

Woe to the Wicked

Habakkuk 2:2-20

The main point of today's passage is crystal clear, and repeated five times over: Woe be unto to those who do wicked things. But how, exactly, does this answer the question Habakkuk asked at the end of chapter 1? At the beginning of this book, Habakkuk was complaining to God about how bad things had become in the land of Judah: there was plundering and violence all around him, strife and contention everywhere. And God answered Habakkuk's complaint by saying that He would indeed put an end to all this wickedness, but He would do it by allowing the Chaldeans, the Babylonians to invade Judah.

Needless to say, Habakkuk did not find such a plan at all satisfactory. Last week we saw that at the end of chapter 1, he prayed to God again, wondering how such a holy and righteous God could use such treacherous and wicked people as the Babylonians to be agents of His justice. He wondered: Did it really make sense for God to punish one set of wicked people, the Jews, at the hands of an even more wicked set of people, the Chaldeans?

Today's passage is God's response to Habakkuk's question, but is it really an answer? After all, nowhere in chapter 2 are the Chaldeans or the Jews mentioned specifically. Nowhere does God deal with the question of these two nations' comparative wickedness, which seemed to be Habakkuk's principal concern.

But sometimes we don't get an answer from God because we are asking the wrong question. And so God sometimes chooses to answer not the question we are asking, but the question we ought to be asking.

Look again at what chapter 2 doesn't say. It doesn't say anything about how wicked a country or an individual has to be before being subject to God's wrath. It doesn't make the sorts of distinctions Habakkuk made between Jews and Chaldeans, or, come to think of it, the sorts of distinctions we all like to make about the sinners in our modern world.

For even though we deny it, don't we tend to look down on some sinners more than others? But why? Why do we laugh at the foibles of drunken college boys while we are outraged at the fights in the juke joints? What's so much worse about one form of self-centered hedonism than another? Or take another example: so many evangelicals today are up in arms about the increasing acceptance of same-sex marriage. But where is our outrage over the increasingly impermanent marriages between men and women? Could it be that we tend to give a pass to the sinful behavior of people who are more like us?

Habakkuk was wondering why God would use people whom he considered to be more wicked to bring judgment on people whom he considered to be less wicked. But God's answer in chapter 2 ignores these sorts of distinctions. Instead, God simply announces that He will bring judgment on wickedness, period. Woe will come to the wicked regardless of who they are, or where they live, regardless of the particular way they might choose to manifest

their sin. In other words, the woes of chapter two apply with equal force to the wicked Jews and to the wicked Babylonians – and to the wicked of today.

The first woe, in verses 6 through 8, is pronounced on those who spoil, who plunder, who take with violence the things that don't belong to them. But remember, this doesn't just apply to the depredations of invading armies. After all, at the beginning of the book, Habakkuk was loudly complaining about all the violence within the land of Judah.

And violence is still a problem today, isn't it? We rightly deplore the ISIS thugs who kill even women and children who refuse to share their perverted faith. We mourn the men and women beaten and imprisoned in Castro's Cuba because they speak out for political freedom. We have become numb to the daily reports of shootings and stabbings in the capital city of our own state.

So what is God's message for all the victims of violence throughout space and time? God says that those like the Babylonians who rampaged through the Ancient Near East, leaving a trail of destruction in their wake, all those who are plunderers will one day be plundered themselves. One day, the violent and the brutal, whether ISIS thugs or inner city gangbangers, will get what is coming to them. They will receive exactly the same sort of treatment they themselves have so readily dished out. Or as Jesus put it much more succinctly, those who live by the sword will die by the sword.

And this did, in fact, happen to the people of Habakkuk's day just as God said it would. God did indeed send the Babylonians to destroy all the violence Habakkuk saw within Judean culture. And then, just as the Babylonians toppled Judah and Jerusalem, they were in turn conquered by the Medes and the Persians. Today, Babylon is nothing more than a ruin, as many of the soldiers who have returned from Southern Iraq can attest.

But violence isn't the only way to take what isn't yours. Verses 9 through 11 describe those who covet what others have and who use any sort of evil means to get it. And why do these wicked people want these things? To set their nest on high. They imagine that their ill-gotten wealth can make them secure, and so they don't care who they have to hurt to get it.

But again, selfish greed wasn't just a problem in Habakkuk's day, and it isn't just a problem for wealthy people, is it? Sure there were lots of banks that made lots of money issuing sub-prime mortgages back during the last decade. But what about the people who bought more house than they could afford, hoping to flip it and make an easy buck? A speculative bubble can't inflate without speculators, and they come in all sizes. And when the bubble bursts, everyone loses, rich and poor alike.

The same thing happened in Habakkuk's day. But does greed really do anyone any good? Were any of the Jews who extorted money from their fellow countrymen able to buy the favor of the Babylonians? Did their wealth keep them safe during the invasion? Of course not – all that they had stolen or swindled simply became someone else's plunder.

But the Babylonians' wealth didn't keep them safe either, and the third woe in verses 12 through 14 reminds us of this, of the impermanence of ill-gotten gains. Yes, after destroying Jerusalem, Nebuchadnezzar sought to enlarge and beautify his own capital city of Babylon. He restored its temples and encircled it with strong walls. The hanging gardens of Babylon were considered one of the seven wonders of the Ancient World. But none of this could stop the Medes and Persians from destroying so much of what the Babylonians had built.

And the same thing is true today – for anything built on an ungodly foundation is inherently unstable. Nazism tried to build a civilization on the basis of racism and violence. Communism tried to force fairness on society by taking away everyone's property, having the government own all the means of production. Both have been swept into the ash-heap of history.

And at this point, we start to see a theme running through the way God does justice – what we do unto others, we can expect to have done unto us. The plunderers will be plundered. The conquerors will be conquered. Those who destroy other's cities will have their own cities destroyed. In short, God's answer to Habakkuk is that the wicked, no matter who they are, will ultimately get what is coming to them, in Judah and in Babylon, and even today.

For look at the fourth woe in verses 15 through 17. God condemns those who humiliate others in brutal ways for their own pleasure. And this doesn't just apply to the way armies treat conquered civilians. Just a few weeks ago, we learned about the ministry of "Along the Way," warning us of the reality and danger of human trafficking right here in America. And what can we say about the forces in our own culture which are leading increasing numbers of our young people to the self-loathing of eating disorders, or the hopelessness of meth or heroin addiction, or even the ultimate despair of suicide? Habakkuk said that "The cup of the Lord's right hand shall be turned unto thee." Can we imagine that God will long tolerate those who encourage or profit from the misery of others?

But there's one last woe, which really should bring us all up short – "Woe to those who say to wood, 'Awake,' and to a dumb stone, 'Arise, it shall teach.'" Woe to those, in other words, who make and worship idols.

But we don't do that, do we? We don't have any images in here, and we don't bow down to pictures or gold-plated statues like those ancient pagans did. Perhaps not, but look again at the root problem of idolatry that we see in verse 18: "The maker of his work trusteth therein," the maker puts his trust in what he has made.

Now, that cuts a little close, doesn't it? For don't we all, in one way or another, place our trust in what we have made? Yes, I know we all say that we trust in God, but where are we really looking for our prosperity, for our next meal? Isn't it our work ethic, or the degree we have studied to receive, or the business that we have built? Is trusting in our bank accounts or our paychecks or our Social Security payments that really all that different from putting our faith in a gold-plated statue?

And why do we tend to put our trust in the things we have made or in our ability to make such things? Isn't that sort of idolatry just another way of putting our trust in ourselves, either individually or collectively? Isn't it really just another way of imagining that we are somehow in charge, that we can control what happens to us?

If so, we need to take a lesson from the people of Ancient Judah, and then from the people of Ancient Babylon, swept away as they were by the tides of history. For it turned out that that none of the things of which they were so proud were able to protect them from God's judgment.

For what was the root cause of all their violence, all their greed, all their oppression, and all their idolatry? Verse 4 says their soul was lifted up – simply put, they were brutal and selfish because they were proud, they were self-sufficient. And God will have none of it. Instead as verse 14 says, "For the earth shall be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the LORD, as the waters cover the sea." No matter what any of us may think, our lives are not to be lived for our own pleasure or for our own glory, but only for the glory of God.

And as God told Habakkuk, He will surely bring judgment on all those whose souls are lifted up, on all those who are proud, whether Jew or Babylonian or American. God will judge all those who place their trust in violence or oppression or in anything made with human hands. And as verse 3 says, no matter how long such judgment may tarry, we must wait for it. For come it will – when God speaks, He does not lie.

So, how are we to respond to this Word of God? We've already seen that we should not give in to spiritual pride, taking comfort in the fact that our sins happen to be more socially acceptable than those of others. Just as the Jews were at root no more immune from God's judgment than were the Babylonians, so God's judgment on all sin, on all pride is certain, no matter what form that sin or pride may take.

So what are we to do? For even if we Americans don't face an imminent Babylonian invasion, we all stand as guilty sinners, deserving death in the face of God's inexorable justice.

Well, what did God tell Habakkuk to do? In verse 2, he said to publish the facts of the coming judgment, to write them down on tablets, probably in letters so large that someone could read the words of the prophecy while running by.

And the application is clear enough for us, isn't it? Instead of remaining in our holy huddles, lamenting the increasing wickedness of the world, we need to take the light and the truth out into the darkness. We need to invite those who are trapped in sin into the glorious freedom of life in Jesus Christ. We need to call those who are lost in self-loathing or hopelessness or despair into the hope of new life in Christ, not just in the hereafter, but here and now.

But what should we tell the lost? How can they come to know this truth, to live in this freedom? In verse 4, God told Habakkuk – the just shall live by his faith. This wasn't just a

promise that God would take care of the righteous during the turmoil of the Babylonian invasion. No, in this verse we can see the essence of the gospel – that we are saved by God’s grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone.

For didn’t we see the same truth in that most familiar verse of Scripture this morning? God so loved the world that He gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him, whoever trusts in Him, has faith in Him, should not perish, but have everlasting life.

Yes, of course we need to repent of our pride in whatever form it may take. Of course we should embrace humility in the face of the power, the holiness, the justice of God – the Lord is in His holy temple, so all the earth should keep silence before Him.

But the reason we can have confidence, even if we have to experience the consequences of our own sin or the sin of others, the reason we can have hope even if countries and cultures may collapse around us, is that we can have faith in God, we can trust in God. For He has chosen to uphold His perfect justice at the cost of His own Son’s blood. And He has loved sinners like us enough to allow this blood to pay for all our sins.