

# **HABAKKUK**

Part 3: “A Vision of Woe and Glory”

Habakkuk 2:5-20

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Sunday, March 14, 2021 (Lent)

## **Scripture Reading**

*“Moreover, wine is a traitor, an arrogant man who is never at rest. His greed is as wide as Sheol; like death he has never enough. He gathers for himself all nations and collects as his own all peoples.” Shall not all these take up their taunt against him, with scoffing and riddles for him, and say, ‘Woe to him who heaps up what is not his own—for how long?— and loads himself with pledges!’ 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. Woe to him who gets evil gain for his house, to set his nest on high, to be safe from the reach of harm! You have devised shame for your house by cutting off many peoples; you have forfeited your life. For the stone will cry out from the wall, and the beam from the woodwork respond. Woe to him who builds a town with blood and founds a city on iniquity! Behold, is it not from the LORD of hosts that peoples labor merely for fire, and nations weary themselves for nothing? For the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the LORD as the waters cover the sea. Woe to him who makes his neighbors drink— you pour out your wrath and make them drunk, in order to gaze at their nakedness! 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 around to you, and utter shame will come upon your glory! The violence done to Lebanon will overwhelm you, as will the destruction of the beasts that terrified them, for the blood of man and violence to the earth, to cities and all who dwell in them. 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! 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. But the LORD is in his holy temple; let all the earth keep silence before him” (Habakkuk 2:5–20, ESV).*

Almighty God, even when it is sobering and mysterious, your word is always true. And by your truth, you set us free. May we receive your word this morning and rest in your freedom today, by the grace of your Holy Spirit. In Jesus’s name we pray, AMEN.

## **Introduction**

To catch you up to speed, Habakkuk has been asking God to do something about the condition of the world around him. He has been grieved by the division and injustice in

his society (Hab 1:3). He has been grieved that no one is paying attention to the word of God (Hab 1:4).

God responds to Habakkuk and announces that the kingdom of Judah will soon fall before the power of the Babylonian Empire (Hab 1:6). This is a hard word to hear. It makes no sense to Habakkuk. How can God judge Judah's wickedness with a nation that is even more wicked (Hab 1:13)?

So, Habakkuk lays his doubts, his frustrations, and fears before God in honest prayer. Then, he waits for the Lord to respond (Hab 2:1).

And God does respond. God gives Habakkuk a vision, and he tells him to place his faith in this vision (Hab 2:4).

In this vision, God makes it clear that he sees the evil of this world. In fact, he sees it more than we do. He grieves over the brokenness of his creation more passionately than we could ever imagine.

God is committed to bringing forth judgment and justice. So, yes, God will use Babylon as an instrument of discipline for Judah. But he is not blind to the evil of Babylon. In fact, here in Habakkuk chapter 2, God pronounces judgment upon Babylon by pronouncing judgment on their injustice and idolatry.

Habakkuk has been crying out against the violence, division, and perversion of justice he sees in society. He wants reform in his nation. But God has something much larger in mind. *God's goal is not the reformation of the Jewish nation. God's goal is the redemption and restoration of all nations.*

So, God gives to Habakkuk **"A Vision Woe and Glory."** It is a vision of both the cosmic judgment and renewal that only God can bring.

### **Exposition**

Now, the term "woe" is probably unfamiliar to you. But the passage that is before us is a specific form of prophetic speech that is known as an "oracle of woe." And yes, I know, the phrase "Oracle of Woe" sounds like the name of a metal band. But in biblical scholarship, it is a technical phrase that means something important.

Simply said, **an "oracle of woe" was a pronouncement of certain judgment.** It meant that a God was promising and pronouncing his wrath upon sin. And many times, particularly in the late ages of the kingdoms of Israel and Judah, God would pronounce oracles of woe against his own people for the way they had forsaken him. God's people had been faithless to serve the Lord who had delivered them from slavery and given them a homeland. Thus, as a consequence, they were sent into exile.

However, the Bible is very clear that although God has a special relationship with his chosen people, he is not a mere national patron deity. He is the sovereign Creator. He is

the Lord who possesses ultimate authority over all nations. So, there are times when God will also speak oracles of woe against the nations of the world. Here in Habakkuk 2, God is pronouncing judgment on Babylon.

And I believe, as we look at this text, we should see God's words of woe for Babylon as more than a promise to judge an empire that fell millennia ago. In Scripture, from the tower of Babel in Genesis (Gen 11:1-9), all the way to that Babylon is depicted in Revelation (Rev 18), Babylon functions as a symbol for all the kingdoms of man that would exalt themselves against God.

The book of Habakkuk shows us that while Babylon, in all of its iterations, can be used by God, ultimately, the kingdom of God is destined to prevail over Babylon and all kingdoms of men.

And as we take a closer look at this passage, we will find five woes and one promise. We'll work through them one at a time.

### **1.) A Woe Against Greed**

Let's take a look at our text: *"Moreover, wine is a traitor, an arrogant man who is never at rest. His greed is as wide as Sheol; like death he has never enough. He gathers for himself all nations and collects as his own all peoples." Shall not all these take up their taunt against him, with scoffing and riddles for him, and say, "Woe to him who heaps up what is not his own— for how long?— and loads himself with pledges!" 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" (Hab 2:5–8).*

At its zenith of power, Babylon was opulently and infamously wealthy. And the primary way that they acquired wealth was by commandeering the goods, precious metals, and commodities of the various nations that they conquered. But eventually, this unsustainable way of life is what led to the destruction of Babylon. The nations conquered and plundered by Babylon grew resentful until, eventually, two of them – Media and Persia – revolted and destroyed Babylon. Ironically, that for which they were willing to annihilate others for became the source of their own annihilation.

And you don't need me to tell you that greed is still a major factor in our world today. Greed is a hunger for money and wealth that can never be satisfied. It is a mentality that says, "I need more money so badly that I am willing to take advantage of others so that I can get it."

Greed is easy to spot in others. You probably remember the story of Martin Shkreli, who was a CEO of a pharmaceutical company. Shkreli acquired a patent for a lifesaving medicine at a moment when the original patent was about to expire. Once he did this, he monopolized the market for this particular drug and raised the price for this drug to fifty-six times its original amount. A pill that once cost \$13 now cost \$750. Profits

soared. But people who needed the medicine died. This type of greed is obviously outrageous and offensive.

But it is also safe to say that such extraordinary greed doesn't grow overnight. We would do well to ask our own hearts where we might be guilty of greed. Are there ways we might justify taking advantage of others? Are there ways that we might be pursuing wealth without anything or anyone to tell us we are going too far?

Greed is a difficult sin to see within our own hearts. I'm now nearing two decades of ministry. I've heard many people confess the sin of lust. I've heard many people confess the sin of addiction or anger or pride. I have never heard anyone confess to the sin of greed.

Now, money is not inherently evil. Wealth is not inherently evil. But greed, which is an inordinate love of money, is "a root of all kinds of evil" (1 Tim 6:10). Greed causes division, oppression, and instability in a society. And, often, when greed goes unchecked, it is self-destructive. It can destroy the lives of individuals and even whole societies.

## **2.) A Woe Against Individualism**

Look at verse 9: *"Woe to him who gets evil gain for his house, to set his nest on high, to be safe from the reach of harm! You have devised shame for your house by cutting off many peoples; you have forfeited your life. For the stone will cry out from the wall, and the beam from the woodwork respond"* (Hab 2:9–11).

Sometimes the motivation behind greed is the need to be significant. But sometimes, the motive behind greed is the desire to be safe and independent. Babylon was once under the heel of the empire of Assyria. Naturally, they wanted to be independent from outside authority and secure from external threats. Eventually, they got their independence and security, but it came at the expense of the independence security of others.

This one should hit home for us in the United States because, arguably, we are the most radically individualistic society in the history of the world. And that has certain strengths. For example, we have historically unprecedented personal freedom. But like most strengths, that sense of radical individualism can also become our greatest weakness.

When we set our nests on high, when we idolize our comfort, our safety, and our freedom, it often results in isolation and callousness to the needs of others. And when all of us think in terms of "me" instead of "we," that mentality has the potential to unravel the fabric of society.

By no means are we to hate ourselves or refuse to take care of ourselves. But we are called to love our neighbors as we love ourselves (Mk 12:31). And to love requires self-sacrifice and vulnerability that will necessarily challenge our individualism.

As C.S. Lewis once wrote, *“To love at all is to be vulnerable. Love anything and your heart will be wrung and possibly broken. If you want to make sure of keeping it intact you must give it to no one, not even an animal. Wrap it carefully round with hobbies and little luxuries; avoid all entanglements. Lock it up safe in the casket or coffin of your selfishness. But in that casket, safe, dark, motionless, airless, it will change. It will not be broken; it will become unbreakable, impenetrable, irredeemable. To love is to be vulnerable.”*

### **3.) A Woe Against Abusive Power**

Let’s continue in the text: *“Woe to him who builds a town with blood and founds a city on iniquity! Behold, is it not from the LORD of hosts that peoples labor merely for fire, and nations weary themselves for nothing?”* (Hab 2:12–13).

Babylon was an empire built on blood, and pretty much every empire since then as had the same foundation.<sup>1</sup> But power in itself is not an evil thing. Scripture teaches us that when God created man and woman, he gave them dominion over the earth (Gen 1:28). Likewise, the New Testament teaches Christians to submit to government leaders because God is the one who institutes their authority (Rom 13:1-7; 1 Pt 2:13-17).

However, it is also clear that God expects those in power to use their power to defend the weak and cultivate justice (cf. Pr 31:8-9; Lk 22:25-27). From leading a nation to managing a business, power is meant to be harnessed for the service of others and the good of something beyond ourselves. Power is meant to be a means to an end. Yet, throughout history, many people treated it as an end to itself.

Whether it was from an overbearing parent, a cruel teacher, a bad boss, or a corrupt government official, almost everyone has some experience with someone who has abused the authority they have been given. Often people will abuse power for no other reason than to retain power. But such power is doomed to fail.

A few years ago, HBO produced a haunting series about the Chernobyl disaster in the former Soviet Union. One of the major themes explored in that program was the unbelievable extent the Soviet government went to in order to cover up their negligence and incompetence related to Chernobyl. Instead of marshaling their resources to save lives from radiation poisoning, they marshaled their energy to deceive their own citizens, as well as their neighboring nations. In other words, instead of using power for the good of their nation, the government chose to use their power to save face and retain control over their nation. But as the main character of that story famously said, *“Every lie we tell incurs a debt to the truth. Sooner or later, that debt is paid.”*

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<sup>1</sup> The Great Wall of China, the Roman Coliseum, and the White House in Washington D.C. were all built by slave labor.

#### **4.) A Woe Against Indulgence**

The next woe gets a little graphic: *“Woe to him who makes his neighbors drink— you pour out your wrath and make them drunk, in order to gaze at their nakedness! 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 around to you, and utter shame will come upon your glory! The violence done to Lebanon will overwhelm you, as will the destruction of the beasts that terrified them, for the blood of man and violence to the earth, to cities and all who dwell in them”* (Hab 2:15–17).

From the book of Daniel, we know that Babylon knew how to throw a good party, even all the way up to the moment they were conquered (Dan 5). From substance abuse to sexual sin, ultimately, all self-indulgence leads to a path of self-destruction.

The text specifically mentions alcohol abuse, which has been a major cause of brokenness in marriages, families, and livelihoods all throughout history. But today, that desire for sedation extends to other forms of substance abuse, such as addition illegal drugs or abuse of pain medications.

Four years ago, President Trump declared that the opioid crisis was a national emergency in the United States. Sadly, the pandemic has not made that situation better. In fact, 46 of our nation’s 50 states saw an increase in overdose related deaths last year.

Likewise, it is not difficult to connect this text to modern-day pornography and the entertainment industry, which has taken the sin of lust and systematized it into our culture. Just like substance abuse, this form of indulgence leads people to destruction and dehumanization.

What all of these forms of indulgence share – from porn to pot to addiction to prescription meds – is a pretense of escape into a false reality. But instead of providing escape, all they give provide is a prison of addiction. God’s people are called to forsake such things.

#### **5.) A Woe Against All Idols**

The fifth and final woe of this passage serves as a type of catch-all category. Look at the text: *“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! 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”* (Hab 2:18–19).

All of the things that God has spoken against in this passage have caused great injustice in society. But behind all this injustice is the fundamental problem of idolatry.

Simply defined, idolatry is the exaltation of something in creation to a place of being functionally worshipped. Idolatry is taking a good thing making it an ultimate thing.

And as John Calvin famously wrote, the human heart is a perpetual factory of idols.<sup>2</sup> Ever since the fall of man, our hearts are gravitationally drawn to idols (cf. Rom 1:21-23). And the dangerous thing is that idols often blind us to their very existence.

In his book *Counterfeit Gods*, Timothy Keller writes: *“What is an idol? It is anything more important to you than God, anything that absorbs your heart and imagination more than God, anything you seek to give you what only God can give. A counterfeit god is anything so central and essential to your life that, should you lose it, your life would feel hardly worth living. An idol has such a controlling position in your heart that you can spend most of your passion and energy, your emotional and financial resources, on it without a second thought... An idol is whatever you look at and say, in your heart of hearts, ‘If I have that, then I’ll feel my life has meaning, then I’ll know I have value, then I’ll feel significant and secure.’”*<sup>3</sup>

All throughout the prophetic books of the Old Testament, God condemns idols in no uncertain terms. And these hard words of Scripture are not meant to shame us. Rather, they are meant to be like harsh-smelling salts that rouse us from slumber. They are meant to wake us up to what matters. These words are meant to expose the futility and the absurdity of idols so that we might repent.

I think we would do well to ask the hard heart-questions, what idols am I most tempted to worship instead of God? And how do I need to retrain my heart to place its hope in God and God alone?

And this is how Habakkuk concludes the chapter, by directing our hearts to the Lord: *“But the LORD is in his holy temple; let all the earth keep silence before him”* (Hab 2:20).

Before the absolute holiness and glory and power of God, there is no room for games and triviality. If we know God for who he is, the only appropriate response is awestruck worship! Our idols are not even worthy of comparison to God’s glory.

So, we might ask, what is the attraction of idols? I think our text gives us a hint. Idols are something we create. And because we create them, we are convinced that we can control and manage them. Yet, our idols only succeed in tyrannizing us. They will never fail to fail us. They cannot give us what they promise. They are powerless to deliver us.

But the God who is our Creator and Redeemer is limitless in his power! And there is a day coming when all idols will not only be exposed – they will be vanquished! That leads us to our final point.

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<sup>2</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion & 2*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, vol. 1, The Library of Christian Classics (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 108.

<sup>3</sup> Timothy Keller. *Counterfeit Gods: The Empty Promises of Money, Sex, and Power, and the Only Hope That Matters*. (New York: Dutton, 2009), xviii.

## 6.) A Promise of Glory

Now, if you were paying very close attention, as we were walking through this passage, there was one very important verse in the middle of our reading that I skipped over.

That is because this passage is written in poetic form, and much of Hebrew poetry uses a structure known as a *chiasm*. And in a chiasm, that which is most important is found not at the beginning or the end, but rather in the dead center of the poem.

What is the center of today's reading? It is found in verse 14: *"For the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the LORD as the waters cover the sea"* (Hab 2:14).

This whole chapter is filled with God's judgment against the sin of this world; against all the things causing brokenness and pain in society. But nestled in these oracles of woe is a promise that God's glory will prevail. It is a promise that one day God will bring the power of evil to an end and make all things new.

When God tells Habakkuk that the righteous shall live by faith, this is what he is telling the prophet to put his faith in. It is a vision of God's justice and judgment!

Not only that, but verse 14 is a direct quote from the prophet Isaiah who lived a little more than a century before Habakkuk. Apparently, even Habakkuk reads his Bible, and it is from this passage in Isaiah 11 that Habakkuk finds faith and hope: *"The wolf shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the young goat, and the calf and the lion and the fattened calf together; and a little child shall lead them. The cow and the bear shall graze; their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. The nursing child shall play over the hole of the cobra, and the weaned child shall put his hand on the adder's den. They shall not hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain; for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea"* (Isa 11:6–9).

It is an image of comic renewal and restoration. It is an image of all sadness and brokenness being gone forever. It is an image of all things being made new!

My question for you this morning is have you allowed your heart to be overwhelmed with the hope of God's promise? Are you looking to the day when God will make all things new, or are you still clinging to the false promises of the idols of this age?

Today, I want to invite you, if you have yet to know the hope of the gospel, put your trust in Christ today. Taste and see that the Lord is good, and allow your restless heart to find its rest in him!

## Conclusion

There is no mistaking that Habakkuk 2 is a serious and sober chapter. In this text, God is confronting the idols and injustices with violence in the same way that they wreak violence upon our world and our souls. We must not shy away from such texts. We must



let them stir our hearts to repentance from sin and faith toward Christ. For in Christ, we will find grace.

When our sins are many, Christ's grace really is more. He invites us into freedom. We can come out of a Babylon that will be judged and into a new kingdom that will know no end. So today, if you are weary of your idols, lay them down and respond to the voice of King Jesus who calls us, *"Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light"* (Mt 11:28–30).

AMEN.

### **Discussion Starters for Gospel Community**

- 1.) Read Habakkuk 2:5-20. This passage includes five uses of the word "woe." In Old Testament prophecy, a, "oracle of woe" was a word of judgment. What are the sins or idols God is judging in this passage? Do any of those sins or idols still exist in our world today?
- 2.) Habakkuk 2:5-20 is a sobering passage that shows us the destructive nature of sin and idolatry. Why are such passages still important for Christians to read and study today?
- 3.) In Hebrew poetry, the center of a poem often contains the most important truth. The center of this poem is Habakkuk 2:14, which is a direct quote of Isaiah 11:9. To get a better context for the picture in Habakkuk 2:14, read and discuss Isaiah 11:1-9. Why would the promise of Habakkuk 2:14 give hope to Habakkuk?
- 4.) Why should Habakkuk 2:14 bring hope to us in this season?