

Fives woes for the wicked

24/5/20 dkm

Read: Habakkuk 2, James 5

Text: Habakkuk 2:6-20

Psalms: 75,11:3-7, 79:1-7, 134

When the Lord told Habakkuk how he was going to solve the problem of evil among the Jews by raising up Babylon to come and crush them, Habakkuk was horrified. How could God use a wicked and cruel nation like Babylon to punish people more righteous than themselves (1:13). In graciously answering Habakkuk's second question, the Lord first told him to write down what was revealed to him because it was for a future time.

Habakkuk did not know the future but he was to trust in the One who did (2:4). In the words of the hymn writer, 'I know not what the future holds but I know who holds the future'. Like all who believe, he was to walk by faith not by sight, believing that God is the God of justice. We know the grace of God revealed in the Lord Jesus Christ, but grace does not rule out justice. In the cross of Christ we see God being 'just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus' (Rom 3:26).

God would raise up Babylon but would later pull them down because of their pride and arrogance, their greed and violence, and their disregard for men and women made in the image of God. Ultimately he would judge them because of their idolatry. The Lord's answer to Habakkuk's prayer ends with the declaration of five woes or taunts against Babylon. At the appointed time, the tables would be turned, and as Babylon had done to others so it would be done to her. Babylon would receive from the hand of the Lord full payment for her sins: 'The wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Jesus Christ our Lord' (Rom 6:23).

The woes are directed against Babylon even though there is no mention of Babylon in these verses (cf. 1:6). This makes them applicable to any nation or person that, like Babylon, listens to Satan

rather than to God. Satan is the father of lies and a murderer from the beginning (John 8:44). Babylon, like Sodom and Gomorrah, became a symbol for divine judgment. In the Revelation given to John, imperial Rome was referred to as Babylon (Rev 17). We can use this symbolism still today because any political or economic entity that usurps the authority and glory of almighty God, and oppresses the people of God, is a 'Babylon' and is destined to destruction.

The five woes against Babylon include:

1. Plunderer will be plundered

One of the commandments the Lord gave Moses states, 'You shall not steal'. People are commanded to work for a living, to 'work in quietness and eat their own bread' (2Thess 3:12), not the bread of other people. Taking what belongs to another is not permitted in God's economy or kingdom. The kingdoms of this world may permit theft and exploitation but not the kingdom of God. Rulers or individuals may have the power to take from those less powerful but God does not approve. The Babylonians looted and plundered surrounding nations with violence and impunity. They made nations they conquered pay pledges or taxes such that the people were left destitute. This happened in Jerusalem, and when the people rebelled they were crushed; not that the king of Judah was himself impoverished.

The first woe makes reference to Babylon amassing goods stolen or extorted from others (2:6-8). How long must this go on? The Lord assures Habakkuk that such wickedness will come to an end, at least as far as Babylon is concerned. Egypt was guilty of violent exploitation until the Lord heard the cries of his people and delivered them. Such wickedness continues today at the hands of terrorists, dictators and even 'respectable' rich people. James condemned rich businessmen for heaping up treasure by exploiting their workers and even murdering innocent people (James 5:1-6).

Babylon would plunder many nations but those they plundered would one day rise up and plunder them (2:7-8). The plundered will become the plunderers. Those from whom goods and labour were stolen, or the remnant of such people, will demand repayment of debts. The Lord himself will demand repayment for the blood shed by rampaging Babylonians. As they devoured others, so they will be devoured. The punishment would fit the crime, as we say. The Lord held Cain to account for the blood of his brother Abel, and he will hold to account every person and every regime that sheds innocent blood.

2. Plotter of evil

The most challenging of the Ten Commandments is the last one, 'Do not covet'. 'Do not covet your neighbour's wife, his servant, his ox or his donkey or anything that is your neighbour's'. The moment we are told we cannot have something we want that thing. In the UK people took no notice when told they should be exercising for at least an hour each day, but when told they could only go out to exercise for an hour they are out in droves. If anyone told the Babylonians there was something they could not have they would start plotting how to get that thing. This is the nature of sin, and the Babylonians were right into sin, into coveting and then taking what was not theirs.

Woe to him who builds his house by evil gain (2:9). Woe to him who is not satisfied until he has more than everyone else, and even then is not satisfied because his desires are insatiable (2:5). He 'sets his nest on high' reminds us of the Edomites, that wicked nation that God wiped from the face of the earth (Obadiah). People think that with money and power they are untouchable by men or natural disasters- or God himself. The current pandemic is shaking many a proud heart. Those who went about cutting off others, either economically or socially, are now cut off themselves. The Babylonians were cutting people off literally, of course, but soon they would be cut off literally (2:10). Sin is real, no matter what you

say or believe. Sin is against one's own soul, the soul that is eternal and the soul that will come before the Lord on the Day of Judgment.

Imagine living in a house you built with slave labour and even having workers die on the job. You might imagine stones in the wall crying out, and timber beams answering (2:11). It is impossible for the human soul to ignore the cry of those afflicted by the hands belonging to that soul. The Babylonians built mansions with the plunder of many nations, and by the sweat and blood of men from these nations. The very stones of that house would cry out against them and signal their judgment. Remember the writing on the palace wall that greatly troubled Belshazzar, the last king of Babylon (Dan 5).

3. Promoter of violence

Most summers here in Australia someone loses their house in a bushfire. The owners are forced to watch as their home and their belongings go up in flames. For years they poured their savings and their life into building their dream home, only to see it all go up in smoke. Babylon would be forced to do the same, except for them it would be God's vengeance on them for building their towns and cities with bloodshed and iniquity (2:12).

This woe goes beyond Babylon to any nation that toils in vain to build a town or city for its own glory. The prophet Nahum pronounced a woe against Nineveh, 'the bloody city... full of lies and robbery' (Nahum 3:1). In his vision the apostle John saw the 'Babylon' that symbolised the political and economic seems of this world which exalt themselves against almighty God, going up in smoke as the last day approaches (Rev 18:8). At the same time he heard rejoicing in heaven: 'Alleluia, her smoke rises up for ever and ever' (Rev 19:3). There was rejoicing because the 'Lord God omnipotent reigns' (Rev 19:6).

Isaiah was the first prophet to speak of the peace and harmony of the new heavens and new earth, and of the earth being full of the knowledge of the glory of the Lord as the waters cover the sea (2:14, Isa 11:9). The kingdom of God will come, and indeed has come in the coming of Messiah. This kingdom will spread like floodwaters, reaching into every place where the kingdoms of this world exist, and try to hide from the wrath of the Lamb (Rev 6:16).

4. Pressing others to drink

The Babylonians loved their wine (2:5). Drink would lead to their downfall- literally (Dan 5). Drink is also used in a figurative sense. The wrath of God is pictured as him making his enemies drink the cup of His wrath to the last dregs (2:16, Ps 75:8, Rev 14:10). This would be just retribution for them making others drink the cup of their wrath.

The Babylonians were not content to 'hit the bottle' themselves; they made others join them in drunkenness and debauchery. They would get their neighbours intoxicated and then 'gaze on their nakedness' or molest them (2:15, Jer 51:7). Rampaging armies even today humiliate their enemies with nakedness and rape of their women. The Lord will repay such wickedness. He will bring 'utter shame on your glory' (2:16). In Hebrew 'utter shame' can also mean 'vomit of shame', which ties in with this woe relating to drunkenness.

The rapacious Babylonians were also guilty of violence against God's creation (2:17). They plundered the forests of Lebanon to build their palaces and their war machines (Isa 14:8). They plundered the beasts also. Again, such violence continues today. Warlords in Africa not only kill wildlife for food but for their horns or tusks which they sell to partners in crime around the world. The creation groans under the burden of sinful man, but will be 'released from the bondage to corruption into the glorious liberty of the children of God' (Rom 8:21-22).

5. Pagan idolatry

In the fifth and final woe the prophet reaches the climax of the sins of Babylon. They were guilty before the Lord of theft with violence, with plundering and murdering innocent people, and of humiliating their neighbours, not mention violence and plundering of God's creation in the form of forests and beasts. They did all this to bring glory to themselves. The climax of their sin was their failure to give all glory to God. God was using Babylon to punish his own people and other nations, but these victories went to their head as they went on the rampage, looting and killing with impunity. They made their own gods to worship, gods that approved of this wickedness. It is no surprise that man-made gods approve the sins of men, that the god of Muslims approves terrorism, that Hindu gods can be invoked to approve child sacrifice and 'Sati', and that the gods of atheists similarly approve lies, threats and violence in the name of some cause.

All the prophets condemn the foolishness of making an idol of wood or stone and then seeking counsel from this object. The object cannot speak, so how can anyone get wisdom from it (2:18). Woe to him who says to wood, 'Awake' and to silent stone 'Arise' declares Habakkuk (2:19). Idolatry is not only the height of foolishness, it is offensive to almighty God. God will not tolerate men and women made in his image, and to whom he has given life, giving thanks and glory to objects of their own making. Hosea spoke to the people of God condemning them for harlotry, for turning away from the true and living God, the God who hears and speaks, to 'ask counsel from their wooden idols' (Hosea 4:12). Where do people get counsel today? From where do you get counsel? Obviously many are not getting wise counsel as they pursue sinful behaviour and destructive habits.

As we close our meditation upon God's word today let us take hold of the closing words of this chapter. If you are in need of knowledge and wisdom in your life, or in the life of your family, do not look to modern-day idols, be they sporting or business heroes, or so called

experts that pop up in every media interview. Do not let your life be ruled by sex, drink or drugs. Look to the Lord for counsel. 'But the Lord is in his holy temple. Let all the earth keep silence before Him' (2:20). Satan wants us to keep busy and keep listening to the cacophony of words, opinions and expert advice that fills the airwaves and screens of our society, but God is in his holy temple ready to give us wisdom, if we are ready to stop and listen to him. If we do not listen today we certainly will on judgment day.