

Be silent before the Lord!

Habakkuk 2:6-20

Covenant Waterfall, 5 September 2021

Read

Pray

Introduction

Every great empire in history has assumed that they would endure forever. Think of the Ancient Egyptians, Persians, Greeks and Romans – all built massive, powerful empires, magnificent monuments honouring themselves, thinking their empire would never end. More recently – British Empire, 18th – 20th centuries – across the world upon which the sun never sets. Nazi Germany, only a generation ago – claimed it would be a 1000 year Reich. And now the United States of America – global superpower of the West. Even here in South Africa, our former president Jacob Zuma used to say that the ANC will rule until Jesus comes!

This is the problem with powerful empires and political rulers – they delude themselves into thinking that they will last forever. They become intoxicated with power and because of this, assume to be gods, thinking they are all powerful and everlasting. And this leads them to abuse their power – oppressing people, behaving in immoral, arrogant and corrupt ways, accountable to no one, thinking they will get away with anything.

Many of us feel fatigued by this kind of attitude in our own government – corruption is never ending, injustices occur continually, state abusing their power, over taxing us – encroaching more into our lives, where they shouldn't be.

Third sermon in Habakkuk – similar context. Judah is about to be invaded by the Babylonians and taken into exile – be oppressed. The Babylonians – like all other great empires – thought that they too were invincible, and acted that way – oppressed others with impunity. In this section of Habakkuk, God pronounces a series of woes, or judgements

upon Babylon. Though they think that they will last forever and think they can do as they please – God reminds them that only he is sovereign and everlasting. He’s the one who sets up kings, and brings them down. Only his glory will endure forever. So what we have here in these woes, is actually great hope for Judah, and all who are oppressed by tyranny. God promises to preserve his people, despite the wickedness of the Babylonians. There is hope because we know that God will ultimately triumph over evil. Going to see - because God is sovereign, injustice won’t prevail.

A. First Woe, vv.6-8

“Woe to him who heaps up what is not his own— for how long?— and loads himself with pledges!”⁷ Will not your debtors suddenly arise, and those awake who will make you tremble? Then you will be spoil for them. Because you have plundered many nations, all the remnant of the peoples shall plunder you, for the blood of man and violence to the earth, to cities and all who dwell in them.”

This first woe that God pronounces on the Babylonians is a woe to him to takes what is not his (v.6). Babylon plundered many nations, they plundered Judah – expropriated their land without compensation, inflicted violence upon them, shed innocent blood and acted like tyrants – over taxing them.

In verses 7-8, God promises Babylon that those whom they have plundered, will plunder them. In God’s sovereign plan, this came to pass. Mighty Babylon fell to the Medes and the Persians in 539 BC. Judah – then in captivity in Babylon, was allowed to return home and when they did, they plundered the Babylonians – took back their own treasures that the Babylonians had plundered from them, and even more!

The truth here is that governments that persist in plundering their own people with high taxes, taking their property and doing other oppressive things, inevitably get overthrown. That’s the story of history – Americans kicked out the British colonial overlords – American revolution, French Revolution, the fall of the Soviet Union – list is endless. God, in his sovereignty, sets a limit of human wickedness.

Proverbs 10:2-3, **“Treasures gained by wickedness do not profit, but righteousness delivers from death. The Lord does not let the righteous go hungry, but he thwarts the craving of the wicked.”**

B. Second Woe, vv.9-11

“Woe to him who gets evil gain for his house, to set his nest on high, to be safe from the reach of harm!”

The second woe is to those who seek evil and unjust gain at the expense of others. In verse 9, God accuses the Babylonians of building their nest (their empire), thinking that nothing will touch it. They think they will always be safe from the reach of harm. God exposes their arrogance here, v.10 – he will shame them. As they have built their empire through evil gain, by “cutting off many peoples” – God will cause their downfall – they will crumble, despite them having amassed much wealth and thinking that they are invincible – safe from the reach of harm.

Warning to all those in power who think they are untouchable, who think they will last forever, “safe from the reach of harm”. Only God is everlasting, and as Daniel 2:21 says, only **“He changes times and seasons; he removes kings and sets up kings...”**

For us – have a sober view of ourselves. Before the King of the Universe, we are all fallible, frail and our lives on this earth will one day come to end. Psalm 144:4 says, **“Man is like a breath; his days are like a passing shadow.”**

C. Third Woe, vv.12-14

“Woe to him who builds a town with blood and founds a city on iniquity!”

The third woe is to those who use violence to achieve their ends, who conduct their affairs sinfully, who build for their own glory. Babylon epitomised an empire built for man’s glory, for selfish gain and pride. In verse 13, God says that this is not of the Lord – working for man’s glory. Those who do so will find that their efforts will prove futile – they will “labour for fire”. God will destroy their cities with fire just like he did with Sodom and Gomorrah –

Gen 18 – two cities destroyed by God because they were founded on iniquity, built for their own glory.

Instead of cities that exist for human pride, selfishness and sin, God promises in verse 14 that, **“For the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.”** Ultimately God will establish his rule across the face of the earth. How so? As the gospel reaches all the nations of the earth, as they hear the good news of Israel’s promised Messiah Jesus, that all those who trust in him are forgiven their sins, they are the righteous who will live by faith; then the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord. Instead of trusting in human glory, people from among all nations will trust in God’s glory alone!

D. Fourth Woe, vv.15-17

“Woe to him who makes his neighbours drink—you pour out your wrath and make them drunk, in order to gaze at their nakedness!”

The fourth woe is to those who force and coerce others to join them in committing sins and immorality. The Babylonians were notorious for their decadence and sexual promiscuity (this is the tendency of most great empires – Greeks and Romans too). They were known to force their captives to get drunk and get them to commit sexually immoral and perverse acts – drinking parties and orgies (v.15).

God promises them in verse 16 that, **“You will have your fill of shame instead of glory. Drink, yourself, and show your uncircumcision! The cup in the Lord’s right hand will come round to you, and utter shame will come upon your glory!”**

God promises the Babylonians that they will face God’s wrath, they will be repaid for their sins, justice will be meted out to them. Just as they have caused their victims shame through forcing them into immorality, so will God shame them. In verse 17, he promises that violence will overwhelm them. God will have his way with them – they will need to drink the cup of God’s wrath! (v.16).

The tragedy is that little has changed today. The world, our culture is enticing us every day into joining them in their sins, specifically sexual sins. Their propaganda, temptation, is

everywhere – social media, Netflix, movies etc. There is a concerted effort from our culture to normalise every kind of sexual perversity from living together before marriage, adultery, homosexuality, paedophilia, transgenderism etc. Not only do they want us to approve them doing these things, they want us to join them too. Strong draw of temptation – promise freedom and pleasure and fulfilment. Reality is that this is all sinful and, like God did to the Babylonians, he will also bring shame upon us, and ultimately his wrath, if we join in with all this.

E. Fifth Woe, vv.18-20

“What profit is an idol when its maker has shaped it, a metal image, a teacher of lies? For its maker trusts in his own creation when he makes speechless idols! ⁹ Woe to him who says to a wooden thing, Awake; to a silent stone, Arise! Can this teach? Behold, it is overlaid with gold and silver, and there is no breath at all in it.”

The fifth and final woe is to those who worship idols. The Babylonians were pagans who worshipped various gods and goddesses of their own creation – depicted on metal images, wooden, stone, gold and silver objects. These verses tell us the futility of idolatry – how pointless it is to trust in something that you have created yourself, something that is lifeless, cannot speak, teach, hear, nor has breath?

Reality is that idolatry is not restricted to the pagan Babylonians. Idolatry is the default setting of the human heart. John Calvin said that the human heart is an idol factory. Our tendency is to worship anything else besides the true and living God: riches, pleasure, ideas of success, our work, our family, other people, even ourselves. Idolatry is the worshipping and serving of the creature instead of the Creator. This is why Romans 1:22-25 says:

“Claiming to be wise, they became fools, ²³ and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things.

Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonouring of their bodies among themselves, ²⁵ because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshipped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed for ever! Amen.”

Idolatry is ultimately the root of all other sins. If you set your heart upon anything else besides the true God – only going to lead you into all sorts of trouble and sin. No anchor in the truth. Exchange the Creator for his creation, exchange the immortal, glorious, eternal God for the finiteness of his creation – exchange the truth for lie, leads to death and destruction. Worship and follow the desires and passions of your hearts, instead of the living God.

In stark contrast to these lifeless idols, verse 20 ends with God declaring: **“But the Lord is in his holy temple; let all the earth keep silence before him.”** Only Yahweh – the Father, Son and the Holy Spirit is the One, True and living God – the Creator. All other gods are false and lifeless – part of this creation, cannot speak nor hear. Our God lives, he hears our prayers, he speaks to us through his Word, he provides for his people, he sustains all of creation by his sovereign power. Before him, the whole earth must bow and keep silence – he’s the true King before which every knee will bow and whose holy Name every tongue will confess!

Conclusion

Through all these five woes which God pronounced upon the Babylonians, we can see that there is ultimately hope for us. How so? God was true to his promise thousands of years ago to punish the evil and injustice of Babylon. If he was true to his promises then, he will be true to them now. No empire, ruler, president or political party will last forever. God is the one who raises them up and brings them down. He is sovereign. He will judge wickedness and injustice now – his hand will restrain evil in the present, and also in the future, when he promises to return to deliver his final judgement.

Great relief for us – no need for us to avenge evil ourselves – God promises to do it for us. Romans 12:19, **“Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, “Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.”** God’s promise to send his wrath upon those who commit evil against us, releases us instead to forgive our enemies.

It can be easy though to point out the sins of our rulers. Yet we too will one day come before the living God of heaven and earth. Like our kings and rulers, we too have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. Whether it is sexual immorality, idolatry, evil gain, theft,

pride, arrogance; we too deserve to drink the same cup of God's wrath that he poured out on the Babylonians.

Yet there was One who chose to drink this cup for our sake. When Jesus went to cross, he drank the cup of God's wrath – he took upon himself the punishment for sins that we all deserve. He suffered and died a death meant for us. But on the third day he rose again, defeating death and forgiving us our sins.

Brothers and sisters, repent and believe in Christ Jesus – the true and living God, the One who drank the cup of God's wrath instead of you. Trust in him who has removed your sins as far as the east is from the west, who has made peace between us and God, who clothes us in his own righteousness, bringing us before the Living God, to live and reign with him forever.

Amen.