

**Habakkuk:
Making Sense of Today's News**

Living in a Fallen World

Habakkuk 2:4-20

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September 24, 2006

Living in a Fallen World¹

Scripture

This is the fourth message in my series titled, “Making Sense of Today’s News.” Let us read Habakkuk 2:4-20:

- ⁴ **“See, he is puffed up;
his desires are not upright—
but the righteous will live by his faith—**
- ⁵ **indeed, wine betrays him;
he is arrogant and never at rest.
Because he is as greedy as the grave
and like death is never satisfied,
he gathers to himself all the nations
and takes captive all the peoples.**
- ⁶ **“Will not all of them taunt him with ridicule and scorn,
saying,**
- “ ‘Woe to him who piles up stolen goods
and makes himself wealthy by extortion!
How long must this go on?’**
- ⁷ **Will not your debtors suddenly arise?
Will they not wake up and make you tremble?
Then you will become their victim.**
- ⁸ **Because you have plundered many nations,
the peoples who are left will plunder you.
For you have shed man’s blood;
you have destroyed lands and cities and everyone in
them.**
- ⁹ **“Woe to him who builds his realm by unjust gain
to set his nest on high,
to escape the clutches of ruin!**
- ¹⁰ **You have plotted the ruin of many peoples,
shaming your own house and forfeiting your life.**

¹ Much of the material for this message comes from D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Faith Tried & Triumphant* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1987).

- 11 The stones of the wall will cry out,
and the beams of the woodwork will echo it.**
- 12 “Woe to him who builds a city with bloodshed
and establishes a town by crime!**
- 13 Has not the LORD Almighty determined
that the people’s labor is only fuel for the fire,
that the nations exhaust themselves for nothing?**
- 14 For the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of
the LORD,
as the waters cover the sea.**
- 15 “Woe to him who gives drink to his neighbors,
pouring it from the wineskin till they are drunk,
so that he can gaze on their naked bodies.**
- 16 You will be filled with shame instead of glory.
Now it is your turn! Drink and be exposed!
The cup from the LORD’s right hand is coming around to you,
and disgrace will cover your glory.**
- 17 The violence you have done to Lebanon will overwhelm you,
and your destruction of animals will terrify you.
For you have shed man’s blood;
you have destroyed lands and cities and everyone in
them.**
- 18 “Of what value is an idol, since a man has carved it?
Or an image that teaches lies?
For he who makes it trusts in his own creation;
he makes idols that cannot speak.**
- 19 Woe to him who says to wood, ‘Come to life!’
Or to lifeless stone, ‘Wake up!’
Can it give guidance?
It is covered with gold and silver;
there is no breath in it.**
- 20 But the LORD is in his holy temple;
let all the earth be silent before him.” (Habakkuk 2:4-20)**

Introduction

September 11, 2001 is now one of the most tragic dates in our history. Terrorists attacked America in a blatant, brutal way.

People in this country, and indeed the world, were shocked by the attacks. Five years later, we are still living with a great deal of uncertainty as we contemplate the possibility of another attack.

How does your view of God line up with such real life evil? How do you make theological sense out of the attack on America? Many great thinkers and philosophers throughout the ages have stumbled at this very problem of pain and suffering and evil—some ultimately rejecting Christianity because of it.

But the messy problem of pain and suffering and evil keeps popping up, regardless of our erudite attempts to explain it away. Living in a real world, we are faced with a question like: “Why did God allow the terrorist attack on September 11, 2001?”

Even C. S. Lewis, who offered perhaps the most articulate explanation of the problem of pain in the 20th century, saw his arguments fade in significance as he watched the onslaught of bone cancer in his wife’s body. Lewis said, “You never know how much you really believe anything until its truth or falsehood becomes a matter of life and death to you.”

The Old Testament prophet Habakkuk reached just that place. When faced with the fact that God was about to raise up the evil Babylonian nation to bring judgment against the people of God, it was more than he could take. He almost lost it! But instead of becoming an atheist or an agnostic, Habakkuk went to his watchtower to pray, meditate and wait on God to put it all together for him. He had confidence that God would send an answer soon.

Review

Last week we saw the steps Habakkuk followed while waiting for God’s answer. He (1) committed his problem to God, (2) expected an answer from God, and (3) was persistent in his expectation of that answer. Finally, (4) God rewarded his faith with an answer.

Lesson

As Habakkuk thought about what God was doing in his world, God gave Habakkuk three truths that helped him understand how he was to live. And so, today, I want you to see these three truths that God gives us in his Word regarding how we are to live in this fallen, sinful and often terrifying world.

I. God Calls Us to Live By Faith (2:4b)

First, God calls us to live by faith.

The life of faith is mentioned in Habakkuk 2:4. There are two paths before us. One is the way of faith. The other is the way of “un-faith” or unbelief. These are the only two paths.

The contrast is seen in Habakkuk 2:4-5 itself. The greater part of these two verses deals with the wicked, that is, those who do not believe in God, those opposed to God. It begins, “**See, he [that is, the wicked person] is puffed up; his desires are not upright. . . .**” Then there is a dash, followed by a description of the life of faith (“**but the righteous will live by his faith**”), followed by another dash. Then the passage continues: “**indeed, wine betrays him; he is arrogant and never at rest. Because he is as greedy as the grave and like death is never satisfied, he gathers to himself all the nations and takes captive all the peoples.**”

The way of the righteous is faith in God. The way of the wicked is pride and arrogance and unrighteousness. The first way submits to God. The second way does not submit to God.

Friends, there are only two realities in the world. There is God and there is Satan. There is light and there is darkness. There is the way of faith and there is the way of unbelief. There is the kingdom of God and there is the kingdom of Satan.

Let us not confuse the United States of America with the kingdom of God either. God has blessed America, but America is *not* the kingdom of God. Frankly, America may not prevail. But I can assure you that the kingdom of God will.

As you may know, Islam seeks to convert the entire world to Islam. The Koran permits Jihad (see Surah 9:20) which, according to the commentary in my version of the Koran, “may require fighting in Allah’s cause, as a form of self-sacrifice.” In recent years we have seen a growing number of attacks in the name of Allah. It seems to me that it is entirely possible that God is using militant Islam to rebuke the Church.

We are living in a culture that says that Christianity is one of many equally valid ways to God. I saw this most vividly in the National Day of Prayer and Remembrance that was held on Friday, September 14, 2001 at the National Cathedral in Washington, DC following the attack on America. I was deeply disturbed as I watched that service. Why? Because Christians, Jews and Muslims all participated in that service giving the impression that each religion was an equally valid way to God. That is simply not true.

There is only one true way, and that is the way of faith in God. For as God said to Habakkuk in verse 4, **“But the righteous will live by his faith.”**

Our society calls us to tolerance. By that they mean we must accept all truth claims as valid. But that is not the biblical position. The biblical position is that there is only one truth: it is God’s truth. Tolerance for the Christian means that we allow others to believe whatever error they like—but we do not accept their view as a valid truth claim. We accept their right to hold whatever errant view they like, but we do not accept their errant views as true.

What God was saying to Habakkuk is this: “Habakkuk, there are not many ways. There is only one way. It is the way of faith. It is the way of faith in the true and living God—Jehovah. You must learn to live by faith, you must learn to trust me and my character—no matter how confusing things may seem.”

So, the first truth is that God calls us to live by faith.

II. God Will Punish the Wicked (2:6-13, 15-19)

Second, God will punish the wicked.

In chapter 2 God told Habakkuk that although he was going to use this wicked nation of Babylon to accomplish his sovereign purposes with his people, he was also going to inflict punishment on the Babylonians for all their wickedness.

Habakkuk 2:6-20 is known as a *taunt song*. It's a song that a once-oppressed people might direct against their former oppressor. Such taunt songs often begin with the word “**woe.**”

If you look closely, you will find five woes recorded here. We won't take the time to study each **woe** but it's very important for you to see the big picture:

- Verses 6-8: **Woe** to the Greedy,
- Verses 9-11: **Woe** to the Unjust,
- Verses 12-13: **Woe** to the Violent,
- Verses 15-17: **Woe** to the Drunkards, and
- Verses 18-19: **Woe** to the Idolaters.

God was saying to Habakkuk, “Know that although the wicked Babylonians will be raised up and will flourish for a while, the limit of their prosperity is fixed by me. Their doom is sure. The wicked Babylonians are living on borrowed time. Watch Habakkuk, my people are about to go into captivity under them—but my people will continue and ultimately the Babylonians will fall!”

If you know your history, you know that they did fall. The Persians crushed them. Babylon became nothing but ruins.

The five woes recorded in this chapter are meant to be seen not only in light of Babylon's destruction but also as a universal principle in history—teaching us that although evil people and wickedness may flourish for a while, they will one day be called to give an account.

In the meanwhile, how are we to respond to the actions of the wicked? Ken Sande, President of Peacemaker Ministries wrote a helpful article following the attack on America titled, “Is This a Time for Peacemaking or a Time for War?”

The question of how we are to respond to evil acts is especially challenging for those of us who follow Jesus Christ, the Prince of Peace. He commanded that we love our enemies and do good to those who hate us.

These are hard teachings in the aftermath of an attack that has killed thousands of people. President Bush has declared this to be a war, and warned us that many people will die before it is over.

So, is this a time for peacemaking or a time for war? The answer, it seems to me, may be both.

But how can both paths be right, especially when they seem to go in opposite directions? Both can be right, because God himself has assigned different paths to different people.

The Bible teaches that God has delegated his authority to civil governments and assigned them the responsibility of promoting justice, protecting their people from aggressors, and punishing those who do wrong. For example, Paul said in Romans 13:1-4:

¹ Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God. ² Consequently, he who rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves. ³ For rulers hold no terror for those who do right, but for those who do wrong. Do you want to be free from fear of the one in authority? Then do what is right and he will commend you. ⁴ For he is God's servant to do you good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword for nothing. He is God's servant, an agent of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer (see also Isaiah 1:17; 1 Peter 2:13-14).

This is a heavy responsibility, especially when it involves the exercise of lethal force—but without this restraint, evil would run rampant. Thus there are times when those who lead and protect a nation can—and must—legitimately walk the path of war. When doing so, they should have our earnest prayers.

But even as we support our civil and military leaders in their God-given duties, we are called by God to walk a different path as

individuals. Just a few verses before God describes the government's right to wield the sword in Romans 13, he describes the individual Christian's responsibility in Romans 12:14-21:

¹⁴ Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. ¹⁵
Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn. ¹⁶
Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud, but be willing
to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited.

¹⁷ Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is
right in the eyes of everybody. ¹⁸ If it is possible, as far as it
depends on you, live at peace with everyone. ¹⁹ Do not take
revenge, my friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is
written: "It is mine to avenge; I will repay," says the Lord. ²⁰ On
the contrary:

"If your enemy is hungry, feed him;
if he is thirsty, give him something to drink.
In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head."

²¹ Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

This passage echoes Jesus' earlier teaching on how individuals should respond to those who wrong them: "But I tell you who hear me: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you. . . . Then your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High, because he is kind to the ungrateful and wicked. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful" (Luke 6:27-28, 35-36).

Most Christians think that these are fine and noble concepts—until someone actually hates us, curses us, and mistreats us. Then these words seem naïve and simplistic. But it is precisely at times when much wrong has been done that these words take on their greatest power and offer their greatest benefit.

On a personal level, we must return love for evil. However, we can be assured that God will punish the wicked. He authorizes civil authorities to dispense justice. And sometimes God works through this agency. But, if justice is not dispensed this side of glory, we can be assured that it will be on the Day of Judgment.

III. God Will Glorify Himself (2:14)

And finally, God will glorify himself.

Tucked neatly between the dark gloom of the third and fourth woe is a striking ray of light recorded for us in verse 14. Here God says, **“For the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea.”**

Habakkuk had been worried about the future of God’s kingdom as a result of this coming siege by the Babylonians. God knew Habakkuk’s concern and so he responded by saying, “Relax Habakkuk, although your nation will be taken captive, that will not hinder my ultimate plan. In fact, it is a part of my plan that I have ordained. You must realize that I am on the throne! And although it will sometimes look like my purposes in the world have been defeated, know that that is impossible! For I am continually ordering everything that happens toward that great and final day when all the earth will be filled with the knowledge of my glory!”

Here we learn this important truth: God is in absolute control of today’s news. God plans very carefully his arrangement for all world events. He is not in heaven apprehensive and anxious about what is going to happen in this world today.

God is on the sovereign throne of his universe, controlling each event of today’s news according to his perfect will. The key to understanding today’s news is knowing how the kingdom of God relates to today’s news. Today’s news is bound up with God’s kingdom. God started what we call “today’s news.” He is presently controlling it. And one day he will bring it to his perfect end!

This means that things are not always as they appear to be! Habakkuk thought that it was the astute military strength of the Babylonians that had brought them into world power.

But he learned that was not so! For God makes clear here that he was the one who had ultimately raised them up for his purposes!

The ramifications of this way of thinking are life changing! This means that when you read your newspaper and watch the

evening news—you should be doing so with kingdom glasses on. Always ask yourself, “What is the relevance of this news event to the kingdom of God? What was God doing, for example, when the planes crashed into the World Trade Towers and the Pentagon?”

You must learn to ask, “What is the relevance of this to the kingdom of God?” God is doing all things to glorify himself.

Conclusion

I know of a tragedy far more devastating and harder to explain than the attack on America on September 11, 2001. And that is the crucifixion of the perfect man—the Lord of glory himself. Why is the crucifixion of Jesus Christ harder to explain?

In the death of Jesus we see how evil, in the hands of a sovereign God, can be a vital and necessary part of the perfect plan of God. In describing those who brought about Jesus’ cruel death, Acts 4:28 tells us, “They did what (God’s) power and will had decided beforehand should happen.”

This does not mean that, in this life, we can ever fully fathom all the divine purposes we encounter. For God’s ways are often “past finding out.”

Nor does the knowledge that God is absolutely sovereign in our trials take away the very real misery and pain we feel at such times. But we must realize that God does have a purpose in everything!

And in our moments of deepest pain and sorrow remember these truths from Habakkuk about how to live in a fallen world:

1. God calls us to live by faith,
2. God will punish the wicked, and
3. God will glorify himself.

May God help us to live like this in our fallen world. Amen.

Mission Statement

The Mission Statement of the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church is:

*To bring people to Jesus Christ
and **membership** in his church family,
develop them to Christlike **maturity**,
equip them for their **ministry** in the church
and life **mission** in the world,
in order to **magnify** God's name.*

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PRAYER:

O Lord our God, we thank you that Habakkuk teaches us how to live in a fallen world. We know that there is a tremendous amount of evil at work in the world. There are wars and conflicts, and there are sorrows and suffering. In the midst of this, help us to remember that you call us to live by faith, that you will punish the wicked, and that you will glorify yourself.

All of this we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

CHARGE:

May the God who controls today's news help each one of you to trust him fully. And as you do, may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all, now and always. Amen.