

Why Bother Being Good In A Bad World?

Habakkuk series

A few weeks back a friend of mine posted this quote on his face book page. **"The biggest difference between you and God, is that God doesn't think He is you."** One of the characteristics of this generation is that we act as if we are God. We think we know it all. We try to be everywhere at the same time. We think we are the centre of the universe. We want everything to revolve around us. "Meet my needs. Make me happy. Fulfil my wishes". I remember seeing an interview on TV with a woman who had been divorced 11 times. As the interview went on it became obvious that her philosophy of marriage was "it's your job to make me happy." When her husband stopped making her happy, she got divorced and found another one.

As Christians, we live in a world saturated with these values. These values have a corrosive effect on us. We find ourselves doubting if God is actually interested in what's going on. We begin to question whether it really is worth being upright and straight in a crooked generation, because the wicked and the powerful seem to be getting the best deals. We start saying to ourselves "What the heck. Why not me too? Why bother being good in a bad world?" But watching the wicked prosper is a very short term view. It's not even half the truth. The prophet Habakkuk brings the word of the Lord to us tonight that puts everything in a very different light. There are some compelling reasons in this scripture we are going to study which provide some reasons why it's still worth being good in a bad world. Habakkuk lived at a time when people were abandoning righteousness and doing whatever suited them. God allowed him to see not only what was going on in the nation, but he allowed him to see into the future. And most importantly, Habakkuk saw what God was going to do about it.

When Habakkuk was alive there was a rising superpower that was about to swallow up most of the nations around it. The Babylonians were on the rise, and everywhere they invaded, they brought destruction and misery. God let Habakkuk how God was going to use the Babylonians to bring his nation to its knees. He also told him how he was going to eventually deal with the Babylonians. were going to do to his nation, and what was going to eventually happen to them.

The Babylonians were characterised by addiction. They were a proud and arrogant people who had become addicted to their success. No matter how many nations and peoples they conquered and captured, they were greedy for more. They were addicted to wealth. The more they accumulated, the more they wanted. They were addicted to strong drink. There is plenty of historical evidence that they were a nation with a serious alcohol problem. They were addicted to violence and cruelty. They ruled and conquered through fear. They craved power. Their ambition knew no limits. The combination of alcohol, arrogance, wealth, cruelty and violence was a pretty heady mix. This is how Habakkuk describes the Babylonians;

"See, he is puffed up; his desires are not upright— but the righteous will live by his faith - 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". (Habakkuk 2:4-5 NIV)

There are a couple of ways we can look at this whole passage of scripture.

1. Look at it historically.

When God gave Habakkuk this prophetic word, the nations of the world were in awe of the wealth and power of Babylon. They were the superpower. Yet God didn't see them as a superpower, but a corrupt people who were coming under his judgement. Other nations saw them as a rising power. God already had their downfall planned. That's what happened. Everything God predicted about Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonians happened to them. But the prophecies of Habakkuk have wider implications. Baghdad, the capital of Iraq, is just 90 kilometres from ancient Babylon. When Saddam Hussein ruled Iraq, his stated dream was to make modern day Iraq as powerful as ancient

Babylon. He was on record as saying that the person he most admired and wanted to be like, was King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon. He spent millions of dollars rebuilding ancient Babylon. But like the Babylonians before him, God had pronounced his judgement on Saddam Hussein and his regime.

God doesn't let the wicked get away with it. His justice may seem to be slow from our point of view, but God always has the last word. In 1971 the Shah of Iran held a huge 22million dollar celebration to mark the 2500th anniversary of the Persian Empire. It was a lavish and glittering affair with 60 heads of state and royalty present. On that occasion the Shah of Iran gave himself a new title. "King of Kings". I remember hearing that at the time and thinking, "He's finished". That's a title reserved for the Son of God. If he takes that title, God won't let him get away with it. What followed from that event was the Iranian revolution. The Ayatollah Khomeini chased the Shah from his palace. 8 Years later the Shah died in exile – a defeated and broken man.

We need to take the longer view with God. Think of the dictators and tyrants of the last generation. Where are they now? Adolf Hitler of Germany. Joseph Stalin of Russia. Mussolini of Italy. Mao Tse Tung of China. Ferdinand Marcos of the Philippines. Idi Amin of Uganda. Pol Pot of Cambodia. God has brought them all down. Charles Taylor, the President of Liberia, who pronounced himself as the Lord and Saviour of his people. Where is he now? On trial for crimes against humanity and his son sentenced to 97 years in prison. We need to take the longer view with God.

2. Look at it in the future.

Right through the scriptures, from Genesis to Revelation – from the tower of Babel to the fall of Babylon in Revelation Chapter 18, Babylon represents humanistic civilisation that has rejected God. These curses from God were not only for the Babylonians. They apply to every person and every nation that rejects God. What we have here is a vivid description of the behaviour and attitudes God sets his face against. It's God's word for the Babylonians. It's God's word for the United States. It's God's word for the British. It's God's word for the Swiss. It's God's word for you and me. We had better sit up and pay attention, for when God promises judgement, he always follows through.

Habakkuk delivers God's word in the form of a song. The song has five verses, each beginning with the word "woe". The word "woe" means "cursed". It's the opposite of the word "blessed". It's the most forceful way the Bible has to express God's anger and wrath. Here are the curses.

1. A curse on those who plunder.

God cursed Nebuchadnezzar, because he had plundered other nations. He had used the might of Babylon to steal and extort wealth from other nations.

"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?' Will not your debtors suddenly arise? Will they not wake up and make you tremble? Then you will become their victim. 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". (Habakkuk 2:6-8 NIV)

In 1990 I preached on the book of Habakkuk. In 1990 I predicted that God's curse would come upon Iraq as a nation because she had plundered other nations. I said then that she would not only lose all that she had plundered from Kuwait, but she would lose the revenue from her own oil reserves as well. That's just what has happened. Iraq first fought a devastating war with Iran, and then turned her attention to Kuwait. During the first Gulf War, the Iraqis looted everything they could find. The consequence was that since the first Gulf war, they have lost huge revenues from their oil reserves. Instead of wealth, the Iraqi people have been living in poverty. It happened to Germany. The Nazis plundered Europe. They took art treasures, gold, machinery and technology and the

flower of the youth of Holland, Belgium and France, Czechoslovakia, Poland and a host of other nations in Eastern Europe. How did the Second World War end? With Germany absolutely devastated and destitute. When God addresses a greedy and proud nation, that nation itself will fall and be plundered. It's a principle that still applies today.

2. A curse on dishonest gain.

God says "Woe to you who get rich by dishonest gain." You may have security for a while, but it is all going to boomerang back on you. The treasure that you have dishonestly stored up – the thing that you have desired so much, is going to be the very thing that causes your downfall.

"Woe to him who builds his realm by unjust gain to set his nest on high, to escape the clutches of ruin! You have plotted the ruin of many peoples, shaming your own house and forfeiting your life. The stones of the wall will cry out, and the beams of the woodwork will echo it" (Habakkuk 2:9-11 NIV)

This is a prophetic word for our time. Bernie Madoff, who made himself rich through the largest scam we have ever seen, is now serving a 150 year jail sentence. Ken Lay of the Enron Corporation may have escaped sentencing by dying, but he still has to stand before the judgement seat of Christ. We often talk about the fact that God has a long term plan for the righteous. But we should not forget that he also has a long term plan for the wicked, that is spelled out just as clearly in the Bible. Who has the last word with the wicked? God does!

3. A curse on those who use people.

"Woe to him who builds a city with bloodshed and establishes a town by crime! Has not the LORD Almighty determined that the people's labour is only fuel for the fire, that the nations exhaust themselves for nothing? For the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the LORD, as the waters cover the sea." (Habakkuk 2:12-14 NIV)

The Babylonians had a practice of making their captives their slaves, and using those slaves as forced labour to build magnificent cities. The hanging gardens of Babylon were one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. One day King Nebuchadnezzar was proudly strutting around this magnificent city that had been built on the misery of slave labour. He cried out "Is this not Babylon which I have built with my power and my glory?" What was he saying? "Mine is the power and the glory." God heard that. Within months Nebuchadnezzar was like an animal. His fingernails were like talons. His hair was long. He was eating grass like an animal and he was out of his mind. When God hears a man like that, His response is "The earth shall be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord as the waters cover the sea."

4. A curse on debauchery.

The Babylonians used to use their captives for entertainment. Nebuchadnezzar used to make his captives drunk so they would cavort around naked. Captives were used as entertainment. That's what Psalm 137 is referring to. "By the rivers of Babylon we wept, because the Babylonians said "Sing us a song". They taunted us. "Sing us a song of Zion!" How could we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?"

"Woe to him who gives drink to his neighbours, pouring it from the wineskin till they are drunk, so that he can gaze on their naked bodies. 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. 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." (Habakkuk 2:15-17 NIV)

Let's put this in today's context. Woe to you internet pornographers. God says woe to you who use the bodies of women and little children for sexual gratification. Woe to you who deal in sex trafficking. Jesus said **"But if anyone causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a large millstone hung around his neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea."**(*Matthew 18:6 NIV*) John Osborne tells me that 90 women and girls a day are trafficked out of Bangladesh into the sex trade in Asia. There is a day of reckoning coming. God is not going to let those people get away with it. He will have the last word.

5. A curse on idols.

"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. 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." (*Habakkuk 2:18-19 NIV*)

Idols in the Western world? Oh yes. When a person rejects the one true God, they always find an idol to put in his place. Everyone worships something. The electronic god with the moving coloured pictures in the corner of our lounges. The polished metal god on wheels in the garage. The career god. The thrills god. The sex god. The pleasure god. The happiness god. The beautiful body god. The ambition god. These gods are among us, and they have come into existence because we have rejected the one true God. Yet the Bible is clear that all of these gods are going to come to nothing. They promise much, but deliver nothing. All of this will crumble when the Lord comes back in power.

One of the key verses in this passage is verse 20. ***"But the LORD is in his holy temple; let all the earth be silent before him."*** (*Habakkuk 2:20 NIV*) Do you want to know why it's worth being good in a bad world? Because God hasn't written the last chapter yet. It's not all over yet. God hasn't finished the final reckoning. There is coming a day, and Habakkuk says we are to wait for it, when God will have the last word. The Lord is still in his holy temple. Just as he has brought down tyrants and dictators in the past, he will do it again. Be patient. For the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the LORD, as the waters cover the sea.

How many of us enjoy the music of Handel's Messiah? How many enjoy the Hallelujah chorus? The Hallelujah chorus is actually a celebration song that is sung over the downfall of Babylon. You can read about it in Revelation, the last book in the Bible. It's a rejoicing by God's people that at last a humanistic, godless civilisation has collapsed. All the proud achievements of a greedy and godless society have been destroyed, and God's people sing "Hallelujah! - The Lord God Almighty reigns!" The Lord is in his holy temple. Let all the earth be silent before him. The bad guys did not win. God has the last word. Hallelujah!

David McChesney, Westlake Church in Nyon, Switzerland