

## **Role reversal - Habakkuk 2:2-20 - 23<sup>rd</sup> August 2020**

### **Introduction**

What keeps you going through difficult times? Think of a hard time you've faced – what kept you going? Think of a challenge you've faced – or are facing...? Maybe it was the knowledge that there was someone looking after you – or that they'd sort things out in the end; maybe it was looking forward to the end of the challenging time – the aftermath of the operation - or the healing of the relationship - or the resolution of a legal problem.

Today we're going to find that it's the same for God's people as we look at the evil around us, and the evil that we're facing. What keeps us going is that we look at the one who's looking after us – God; and we look at the future that he's bringing for those who love him.

### *Recap:*

Last week we started a short series looking at the book of Habakkuk. We saw that Habakkuk was a prophet writing in 605BC. And he looked at the injustice and the corruption around him in Judah. And he cried out to God - “How long O Lord?” And in chapter 1 God responds, saying “I'm going to raise up a new superpower, Babylon. And they will come with great speed and great power, and they will conquer those who've been unjust.” And Habakkuk then responds to this. And he does so by worshipping – remembering what God is like; by wailing – continuing to cry out to God about what seems like an even worse outcome; and by waiting to see how God will respond. And that's where we finished last week – 2:1 – Habakkuk was waiting.

Today in chapter 2 the LORD speaks again. Read v2-3. What God is about to reveal in chapters 2-3 should be written down. It should be written down because it will certainly happen. It won't happen straight away – it may linger. It awaits an appointed time - but it will happen. So what does God reveal in ch 2, which we're looking at today?

### **Two ways to live (v4b-5)**

The first thing he reveals in v4-5 is that there are only two ways to live. Read v4. Do you see the contrast there, between two different people? On the one hand is “the enemy.” Actually the word “enemy” has been added in by the NIV. Literally it's simply “he is puffed up” - he's proud. His desires are not upright. And then v5. This is the first way to live. It's the way of the unjust rulers of Judah in ch 1; it's the way of the Babylonians; and it's a way that's characterised by focus on self. “He is as greedy as the grave”; “He gathers to himself all the nations.” He sees something, he wants it. If he has to take it unjustly to get it, he will. Self is his god.

This way is contrasted with another way – v4b. So on the one hand we have the self-focused - the proud, the arrogant, the greedy. On the other hand we have the righteous. And clearly Habakkuk is being encouraged to see himself in this category and to pursue what it takes to be righteous. And what does it take? The latest NIV (2011) says “faithfulness”. The older NIV (1984) says “faith.” Actually the two go together. As a person trusts God – has faith in God; so she will remain faithful to God's promises – will cling on to God through thick and thin. This, says God, is what characterises the righteous person: Faith – leading to faithfulness – enabling the person to persevere whatever may come at them.

And notice that if the first way to live is self-focused, this way is God-focused. Faith is only as strong as the person it's placed in. And the righteous person is looking to God, and trusting in him. So fundamentally there are two ways to live. And that doesn't just apply to 605BC, to Judah and Babylon and Habakkuk. No it's true for all of time and every human being who's ever lived. Every single human being is characterised by one or other of these ways. On the one hand self-focus, pursuing and seeking to satisfy self; which will lead if unrestrained to the kind of injustice we saw in chapter 1. On the other hand, God-focus, trusting in and clinging to God; which God describes as “righteousness.” And it raises the question doesn't it – which are you? Which am I? Fundamentally is your focus on yourself or on God? Do you live by seeking to satisfy self or by clinging to God? Why not take a moment to write down your answer.

## **The future of the unjust (v6-19)**

Having set out those two ways to live, the LORD goes on to lay out the future of the unjust. In verses 6-19 he lays out 5 “woes.” The word for “woe” literally means “Alas.” We might say “how terrible” - how terrible it will be for this person. And he imagines a group of people – perhaps those who've suffered injustice – saying “Woe! How terrible!” And each of the 5 woes describes some kind of wrong action that has been taken. And what I'd like us to do on our own for a couple of minutes is to read through the 5 woes and work out in each case, what is it the person has done wrong? Do it on your own or in a group.

Here's how one person has described the wrongdoing in each section. And I've added some thoughts and what it might look like today.

### ***V6-8 – Woe to the Empire builder***

v8 – In your attempt to grow and develop you have plundered many nations; you have shed human blood. And we've seen many empire builders over the centuries haven't we – from Babylon to Rome to the British Empire to China today. But what about closer to home? What about the person in an organisation – a church, a business, a family - who is more concerned about themselves and their reputation, than the organisation?

And what will happen to the empire builder? Read V7. It's as if the empire builder has been borrowing and borrowing – and eventually the people he's borrowed from will rise up – they will attack him, they will plunder him.

### ***V9-11 – Woe to the Exploiter***

Read v9-10a. This is the person who exploits others in order to make himself secure. He ruins others to protect himself from ruin. Think of the British empire built for so many years on slavery; think of the scourge today of domestic abuse. Closer to home – what about the person who doesn't abuse, but who even so uses other people to their own ends – whether it's their family, or their friends, or others?

But such a scheme will always fail. Read v11. For an empire built on violence and injustice, there is no coherence – it cannot hold together - the very building materials are in tension with each other and will collapse.

### ***V12-14 – Woe to the Arrogant slave driver***

This is the person who builds new cities using the people he's defeated in war as slaves. Think today of drug gangs making use of innocent school children to do their work, and drawing them in.

But v13 – at the end of the day all human labour is futile. “The people's labour is only fuel for the fire.” All his work to build his empire will come to nothing. Indeed the nations exhaust themselves for nothing.

### ***V15-17 – Woe to the Demoraliser***

This is the person who shames & humiliates other people to rob them of their self-respect and break their will to resist. Think of how today social media destroys and humiliates a person without bothering to think whether their arguments might be valid. Or of how we so easily humiliate others with our words, just to get one up on them, or to win an argument.

But what will happen? Read v16. Just as he has shamed others, so he too will be shamed.

### ***v18-19 – Woe to the Idolater***

This is the one who worships created things rather than the creator. Read v19. And we may say “well that doesn't happen in an advanced society like the UK.” But isn't it exactly what's happening when someone trusts in their bank account or their qualifications or their reputation or people? And don't we do that sometimes?

What is the result? The idol cannot give guidance, it cannot help the person.

So: 5 woes. Who are they referring to? Who will be on the receiving end? Well certainly Babylon –

they will get their come uppance in the end. Probably the rulers in Judah as well. But actually as we've seen, these principles apply throughout human history. They apply to injustice on a global or a personal level – from the throne room to the bedroom - From the C1st to the C10th to the C21st. They're principles that are built into the fabric of the universe. Injustice will always be repaid – the unjust will always be judged. The unjust always get what they deserve in the end.

And this is good news isn't it? It's certainly good news for Habakkuk as he sees, first injustice in Judah and then the Babylonians. Justice will be done, says God. And it's good news today. As we look at injustice in Nigeria and China; as we look at those who advise abortion to helpless mothers without giving sufficient counsel; as we hear that domestic abuse and recruiting for violent gangs is on the rise; as we hear of racial injustice. All injustice will be dealt with by God. Thanks be to God!

And of course we've seen this happen many times already over history.

> Judah was destroyed by Babylon.

> Babylon was destroyed by the Persians. You can read about that in Daniel 5 – and I was talking just the other day to Alistair Newberry about the compelling archaeological evidence for those events.

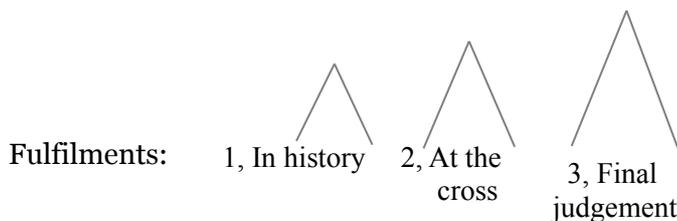
> Rome was brought down.

And all of this gives us confidence that future unjust empires will also be brought down, and individuals who have practiced injustice will come to judgement, whether in the current age, or on the day of judgement.

But of course, there's a problem for us listening today. Because as we saw in some of the examples earlier, if we're honest we've all acted unjustly from time to time. Ask yourself the question: “When have I sought to build my own empire at the expense of others? When have I exploited others, or shamed others? When have I worshipped created things?” It may have been years ago – we may think it's forgotten. But Habakkuk 2 tells us it will be found out – it will come into judgement. We too face the judgements that God is pronouncing in Hab 2.

### **The future of the righteous (v4, 14 cf Romans 1:16-17)**

As Habakkuk looks into the future all he sees is God judging the unjust at some point. It's a bit like looking ahead to a mountain range in the distance, and Habakkuk sees, if you like, one mountain peak ahead of him – the judgement of the unjust. But for us who have the New Testament, we are further ahead than Habakkuk. We are, if you like, in the middle of the mountain range. We can look back and look forward and we can see that what looked like one mountain peak is actually several.



And verse 4 points us to the second one. Read v4b. I wonder if those words are familiar to you? The apostle Paul quotes this verse in our second reading, Romans 1:16-17 – when he's giving a summary of the good news of Jesus Christ. Paul says the gospel or good news is this – there is salvation or rescue; and there is righteousness for a certain person – the person who has faith. Why is that? If you've been with us for any length of time you'll know it's because of the death of Jesus Christ. Jesus lived a perfectly just life – in him there was no injustice at all. And when he died on the cross he took God's judgement against all our injustice – your injustice, my injustice – he took it on himself, so that all who trust in him will be treated by God not as unjust but as just, perfectly righteous. Treating us as if we've never acted unjustly, we've never sinned. Isn't that wonderful news – the best news in the world? We deserve God's judgement because of the injustice we've committed; but it's possible to be considered righteous by God.

What must we do to be considered righteous? What does Hab 2:4 tell us? “The righteous will live by faith.” We must believe. Trust in Jesus – turn to him – cling to him – give our lives over to him.

And so it becomes clear in the NT that there are 3 fulfilments to the judgement of the unjust in Habakkuk 2. The first fulfilment is judgement in history on the unjust who reject God. The second fulfilment is judgement of Jesus on the cross in the place of all who trust in him – so we don't need to face God's judgement. He has faced it already. And then thirdly, for all judgement that doesn't take place in history there is a final judgement. Those who appear to have got away with it in this life – and there are many like that aren't there – they will face the judge Jesus on judgement day.

But the future for the righteous – those who have faith in Jesus? We see that in Habakkuk 2:14. They will be part of a new heavens and earth, where there is no injustice, no sin, no self-focus. Why? Because just as a present the earth is filled with injustice, on that day the earth will be filled with the knowledge of God's glory. And it's a wonderful image isn't it - “as the waters cover the sea.” Think of a time when you've looked out from the coast or a boat and all you can see is sea to the horizon. Just like that, all you'll be able to see is God's glory. Every creature in the new heavens and the new earth will know God, will see his glory, will delight in his perfections - his justice, his holiness, his love, his grace, his majesty and so on. It's a wonderful vision isn't it. I've spent time this week thinking about this future. And it's excited me. Because it tells me that whatever happens now, however God is dishonoured, however his people suffer – this is the certain future and it is glorious.

### **So how should we live?**

So how should we live in response to Habakkuk 2?

Maybe you **haven't yet put your trust in Jesus**. You're aware that you're slightly holding him at arms length. You like to meet with God's people, to hear his words. But you haven't yet entrusted yourself to him. Well can I urge you – in light of Habakkuk 2 – don't delay any longer. You are still under God's judgement for the injustices you've committed – however small they might seem to be. They cry out against you. They will be dealt with – justice will be done.

There are only two ways to live, and your only options are to bear the judgement yourself; or to come to Jesus in trust and faith, and allow him to bear the judgement on the cross. Life is fragile. We've seen that clearly haven't we in the last few months. Can I urge you – come to Jesus today. Trust him today. And wonderfully, if you do God will view you not as unjust, but as perfectly righteous!

### *Christian*

What about those of us who have put our trust in Jesus already? Well the antidote to the poison of our fear and anxiety in dark times is exactly the same as the antidote to the poison of our sin – faith. “The righteous will live by faith.” As Christians we commit ourselves to live by faith. Not just faith in Jesus to deliver us from our wrongdoing; but also faith in Jesus to sustain us, to look after us through the challenges of life. And faith in Jesus that he will bring about the glorious future of verse 14 for all who love and trust him.

As well as Romans 1 Habakkuk 2:4 is mentioned one other time in the NT. Hebrews 10:38. Read Hebrews 10:36-40. We need to persevere. We do not belong to those who shrink back, but to those who have faith. Trust. Justice will be done. Our injustice has been dealt with by Jesus on the cross. All injustices will be dealt with in the end. God will look after his people. And he will bring us to his glorious new heavens and earth in the end. Let's pray.