowledge of the glory of Yahweh* that guarantees the vanity and futility of all efforts to the contrary. This beautiful statement at first appears so unrelated to the consuming fires of God's judgment. How can it be said that the glory of God fills the earth so long as such wicked practices continue? **Only when the problem of the wicked is resolved will the glory of God fill the earth.**

This statement in Habakkuk gives every evidence of being an intentional conflation of two different older sources, Numbers 14:21 and Isaiah 11:9. Each of the three instances depicts the spread of the knowledge of God to universal boundaries. The precise wording may be compared as follows:

Num. 14:21	Shall be filled	all the earth
Isa. 11:9	Shall be full	the earth
Hab. 2:14	Shall be filled	the earth
Num. 14:21	(with) the glory of Yahweh	
Isa. 11:9	(with) the knowledge of Yahweh	
Hab. 2:14	(with) the knowledge of the glory of Yahweh	
Num. 14:21	(no references to the waters covering the sea)	
Isa. 11:9	as the waters for the sea make a covering	
Hab. 2:14	as the waters cover over the sea.	

Distinctive to Habakkuk is this combination of *knowledge* with *glory* covering the earth. **Man in the totality of his rational facilities is distinctive for his capacity to appreciate God's creation.** This verse, a modified quotation from the description of the peaceful Messianic kingdom of Isaiah (Is. 11:9), **raises the oracle from a single reference to Babylon's defeat and places it on the level of eschatology.** In the last days God will move powerfully, bringing His kingdom to all creation. **The violence of Babylon will ultimately be replaced by God's tranquility, which will be universally enjoyed.**

Paul, apostle of the new covenant, captures something of this same vision in his description of the new temple of God constituted by a universal fellowship in which the glory of God is manifested throughout creation (Eph. 3:18-19). **As Habakkuk's announcement that the just shall live by faith travels among the nations, the earth shall be filled with knowledge of the glory of God as the waters cover the sea.**

Minor Prophets: Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah

d. *Ha! The Shameless Defamed (2:15-17)*

15 *Ha!*

*the one who makes his neighbor drink,
mixing in your wrath—
even making (them) drunk
so you can gaze on their nudity.*

16 *You are satiated*

*with shame rather than glory!
You do some drinking!
Expose yourself as uncircumcised.
The cup of the right hand of Yahweh
shall rotate around to you,
and putrid shame (shall be) all over your glory.*

17 *For the violence done to Lebanon*

*shall overwhelm you,
and the devastation to beasts
(by which) you terrified them;
because of human bloodshed
and violence (done)
to the land,
the city,
and all its inhabitants.*

The problem here is *seduction*. First there is greed. Then there is mild injustice, followed by more serious injustice. Next comes violence. Now there is seduction and perversion. **Now the baseness of Babylon's sin surfaces.** Drunkenness, bullying, coarseness, and perversion characterize their king. It may be that the prophet intends to describe the actual behavior of the king of Babylon and his court as a backdrop for depicting the larger atrocities associated with Babylon's treatment of the nations it invades. This depraved brute does not have as his ultimate goal simply the mocking of his acquaintances. He manifests a deep-felt hatred, a psychotic rancor toward his neighbor. He *mixes* an irrational *wrath* with the *wine* he pours.

15. Part of the depravity inherent in sin is its insistence on involving others in its debauchery. The Babylonian king is not satisfied with making himself drunk; he can rest contentedly only when he has forced his degradations on others. It is almost a universal principle that the sin of drunkenness is associated with sexual impurity and the degradation of the body (cf. Lot's daughters in Gen. 19:32-35; Noah in Gen. 9:21).

16. In the description of the judgment that must come on Babylon, the retributive character of the punishment becomes very apparent. As Babylon has treated others, so God shall treat them. If they have made others drunk, they shall be drunk. If they have brought shame and dishonor on others by depraved sexual activity, God shall shame them before all the nations.

Special attention must be paid to the *cup of the right hand of Yahweh* from which the Babylonian must drink (cp. Jer. 51:7; Jer. 25:15-29). **The Babylonian may be the instrument of God's hand**, the cup of the fury of the Lord poured out on Jerusalem. **But their service in this fashion did not by any means indicate that they would escape the judgment of God.**

Minor Prophets: Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah

When Christ under the new covenant speaks of the cup which the Father has given Him, He echoes this awesome figure (Matt. 20:22; 26:42). **The wrath of the Father against the shameful sin of mankind finds a consummate manifestation in the outpouring of God's judgment on His own Son.**

The pouring of wrath into the cup finds consummate expression in **the book of Revelation, where "Babylon" emerges as a symbol of the epitome of wickedness among the nations.** Babylon has made all nations drink of the maddening wine of her adulteries (Rev. 14:8). But anyone who has shared in these perversions must drink of the wine of God's fury, which has been poured into the cup of his wrath (Rev. 17:4).

So Babylon has made the nations drink of the cup of the fury of Yahweh. Babylon has been the instrument of God's righteous judgments in the earth. Even God's own people have drunk this bitter cup at the hands of the Babylonians. But now it is the Babylonians' turn. They have been simply the instrument of judgment for the Lord. **Ultimately it is the right hand of the Lord Himself that administers this cup.**

17. The devastating humiliation of Babylon must come because of the *violence done to Lebanon*. But why Lebanon? Why not for the violence done to Jerusalem? Very likely the oracle of the Lord specifies Lebanon because of its proverbial beauty.

The concept of the execution of reciprocal justice does not appeal to humanity. But it is God's way. By this way He proves Himself to be impartial and righteous as judge. By this way He finally establishes himself as just and yet also the justifier of the ungodly who believe. **For Jesus the Christ drank the cup of God's fury to the dregs, and so became the Savior of all who would renounce their own pride and violence, looking to Him alone for salvation.**

e. Ha! The Idolatrous Powerless (2:18-20)

18 How can a carved idol profit?

For his designer carved it (himself);

and a poured image—

a teacher of lies.

*For he who designs his (own) designs trust in it,
making speechless nothings.*

19 Ha!

a He who says to the tree,

b Awake!

b Arise!

a to the silent stone,

a He

b will teach?

a Behold, he

b is covered over

c with gold and silver

b and no spirit at all

c is in him.

20 Bu Yahweh

is in His holy temple,

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*Hush before Him
all the earth.*

This fifth and final proverbial byword against the Babylonians assumes a distinctive form. It begins with denunciation before reciting the customary Ha! that has introduced the previous four sayings. Why this alteration of form? **The idolatry of the Babylonian may have been viewed as the source of all the other atrocities previously mentioned.** Because their religious orientation was wrong, their moral standards had to be perverted. In this light, it is quite understandable that the condemnation of idolatry would be reserved for last, and that this message would be emphasized by a departure from the previously established form of the proverbial byword.

The problem here is idolatry. It is simply the end condition of a people who will not walk by faith in God but who trust to their own devices instead. We trust ourselves, but we are not adequate for the trust. So, finding no help in mere human beings and having rejected the true God, we turn to superstition.

18. *How can a carved idol profit?* Their very origin as well as their constitution testify to their uselessness. The divine description of them mocks their very existence. Modern people in their sophistications may regard themselves as free from the obvious folly of idolatry. What educated, self-respecting person would be deluded into expecting special powers to emanate from the form of an antiquated idol? Yet **the new covenant Scriptures make it plain that covetousness is idolatry (Eph. 5:5).** Whenever a person's desire looks to the creature rather than the Creator, he is guilty of the same kind of foolishness. An insatiable desire for things not rightly possessed assumes that things can satisfy rather than God himself. **Whenever a person sets his priorities on the things made rather than on the Maker of things, he is guilty of idolatry.**

19. This proverbial byword continues by mocking those who would look to the idol for relief and help, calling on it in time of trouble. How foolish it is for someone to attempt to stir up a tree, to awaken a stone. So the point is made plain. The gods of the Babylonians can offer no help.

20. *But Yahweh is in His holy temple.* **This last verse contrasts the vitality of the one true God with the deadness and silence of the idols.** The true source of revelation is present where He has always been. **Yahweh is approached in silence, a fitting response to His holiness and majesty, and a token of one's respect for His being—dependency upon His grace and submission to His will.** Lifeless idols approached in clamor are silent, while the living God, approached in silence and reverence, speaks.

Conclusion

God says, "I have heard your prayer, Habakkuk, and I understand perfectly what is bothering you. Here is My answer. It is true that I have raised up the Babylonians to punish my people, but this does not mean that I am endorsing their evil or sin. On the contrary, I will judge them in due course. I have raised them up; I will bring them down again. They will suffer the full outpouring of My wrath. Meanwhile My people will be purified of their sin and restored to My favor. And while this is happening, the one who is truly righteous must live by faith in Me. Write this down. Make it plain, so that anyone who reads it may live by it." This is what

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Habakkuk did. He wrote it down in his prophecy. We are called to read it and live by faith in our great God.

If we will not have God, then there will always be a vacuum—a terrible, hellish vacuum—in our lives. **The challenge presented to us in this chapter is that choice. Will it be the world's way, the way of the ungodly with its emptiness, frustration, and eventual ruin? Or will it be God's way, the way of faith in Him who alone is worthy of that faith?** This is the choice Joshua presented to the people of his day (Jos. 24:15). Though the world should rise up against us, the righteous will live by faith, regardless of circumstance. It is by faith in the righteous God alone that we can stand against it.

Habakkuk had begun his dialogue in an effort to understand the mysterious ways of a holy God with sinful people. Now he stands in the presence of the Lord's holy temple, hushed in reverential awe. He may not have grasped fully all the implications of the divine answer to his query. **Yet he stands assured of the abiding lordship of his God, of His justice in prosecuting all violators of His holy law, and of His infinite mercy in granting life to all who will trust in Him and in the provisions He has promised for the sinner.**

Next week: Lesson 8 – Habakkuk 3 – “Yet I Will Rejoice in the LORD”

Close in Prayer.