

Habakkuk: A Prophet Of Faith (Part Three)

Five Woes

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As we saw in my previous two sermons, Habakkuk sees that the Chaldean-Babylonians will pose a serious problem to reconcile with the holiness of God, because they are a bloody and ruthless people who have no respect for the moral law. So why would God use such an evil people to come against His own people in Judah?

Instead of falling into impatient cynicism, Habakkuk sets a positive example of waiting upon the Eternal for His answer and shows himself to be a faithful servant of the Supreme God. In time, the answer comes: the proud, self-confident sinner will be condemned, his time is ripe, and only the faithful believer will stand acquitted before God's judgment. Only he will partake of eternal life.

God has taken notice of the sins of the Chaldean's and will gloriously vindicate Himself in the end as He brings judgment upon them.

Once all these doubts are settled, Habakkuk enthusiastically sings a psalm of holy rejoicing in Habakkuk 3, and thinks back to the days of the Exodus, the conquest, and the times of the judges, to recall past instances when God similarly justified His righteousness and demonstrated His sovereignty to the world.

In many ways the prophecy of Habakkuk is unique. It is especially significant in the style of its approach. In this prophecy the Chaldean's are ruthless conquerors and oppressors representing persecutors of God's people.

Anciently, Chaldea was the southern portion of Babylonia, which is lower Mesopotamia, lying mainly on the right bank of the Euphrates, but is part of the Mesopotamian plain as a whole.

Instead of addressing the people of Judah directly as a spokesman of the Eternal, Habakkuk imparted God's message by telling them how it first came to him and answered the questions that were puzzling him. With the possible exception of Daniel, no other biblical author uses this particular technique.

In my last sermon we left off in Habakkuk 2:6-20. We see here a five-fold woe upon the wicked Chaldean oppressor. These five woes are presented symmetrically in five stanzas of three verses each. The woes are taken up and spoken by all the nations and peoples mentioned in verse 5 who have suffered at the hand of the cruel oppressor.

In Habakkuk 2:6-20 we find what scholars call a "taunt song." It is the kind of song that a once-oppressed people might direct against its former oppressor. Often taunt songs begin with the word "woe" or "alas."

To the faithful Jews in the land, God would be a refuge and strength.

Nahum 1:7 The Lord is good, a stronghold in the day of trouble; and He knows those who trust in Him.

However, to the godless Babylonians invading the land, He would be a judge and eventually punish their sins and give them what they deserved, even though initially God would use them as a tool to chastise Judah—His people.

In the second chapter of Habakkuk, there are five occurrences of the word “woe,” each of which marks a stanza within the taunt song. The first woe is in verse 6; the stanza it introduces is in verses 6-8. The second woe introduces verses 9-11. The third woe introduces verses 12-14. The fourth woe introduces verses 15-17. The fifth and final stanza encompasses verses 18-20, but the woe comes in the middle, in verse 19.

These five stanzas show the misery of the person or nation that thinks it can do without God. So, here is Judah (or Habakkuk) being inspired by God, looking at the nation of the Chaldeans and seeing them as a people without God.

The first woe stanza has to do with selfish ambition and begins in verse 6.

Habakkuk 2:6 “Will not all these [oppressed nations or people] take up a proverb against him [the oppressor], and a taunting riddle against him, and say, “Woe to him who increases what is not his—how long? And to him who loads himself with many pledges?” [Or, in other words, to paraphrase it: “Woe to him who piles up stolen goods and makes himself wealthy by extortion!”]

It was a common business practice in the ancient Near East for a person, in order to make a pledge, had to offer as collateral a portion of his property as a guarantee of paying off a debt or other financial obligation. So, the principle was well understood at that time.

The problem here is selfish ambition in the form of greed, as the preceding verse indicates. Greed is a natural but destructive characteristic of the one who will not trust God. If a person trusts God, he does not feel a need to be covetous of more and more material possessions.

In this taunt song they will heap woe on the Chaldean-Babylonian for his greedy and plundering ways. He sought to heap up for himself property which was not his. So, the question is, how long did he think he could go on this way with apparent impunity? How long could he get away with it?

Additionally, he loaded himself with pledges, that is, the wealth of the nations which he has plundered, as an exacting user accumulates pledges contrary to God’s law, and which must be given up again. Suddenly, he would be called upon, by those whom he oppressed, to relinquish his ill-gotten gain.

Now in contrast, God’s law, as always, is a law of love. Notice what He says regarding pledges here in Deuteronomy 24.

Deuteronomy 24:10-13 “When you lend your brother anything, you shall not go into his house to get his pledge. You shall stand outside, and the man to whom you lend shall bring the pledge out to you. And if the man is poor, you shall not keep his pledge overnight. You shall in any case return the pledge to him again when the sun goes down, that he may sleep in his own garment and bless you; and it shall be righteousness to you before the Lord your God.

The basic rights of a vulnerable person are protected. The dignity of the borrower was preserved by prohibiting the lender from entering his house and from taking anything he might want as a pledge.

If the borrower was so poor that the only thing he could offer as a pledge was his cloak, which served as a blanket at night, or anything else that was necessary for his livelihood, then the lender was to return it before nightfall. By acting in this manner the lender was loving his neighbor as himself and that is what God's law of love requires.

In contrast however, the average worldly creditor has no loving concern for the poor borrower. We see that in the world today.

Habakkuk 2:7 Will not your creditors rise up suddenly? Will they not awaken who oppress you? And you will become their booty.

“Oppress” in verse 7 is from a Hebrew word used of the oppression of usury. So, it is specifically talking about usury and extortion and those types of crimes. Thus, the words “creditors” and “oppress” are linked.

We know that the Medes and Persians struck unexpectedly at the Babylonians. According to Barnes' Notes:

The destruction of the wicked is always sudden in the end. This was the case with the flood, the destruction of Sodom, of Pharaoh, of the enemies of God's people through the Judges, of Sennacherib, Nineveh, and Babylon by the Medes and Persians. The Medes and Persians who were before subject to the Babylonian empire, and whose kings were subject to Nebuchadnezzar and his successors, rose up and awakened, that is, stirred themselves up in the days of Belshazzar to rebel against the successors of Nebuchadnezzar which sat on his throne, like a man who awakes from sleep.

In verse 8, the table is turned upside-down. As the creditor, by his oppressing, had abused others, the same thing will be done to him.

Habakkuk 2:8 Because you have plundered many nations, all the remnant of the people shall plunder you, because of men's blood and the violence of the land and the city, and of all who dwell in it.

According to this woe, the oppressors had become indebted to the nations from which they had oppressed and stolen. The surrounding conquered peoples would, for all practical purposes, become their creditors looking for retribution. These verses mean that when you take advantage of someone, steal from them, beat them, or take advantage of them, they will eventually turn on you.

The oppressors would not only be stung by the remnant of oppressed and enslaved peoples but would be shaken violently. This is how strong the forceful seizure of the oppressor and the payback by the oppressed and enslaved victims would be.

In other words, the conquered, that is the Jews and other nations, who have been robbed by their conquerors—the Babylonians—would eventually take harsh retribution out on their captors, because they would be pushed to the limit by their suffering under oppression.

This has happened time and time again. When the creditor or oppressor goes too far in his extraction of payment, the debtor turns on the creditor and he strikes him back for exacting usury upon him.

The thought here is that since the Chaldean oppressors had spoiled so much of the goods of others, they had actually become as if they were in debt to the conquered oppressed peoples which they had spoiled. This verse finishes up the idea of selfish ambition found here in verses 6-8.

The Chaldean-Babylonians were consumed by selfish ambition and they stopped at nothing to acquire wealth and expand their kingdom. They did it as individuals and they did it as an empire.

They had hoards of stolen goods plundered from helpless people and God warned them that the owners of this wealth would one day rise up to condemn them and collect what was due. Then the Babylonians would become the victims. And this did happen when the Medes and the Persians invaded Babylon and overthrew Belshazzar as recorded in Daniel 5.

Babylon plundered other nations and she herself was plundered. She had shed rivers of blood, and her blood was shed. It is a basic law of the universe that eventually we reap what we sow. The spoil will be spoiled; the plunder will be plundered. All this will come to him for his shedding of blood and violence inflicted upon the lands and cities of the nations.

Selfish ambition manifests itself in greedy and plundering ways. The ancient Chaldean-Babylonian sought to heap up for himself possessions which were not his.

“Ambition” is a neutral word. Neither good nor bad, it is defined as a strong desire to do or to achieve something, typically requiring determination and hard work.

Of itself, ambition can be a good thing, but if it motivates a person to be greedy, selfish, and abusive it is obviously a bad thing. For example, Paul himself was ambitious for God and wrote in II Corinthians 5.

II Corinthians 5:9-10 Therefore we make it our aim [or ambition], whether present or absent, to be well pleasing to Him. For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive the things done in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad.

We should imitate the apostle Paul’s ambition. Ambition driven with the purpose of serving God produces blessings for others as well as for ourselves. Of course, there is a much better treasure than other people’s possessions, property, or money.

The Lord is the inheritance of the righteous, and He abundantly supplies our need. Jesus Christ spoke of God’s provision for the birds of the air and the flowers of the field and asked, in Matthew 6.

Matthew 6:30 “Now if God so clothes the grass of the field, which today is, and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will He not much more clothe you, O you of little faith?”

Matthew 6:33 “But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you.”

So, if a person trusts God, he does not need to acquire more and more possessions, since he knows God will provide what he needs. If he does not trust God, then the need for things becomes a burden, because his needs and wants are blurred by his carnal desire. Everything he wants becomes his need out of selfish desire.

This world is an insecure place, and the individual is insecure within it. So, he works to get more and more in the hope that if he only has a little more land or stocks or capital, he may survive. But it does not work, it is never enough.

This is what Habakkuk says clearly. For one thing, they talk about “stolen goods” and things acquired by extortion. In the beginning, the person who is trying to build security with things probably intends to be quite honest in doing it. But, somehow, what is acquired is never enough, and so, he finds himself resorting to questionable and eventually to dishonest practices in the quest for more.

The Scriptures also talk about this person’s “debtors,” suggesting that a person like this easily overextends himself and eventually falls prey to the collectors. So, Habakkuk is quite contemporary in what he describes.

Is this not what today’s society does day in and day out? The people of the Western world are more in debt than they have ever been, and many are losing houses or other tangibles to the debt collectors. It has gotten so bad that people are now living in parks. Many are going into personal bankruptcy and losing everything.

These facts are testimonies to the truthfulness of God’s Word and proof of what happens when a person or nation rejects God and lives without Him.

The second woe stanza is pronounced upon the Chaldean-Babylonians for their covetousness and self-exaltation.

Habakkuk 2:9 “Woe to him who covets evil gain for his house, that he may set his nest on high, that he may be delivered from the power of disaster! [people’s insecurity is seen here]

The drive which led the wicked to seek wealth or power at the expense of other people was a drive for security. Yet wealth and power could never really protect anyone. All that this lifestyle was sure to gain was dashed hopes and guilt.

The basic meaning of gain is breaking off pieces of silver and other metals in money transactions. Then, it came to refer to those who sought after ungodly gain.

Like Edom, the Chaldean set up his government on a basis where it was secure from attack. The language is not literal but is taken from the imagery of an eagle.

We will quickly look at three passages here just to get a sense of this eagle imagery.

Job 39:27-30 “Does the eagle mount up at your command, and make its nest on high? On the rock it dwells and resides, on the crag of the rock and the stronghold. From there it spies out the prey; its eyes observe from afar. Its young ones suck up blood; and where the slain are, there it is.”

We can almost see a direct imagery to what was happening with the Chaldean’s attacking Judah. Now turn to Jeremiah 49.

Jeremiah 49:15-16 “For indeed, I will make you small among nations, despised among men. Your fierceness has deceived you, the pride of your heart, O you who dwell in the clefts of the rock, who hold the height of the hill! Though you make your nest as high as the eagle, I will bring you down from there,” says the Lord.

Now Obadiah was aware of what Jeremiah wrote, because he prophesied after Jeremiah, and he prophesied something similar about Edom here in Obadiah.

Obadiah 2-4 “Behold, I will make you small among the nations; you shall be greatly despised. The pride of your heart has deceived you, you who dwell in the clefts of the rock, whose habitation is high; you who say in your heart, ‘Who will bring me down to the ground?’ Though you ascend as high as the eagle, and though you set your nest among the stars, from there I will bring you down,” says the Lord.

It is interesting that an eagle cannot devour an oyster unless he breaks it open by carrying it into the air and dropping it from a great height onto rocks below. Satan uses a similar method to break our resistance to pride. He tries to get us to desire high stature and wealth, and then, once we are exalted in our own minds, he can spiritually “dash us to pieces” below.

This was the same thing that was happening with the Babylonians attacking the Jews at the time of Habakkuk. It was the same method that Satan uses today on a spiritual level to distract us.

Satan used this method on Jesus Christ in Matthew 4 when he attempted to elevate Jesus’ view of Himself through enticements of vanity and power. He placed Jesus on the highest pinnacle of the Temple, and then told Him to cast Himself down if He were truly God. Jesus, though, was not deceived, being content with His temporary stature during His physical life.

Contentment is indeed great gain as Paul says in I Timothy 6:6. If we are satisfied with our current status, then we will have contentment. Oftentimes God does not bless us with what we are asking for because He is waiting for us to be content with what we have.

The world views stature as overwhelmingly important, when in reality, those who seek great heights eventually receive the depths of this very dangerous pitfall.

The ungodly oppressor may think his position is an impregnable one, but because of his many plunderings, he has sinned against his own self, caused his own ruin, and has brought the retribution of God upon himself. Now this may not happen right away, but it will eventually, Scripture guarantees it.

Even inanimate things—the buildings he has erected to his own glory and for the satisfaction of his own pride—will cry out because of the injustices perpetrated in them. The reference is not to the dissolution of the empire, as though it were falling apart. But the stone and the beam would cry out together to accuse of sin and bloodshed, meaning that God's justice and righteousness would be upheld and He would eventually carry out His punishment.

Similarly, Genesis says regarding Cain murdering Abel:

Genesis 4:10-11 And He [God] said, "What have you done? The voice of your brother's blood cries out to Me from the ground. So now you are cursed from the earth, which has opened its mouth to receive your brother's blood from your hand."

In the same way that the earth cried out for Abel's blood, so does the blood of the oppressed cry out to God and God carries out His judgment on the oppressors, as He did with Cain.

Here is a man who had tried to accumulate as much as he could by more or less honest means, but when he finds he cannot get enough, resorts to unjust means to enlarge his portfolio and place himself beyond the possibility of ruin. But ruin comes. The text says that even what he has accumulated will cry out against him. The reason is because the people he had hurt and the blood he has shed will cry out to God.

Habakkuk 2:10-11 You give shameful counsel to your house, cutting off many peoples, and sin against your soul. For the stone will cry out from the wall, and the beam from the timbers will answer it.

Now picture a nobleman in the Babylonian army. He wants to rise to a high position and enjoy its rewards, to have an opulent house and to be secure in it. So he cuts down a forest that belongs to somebody else and from the trees of that forest makes great beams for his home. Then he destroys someone else's home and takes the beautiful stone blocks it was made of for himself.

When he finishes he has a beautiful house, a "nest on high" as verse 9 says. But everyone who looks at it knows where the stones and beams came from, and his pride and joy become a cause for shame. When the opportunity arises the oppressed will see to it that the nobleman or the elite is treated as he treated others. In other words, judgment will come upon him.

In contrast, God's principle regarding this is commanded in Ephesians 4, which says:

Ephesians 4:28 Let him who stole steal no longer, but rather let him labor, working with his hands what is good, that he may have something to give him who has need.

Regarding covetousness, Paul that there are three ways to get wealth: you can work for it, steal it, or receive it as a gift. Stealing is wrong because the eighth commandment says, "You shall not steal;" and it is a hateful action.

So the Chaldean's took land that was not theirs in order to build an empire that glorified them and assured them safety. Their goal was security, like the eagle's nest on the high mountain crags. Of course, this was a false security, because no individual or nation can build walls high enough to keep God out.

What will be the consequences of this covetousness? Instead of having houses and families that bring honor, they will have disgrace and shame and will eventually lose their lives and the property that they stole.

Mark 8:36 For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul?

The very materials in their expensive houses would testify against them, because they were plundered from helpless people. In James 5, James used a similar image when he warned the rich that the wages they owed their laborers would witness against them at the judgment.

James 5:1-6 Come now, you rich, weep and howl for your miseries that are coming upon you! Your riches are corrupted, and your garments are moth-eaten. Your gold and silver are corroded, and their corrosion will be a witness against you and will eat your flesh like fire. You have heaped up treasure in the last days. Indeed the wages of the laborers who mowed your fields, which you kept back by fraud, cry out; and the cries of the reapers have reached the ears of the Lord of Sabaoth. You have lived on the earth in pleasure and luxury; you have fattened your hearts as in a day of slaughter. You have condemned, you have murdered the just; he does not resist you.

It is likely that some of the covetous Jews, at the time of Habakkuk, felt the sting of this rebuke, because they were amassing fortunes by exploiting the poor and using that money to build expensive houses. The prophets often rebuked the rich because they lived in luxury while the poor suffered. This was going on before the Chaldeans attacked the Jews.

Jesus warned His disciples in Luke 12.

Luke 12:15 And He said to them, "Take heed and beware of covetousness, for one's life does not consist in the abundance of the things he possesses."

That warning is still valid for us today. "You shall not covet" may be the last of the Ten Commandments, but if we are guilty of covetousness, we have broken the other nine also! When a person covets, he allows the desire for that which is coveted to govern his relationship with other people. This may become the motivation for murder, stealing, or lying either to attain the desired thing or to keep it from someone else.

Because of the way that coveting values a particular thing over trust in and obedience to the Eternal as the Provider, it is also a breach of the first commandment, which the apostle Paul makes clear when he refers to coveting as idolatry. So it breaks all of the Ten Commandments.

Moving on to the third woe here. This deals with the tyrannical oppression of captive peoples, and is called down upon the Chaldean-Babylonian conqueror. Verse 12 introduces violence and exploitation.

Habakkuk 2:12-13 "Woe to him who builds a town with bloodshed, who establishes a city by iniquity! Behold, is it not of the Lord of hosts that the peoples labor to feed the fire, and nations weary themselves in vain?"

Their cities were built with blood, because the wealth by which the king of Babylon built his magnificent buildings was gained by bloody wars. Captive labor was used to build the grand structures of the empire.

But, contrary to the purposes of the proud rulers of Babylon, the Eternal had determined that the labor of these subject peoples would not stand. It would all be consumed in the fire that was to bring the Chaldean-Babylonian empire to an end. Their work was all in vain.

Anciently, a kingdom had been set up in Babylon to usurp power and glory. But it must pass away and be replaced by God's Kingdom. The Seventh Trumpet proclaims the Kingdom of God.

Revelation 11:15 Then the seventh angel sounded: and there were loud voices in heaven, saying, "The kingdoms of this world have become the kingdoms of our Lord and of His Christ, and He shall reign forever and ever!"

In order for the earth to be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord as the waters cover the sea, the kingdoms and rulers of this world must be judged and destroyed.

The purpose of God in creating the earth at all was that it might reflect His glory in bringing sons to glory as members of His Family.

This violence was a vice particularly observable among the Babylonians, and has carried down through the ages to our present time under this Babylonian system. This nation and those under this Babylonian system have destroyed millions and millions of people through this last century and more.

Here are people who have gone from greed to injustice to violence. Not content with what their injustices can procure, they are now adding crimes of violence to their vices. So great is their desire to have things such as power, land, and everything else under the sun.

The specific setting of this stanza concerns building, in this case building a city. Of course, building is not wrong in itself, though the desires that motivate it may be. There is nothing wrong with building a city or a company or a house, if the motives and means are right.

But here in Habakkuk is an example of building by wrong means. And the decreed result is that the work will not endure. That which exalts man will pass away. So even though the Babylonians are making the Jews, which they took into slavery, build their empire, it is still work that will be in vain and would pass away.

We can even apply this to building a church. It is possible to build a large church by secular means. That is, you can prosper externally by using good marketing, advertising, and other secular techniques. Find out what the people want, then give it to them. That is the secret to "human success."

If they want bowling alleys and gymnasiums, give them bowling alleys and gymnasiums. If they want classes on how to fulfill themselves as individual people and get ahead in business, give them those classes. If they want soothing, reassuring sermons, give them such sermons. Give them anything they want, but above all, do not confront them with the harsh statements or demanding standards of the Bible.

A church built along these lines will grow. But it will not endure! When hard times come and things change, it will fade away. On the other hand, a church that seeks to do things God's way will endure, even though its way may be harder and the growth quite slow. Floods may come upon a church like this, the winds of adversity may blow upon it, but it will stand and be a source of blessing because "the gates of hell can not prevail against it."

Now let us shift gears here to take a look at the exploitation of people. Babylon was built by bloodshed, the blood of innocent victims. It was built by prisoners of war, slave labor that was exploited to the fullest extent. Babylon was proud of what she had built, but God said it would not last, it was only fuel for the fire. That principle holds true to this day.

The city of Babylon was an architectural marvel, but their great projects were for nothing. It is all gone today. The city was built with slave labor, but one of those slaves meant more to God than all the buildings put together, which is the opposite attitude than the Babylon's had. Things meant more to them than people did.

Continuing on in Habakkuk 2, God gives the prophet a second assurance, this time of God's glory.

Habakkuk 2:14 For the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea.

In contrast to the shame and infamy of Babylon, God promised that His glory would one day cover the earth. The glory of Babylon did not last, but the glory of the Lord will abide forever.

As we read this it gets into transforming the world from the way it is today under man and Satan's rule, to God's rule in the Millennium, so it is a perfect transitional parallel in that sense.

Certainly, the Eternal was glorified when Babylon fell before her enemies in 539 BC, and He will be glorified when the Babylon of the last days is destroyed, that final great world empire that opposes God.

When Jesus Christ returns and establishes His Kingdom, then God's glory will indeed cover the whole earth.

The fall of Babylon the Great is a reminder to us that what man builds without God can never last. The exploiter will eventually lose everything, and man's utopias will turn out to be disasters.

A prime example of this now is the city of Detroit, which was built upon total progressive and liberal ideas. And it looks like a bombed-out city today and is so dangerous that the police avoid major areas of it. That is what man produces without God!

It may take time, but eventually the judgment falls! One major problem with human beings is that we tend not to have enough patience to give God time to work out what needs to be done according to His will and His time frame.

Now the fourth woe stanza of Habakkuk's taunt song takes into account the oppressor's shameful treatment of weaker or neighboring nations in leading them astray.

Habakkuk 2:15-17 “Woe to him who gives drink to his neighbor, pressing him to your bottle, even to make him drunk, that you may look on his nakedness! You are filled with shame instead of glory. You also—drink! And be exposed as uncircumcised! The cup of the Lord's right hand will be turned against you, and utter shame will be on your glory. For the violence done to Lebanon will cover you, and the plunder of beasts which made them afraid, because of men's blood and the violence of the land and the city, and of all who dwell in it.”

The word ‘neighbor’ in verse 15 could refer to a neighboring nation that was “intoxicated” by Babylon's power and made naked, that is stripped and powerless, before Babylon's invading armies. This can also apply to today in the effect that Babylonian system is having on the world today.

Verses 15 and 16 may be taken literally, however the context shows that its primary intent is that it is to be taken figuratively.

Taken literally, the condition of a drunken man in Scripture represents the overthrow of a conquered nation or person.

Nahum 3:11 You also will be drunk; you will be hidden; you also will seek refuge from the enemy.

The thought is that the Chaldean-Babylonians with their lust for power and conquest enticed other nations into campaigns for spoil and finally left them to suffer loss and shame. For this, filthy shame will be upon those who allured the peoples and they will be as the uncircumcised, which indicated to the Jewish Israelites the height of contempt.

The cup of retribution in God's wrath will come, in due time, to the Babylonian.

Jeremiah 25:15-16 For thus says the Lord God of Israel to me: “Take this wine cup of fury from My hand, and cause all the nations, to whom I send you, to drink it. And they will drink and stagger and go mad because of the sword that I will send among them.”

The repulsive picture of drunkenness and violence in Habakkuk 2:15-17 can be interpreted both personally and nationally. While the Bible does not demand total abstinence, it does warn against the evils of strong drink.

Proverbs 20:1 Wine is a mocker, strong drink is a brawler, and whoever is led astray by it is not wise.

That applies both figuratively and literally. Now turn to Romans 13:11. Drunkenness and sensual behavior often go together.

Romans 13:11-14 And do this, knowing the time, that now it is high time to awake out of sleep; for now our salvation is nearer than when we first believed. The night is far spent, the day is at hand. Therefore let us cast off the works of darkness, and let us put on the armor of light. [As we read Paul's words here, we feel a sense of urgency.] Let us walk properly, as in the day, not in revelry and drunkenness, not in lewdness and lust,

not in strife and envy. But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to fulfill its lusts.

That has a definite strong spiritual impact on our lives, that if we do not follow it, we can actually lose our salvation. In Scripture, “drinking a cup of wine” can be a picture of judgment. Also in Scripture, “nakedness” sometimes speaks of the devastating effects of military invasion or of being blind to God’s way of life.

Now regarding the humiliation of Babylon, Isaiah 47 says:

Isaiah 47:1-3 “Come down and sit in the dust, O virgin daughter of Babylon; sit on the ground without a throne, O daughter of the Chaldeans! For you shall no more be called tender and delicate. Take the millstones and grind meal. Remove your veil, take off the skirt, uncover the thigh, pass through the rivers. Your nakedness shall be uncovered, yes, your shame will be seen; I will take vengeance, and I will not arbitrate with a man.”

That is the inspiration that God gave to Jeremiah to warn Babylon and to warn Israel what was going to be coming upon Babylon.

What Babylon did to others, God would eventually do to her. Babylon had been a golden cup in God's hands. This is similar to how the U.S. has taken the tremendous blessings from God and used them to promote immorality, greed, and violence worldwide.

Jeremiah 51:7 Babylon was a golden cup in the Lord's hand, that made all the earth drunk. The nations drank her wine; therefore the nations are deranged.

God had used her to chasten the nations, but now God will give her a cup to drink that will bring her to ruin.

Revelation 16:19 Now the great city was divided into three parts, and the cities of the nations fell. And great Babylon was remembered before God, to give her the cup of the wine of the fierceness of His wrath.

She will be ashamed as other nations look on her nakedness. Divine retribution will be hers. The violence she did to others will be done to her. As she shed the blood of others, her blood will be shed, and as she destroyed the lands of other nations, so would her land will be devastated.

The glory of God will cover the earth, but Babylon's glory will be covered with shame. The picture is that of a repulsive drunk, vomiting all over himself. Not a very pretty picture!

Watching the political debacle play out in the nation today, we are seeing the sins of our nations exposed. It sickens us and you get the picture of a repulsive drunk vomiting all over himself. I am not saying that this nation is Babylon, necessarily, but I am saying that this is part of the system of Babylon.

Notice that God mentions the way the Babylonians abused trees and animals. Reading Habakkuk 2 once again.

Habakkuk 2:17 For the violence done to Lebanon will cover you, and the plunder of beasts which made them afraid, because of men's blood and the violence of the land and the city, and of all who dwell in it.

This suggests that the soldiers wastefully chopped down trees and killed cattle to use both the wood and the meat for their war effort.

Judgment is determined against Babylon because of the desolation produced in the land of Palestine. They had denuded the forests for their military campaigns and in their building enterprises, and had killed the animals hiding there, especially the animals fit for food.

From the earliest days, conquerors cut down the forest of Lebanon and killed its animals, as is recorded by different kings, both of Babylon and Assyria.

The verse also indicates a climax in wickedness from the destruction of the forests and animals to the desolation of cities. The 'land' and 'city' of verse 8 refer to all the nations. In verse 17 the reference is to Judah and Jerusalem.

God also mentions His concern for animals in Jonah 4, where he says:

Jonah 4:11 "And should I not pity Nineveh, that great city, in which are more than one hundred and twenty thousand persons who cannot discern between their right hand and their left and much livestock?"

A tremendous number of birds and animals must have lost either their lives or their homes because of Babylon's war policy. God gave Israel a policy regarding war supplies, which is found in Deuteronomy 20.

Deuteronomy 20:19-20 "When you besiege a city for a long time [God's instruction here], while making war against it to take it, you shall not destroy its trees by wielding an ax against them; if you can eat of them, do not cut them down to use in the siege, for the tree of the field is man's food. Only the trees which you know are not trees for food you may destroy and cut down, to build siege-works against the city that makes war with you, until it is subdued."

The words of this fourth woe are blunt and shaming. Verse 15 refers to seduction, and seduction is fairly far along the slippery slope of moral decline that chapter 2 of Habakkuk highlights.

The progression is noticeable. First there is greed, then there is mild injustice, followed by more serious injustice. Next comes violence, then there is seduction and perversion.

But, how does this concern the secular man's quest for security? In this way: having sought for security in things and being disappointed there, the God-despising man now turns to personal relations, hoping to find security through "love." But he does not know *how* to love. He does not know what a true, intimate relationship is. All he can do is seduce another person. So, he does, and that which should be a thing of glory becomes shame.

Those who commit such sin are not victims but perpetrators and predators. This is especially true of sexual immorality. In James 1 the apostle James enlightens us with a succinct description of the process of sin. He tells us:

James 1:14 But each one is tempted when he is drawn away by his own desires and enticed.

God's Word helps us see temptation from a godly perspective. James continues with the process of sin in verse 15, where he writes:

James 1:15 Then, when desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown brings forth death.

This also exposes the deceptiveness of seduction. Seduction works because a person is drawn away by his own desires and enticed. Many view seduction as power. Habakkuk sees it as sin. He says that the one who seduces another becomes seduced himself and is a seducer; the one who corrupts, a corrupter. These people have their reward.

Now moving on to the fifth and final woe stanza of Habakkuk's taunt song concerns the horrible sin of idolatry. This woe is in verse 19.

Habakkuk 2:18-20 "What profit is the image, that its maker should carve it, the molded image, a teacher of lies, that the maker of its mold should trust in it, to make mute idols? Woe to him who says to wood, 'Awake!' To silent stone, 'Arise! It shall teach!' Behold, it is overlaid with gold and silver, yet in it there is no breath at all. "But the Lord is in His holy temple. Let all the earth keep silence before Him."

To bring out forcefully the total worthlessness of idols, the prophet asks, "of what profit is it"? It is of no use whatsoever.

Isaiah 44:9-10 Those who make an image, all of them are useless, and their precious things shall not profit; they are their own witnesses; They neither see nor know, that they may be ashamed. Who would form a god or mold an image that profits him nothing?

"The teacher of lies" is the idol because of the false oracles connected with its worship. It is utterly senseless for the idolater to cry out for help to the dumb idol to awake to help him. Ironically and scornfully, the prophet Habakkuk questions whether such can teach. Not that he believes it, but he is trying to impress upon the Jews, because they had many idols. Why did they have these idols?

The idol may be overlaid with gold and silver, showing earthly splendor, but there is no life within it. The prophets of the Old Testament are at their best when they expose the delusion and senselessness of idol worship. And they hit it hard because it was one of the greatest sins of the Israelites besides Sabbath breaking.

In ancient times, in Central America the cross-beamed cross was called *Tota*, meaning "Our father". This practice of addressing a piece of wood with the title father is also mentioned in Jeremiah 2.

When God's people of the Old Testament mixed idolatry with their religion, they worshipped pagan gods and notice what they said to a tree.

Jeremiah 2:26-28 “As the thief is ashamed when he is found out, so is the house of Israel ashamed; they and their kings and their princes, and their priests and their prophets, saying to a tree, 'You are my father,' and to a stone, 'You gave birth to me.' For they have turned their back to Me [God], and not their face. But in the time of their trouble they will say, 'Arise and save us.' But where are your gods that you have made for yourselves? Let them arise, if they can save you in the time of your trouble; for according to the number of your cities are your gods, O Judah.

Now notice a few different translations of verse 27 here:

KJV Translation: “Saying to a stock, ‘Thou art my father.’ ”

NIV Translation: “They say to wood, 'You are my father,' ”

NET Translation: “They say to a wooden idol, 'You are my father.' ”

CJB Translation: “Who say to a log, ‘You are my father,’ ”

CEV Translation: “Worship stone idols and sacred poles as if they had created you and had given you life.”

You get the point. Obviously, it is wrong to call a sacred pagan pole or tree by the title, father, yet this has been going on since Babylon and earlier, all the way back to Semiramis and Nimrod.

Idols are nothing, but there is a living, all-seeing, ruling God in the heavens. He is not hidden under gold and silver, but alive in heaven, ready and willing to help His people. He is the invisible God inhabiting His heavenly Temple and all-powerful; therefore it is incumbent upon all nations to be solemnly and humbly reverent before Him. The nations would do well, as well as individuals, to submit silently to Him waiting for His judgment.

In the context of the references to the Babylonians, it is clear that this involves not merely simple idolatry, a case of an individual bowing down to a wooden or stone idol. It involves the Babylonian's whole religious system with its divination, sorcery, sexual immorality, spiritism, and demonism. Babylon was a center for such occult practices, and most of those practices are being continued today.

Sadly, we also have this in our time. It is hard to understand why an educated, scientifically minded, modern people such as we imagine ourselves to be, should be so intrigued by spiritism and the occult; but chapter 2 of Habakkuk explains it perfectly.

It is simply the end condition of a people who will not walk by faith in God but who trust their own devices instead. We trust ourselves, but we are not adequate for the trust. So, finding no help in mere human beings and having rejected the true God, they turn to superstition.

The most widespread American version of occult practices is astrology. Why is astrology so popular in our “enlightened” age? Here are three possible explanations.

First, is that astrology offers religion without moral responsibility. This is inherent in the very axioms of astrology, which substitute a causality of stars and planets for human free will, liberty, and responsibility.

It is fatalism, and fatalism absolves man from duty. This outlook is also evident in other forms of occult practices where nothing is taught or said that might possibly make an individual feel guilty for something he or she has done.

Second, astrology offers revelation without the disconcerting doctrines of the Bible. It pretends to give a word from beyond, but it does not speak of sin, death, or judgment—the Bible does.

II Corinthians 5:10 For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive the things done in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad.

Third, astrology offers salvation without a real Savior. The popular song from the 1970s musical “Hair” claims, “When the moon is in the Seventh House and Jupiter aligns with Mars, then peace will guide the planets, and love will steer the stars.” Remember that Jupiter symbol is the Christian cross/Latin cross.

But this is not true. God guides the planets, just as God guides history. If there is to be peace and love in the world, then the Lord Jesus Christ, who alone is the embodiment of peace and love, must provide it, under God’s direction.

Sadly, the people of Judah were also guilty of this sin of idolatry, because during the declining years of the kingdom, they worshipped the gods of the other nations. All the prophets cried out against this flagrant violation of the second commandment in Exodus 20:4-6, but the people refused to repent.

What is idolatry? Romans 1:23 gives the best succinct answer: worshipping and serving the creature instead of the Creator. It started with Lucifer who said as recorded in Isaiah 14.

Isaiah 14:14 ‘I will ascend above the heights of the clouds, I will be like the Most High.’

And later, as Satan, his poison of arrogant pride was introduced to humanity when Satan tempted Eve with, “You will be like God.”

It is the popular philosophy of the world, called humanism, that mankind is the highest thing in the universe and can pull himself up by his own bootstraps to any level he chooses. Therefore his new age, occultist religion, says that he ascends on his own volition to the next level of spirituality.

Not only is idolatry disobedience to God's Word, but it is also foolish and useless. Of what value is a god made by a man? It is much more reasonable and wise to worship the God who actually made the man!

Ecclesiastes 7:29 “Truly, this only I have found: That God made man upright, but they have sought out many schemes.”

Not only is the idol useless, but it does definite evil by teaching lies and giving people false confidence that the dumb idol can help them at all. Idols are dead substitutes for the living God. Psalm 115 describes the futility of idols.

Psalm 115:2-8 Why should the Gentiles say, “So where is their God?” But our God is in heaven; He does whatever He pleases. Their idols are silver and gold, the work of men's

hands. They have mouths, but they do not speak; eyes they have, but they do not see; they have ears, but they do not hear; noses they have, but they do not smell; they have hands, but they do not handle; feet they have, but they do not walk; nor do they mutter through their throat. Those who make them are like them; so is everyone who trusts in them. [Deaf, dumb, and blind!]

Whatever people delight in other than God, whatever they are devoted to and sacrifice for, whatever they could not bear to be without, is an idol; and therefore under the condemnation of God. Most people in civilized countries do not worship man-made images of things in nature, but if the definition I just gave is correct, modern society has its idols just as the Babylonians did.

Famous people are the idols of millions, especially politicians, athletes, wealthy tycoons, and actors and actresses. Even dead entertainers still have their worshipping followers. People may also worship and serve man-made things like cars, houses, boats, jewelry, and art.

While all of us appreciate beautiful and useful things, it is one thing to own them and quite something else to be owned by them. The French-German theologian Albert Schweitzer said, “Anything you have that you can not give away, you do not really own; it owns you.”

Social position can be an idol and so can achievement by aptitude and talent. Intellectual ability can be a terrible idol as people worship their IQ and refuse to submit to God.

II Corinthians 10:4-5 For the weapons of our warfare are not carnal but mighty in God for pulling down strongholds, casting down arguments and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ.

For some people, their god is their appetite; and they live only to experience carnal pleasures.

Philippians 3:18-19 For many walk, of whom I have told you often, and now tell you even weeping, that they are the enemies of the cross of Christ: whose end is destruction, whose god is their belly, and whose glory is in their shame—who set their mind on earthly things.

We have a choice, between the temporary things below the sun which lead to vanity, unhappiness, and death; or the permanent things above the sun which lead to salvation, rejoicing, and eternal life.

If what we need is God, as the Bible claims, and if we turn to worldly things instead of God, as we so often do, these other things will inevitably disappoint us no matter how much we have or how fervent our misplaced devotion to them may be.

What do you turn to for strength and security in life? Is it money? Do you think that if you only have enough money you will be all right? Is it other people? Do you think that somehow your friends will help you get by? Your own strength and ability, whatever it may be? Do you think that if you get all these in order, somehow you will manage? Well, it will not be enough!

You and I are made in the image of God, destined for fellowship with Him. If we will not have God, then there will always be a vacuum—a terrible, miserable vacuum—in our lives.

The challenge presented to us in this second chapter of Habakkuk is that choice. Will it be the world's way, the way of the ungodly with its emptiness, frustration, and eventual ruin? Or will it be God's way, the way of faith in Him who alone is worthy of that faith?

Joshua presented the choice to the people of his day. He had come to the end of his life and was soon to die. But before he died, he brought the people together and reminded them of all God had done for them from the time he first called Abraham out of Ur of the Chaldeans to the day he brought them out of Egypt into the Promised Land. At the end of Joshua 24 he said verse 15:

Joshua 24:15 “And if it seems evil to you to serve the Lord, choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve, whether the gods which your fathers served that were on the other side of the River, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you dwell. But as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.”

Joshua was saying what Habakkuk later said in other languages. He was affirming that though the world would rise up against us, the righteous will live by faith. It is by faith in the righteous God alone that we can stand against it. God ended His reply to Habakkuk by giving a third assurance:

Habakkuk 2:19-20 “Woe to him who says to wood, 'Awake!' To silent stone, 'Arise! It shall teach!' Behold, it is overlaid with gold and silver, yet in it there is no breath at all. But the Lord is in His holy temple. Let all the earth keep silence before Him.”

The first assurance focuses on God's grace in Habakkuk 2:4; the second on God's glory in Habakkuk 2:14; and the third assurance focuses on God's government in Habakkuk 2:20.

God is on the throne and has everything under control. Therefore, we should not complain against God or question what He is doing. Like faithful servants, we must simply stand and listen for His commands in patience, humility and obedience.

Psalms 46:10 Be still, and know that I am God; I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth!

Seeing the vision of God and hearing the voice of God made a tremendous difference in Habakkuk's life. As he grasped the significance of the three great assurances God gave him, he was transformed from being a worrier and a watcher to being a faithful worshipper and servant.

In the closing chapter of this book, in chapter 3, he will share with us the vision he had of God and the difference it made in his life.