

## Five Woes Pronounced Against Babylon

### Habakkuk 2:5-20

*Habakkuk 2:5: "Indeed, because he transgresses by wine, he is a proud man, and he does not stay at home. Because he enlarges his desire as hell, and he is like death, and cannot be satisfied, he gathers to himself all nations and heaps up for himself all peoples."*

### Background Notes

Habakkuk, a prophet in Judah in the 7<sup>th</sup> Century BC, raised the question of evil to God: "How can a holy God allow evil and wickedness to go unjudged in Judah?" God answered Habakkuk by telling him that He was going to use the Babylonians to judge the people of Judah for their sins. Habakkuk was shocked – he couldn't understand. "How can God use a pagan nation – a nation that was even more wicked than Judah - to judge God's own people?" God answered Habakkuk's second question in chapter 2. He assured Habakkuk that all evil will exist for only a limited time, and all evil will eventually be judged. And even though God would use Babylon to discipline and punish Judah, Babylon would not escape God's eventual judgment.

In verses 5-20 of chapter 2, God pronounced His judgment against Babylon for its evil ways. In verse 5 God continued His charge against proud Babylon that He began in verse 4. Not only were the Babylonians arrogant (v 4), they were also drunk with wine and could not think straight or act right (v5). They had an insatiable appetite for land grabbing and conquering other nations and people, and this wicked greed was likened to death and the grave, which are never satisfied.

In verses 6-19, five specific "woes" were pronounced upon Babylon. Because this is the Word of God, these "woes" certainly have application for any nation that commits the same sins - including our own nation. And in addition, of course these verses have implications for the individual. These five woes are like five verses of a taunt song.

### Doctrinal Points

#### 1. God pronounces woe for illegal gain.

Verses 6-8: *"Will not all these take up a proverb against him, 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, <sup>7</sup> will not your creditors rise up*

*suddenly'? Will they not awaken who oppress you and you will become their booty? <sup>8</sup> 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."*

The Babylonian Empire was merciless in the way it plundered smaller nations and forced them to pay exorbitant amounts of tribute money. This was "wrongful gain," and it was against God's Law. Babylon would reap what it had sown. About seventy years after this prophecy was written, the Medo-Persian Empire conquered the proud and arrogant Babylonian Empire. God pronounces woe for illegal gain.

Is there an application here for us? You'd better believe there is! Is it possible that you're getting ahead right now by taking what is not yours? What about loans that you haven't paid back? What about taxes you haven't paid? What about charging unfair rent for a house or building you own? What about paying taxes on cash gains, or unreported income? God pronounces woe for illegal gain!

## **2. God pronounces woe for stepping on others.**

*Verses 9-11: "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! <sup>10</sup> You give shameful counsel to your house, cutting off many peoples, and sin against your soul. <sup>11</sup> For the stone will cry out from the wall, and the beam from the timbers will answer it."*

Babylon had trampled over nations and cut off many people in order to build up a powerful and secure empire. It was like a fortified nest built on a foundation of the skeletons of tortured bodies. Babylon had cruelly stepped on weaker peoples so she could raise herself to the heights. God said that even the timber and stones of such a fortification would witness against this evil of climbing higher by stepping on others. Babylon would be brought down from her lofty nest on high.

It sounds a lot like Obadiah's prophecy against the nation of Edom. Obadiah 2-4: "*Behold, I will make you small among the nations; you shall be greatly despised. <sup>3</sup> 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?' <sup>4</sup> 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.*

Do you see the application? Getting ahead by stepping on others and taking advantage of others is **evil**, and God pronounced woe for this sin. Woe to you, if you're climbing the corporate ladder by stepping on others. Woe to you, if you're making yourself more secure or more comfortable if in your church or ministry by putting others down, or by forcing them to leave. God pronounces woe for stepping on others.

## **3. God pronounces woe for boasting and self-glory.**

Verses 12-14: *“Woe to him who builds a town with bloodshed, who establishes a city by iniquity! <sup>13</sup> Behold, is it not of the Lord of hosts that the peoples labor to feed the fire, and nations weary themselves in vain? <sup>14</sup> For the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea.”*

The cities of the Babylonian Empire were built by the blood and sweat of enslaved peoples. Babylon built for the glory of Babylon - they did not honor God. Remember how King Nebuchadnezzar bragged before he was cut down to size (Daniel 4:30-31)? God pronounces woe for vain glory - for glory of self, not for the glory of God.

Think of our nation. Are we building our nation for the glory of God, or for the glory of Man? We may say that we are “one nation under God” - but God is not even allowed in our school classrooms! The glory of Man is certainly promoted in the classrooms and museums and theme parks of our country, but not God. If we’re working hard to build our nation up and glorify Man, and not give glory to the Lord, then we’re laboring to feed the fire (v13). You are working in vain. It will all be burned up.

This applies not only to nations but to individuals as well. If you’re building a career for yourself but not taking the Lord’s will into account, then you are working in vain. In the long run, it’s not going to count. It’s like laboring only to throw expensive logs in the fire, because there will be no room for glory of self in the end. ***The earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord!*** God pronounces woe for vain glory.

#### **4. God pronounces woe for perversion and pillage.**

Verses 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! <sup>16</sup> 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. <sup>17</sup> 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.”*

Babylon was responsible for teaching evil and idolatry to her conquered peoples, and forcing them to participate in shameful and vile practices, including sexual perversions. As a result, divine retribution - “the cup of the Lord’s right hand” - would come against them. Babylon would be forced to drink the cup of judgment, and be brought down to shame and disgrace. God will not be mocked. People will reap whatever they have sown (Galatians 6:7).

Is there an application for us? Teaching and enticing people to participate in sin is evil. Think of the sexual sin that is committed all the time in our country. Those who are responsible for the TV programs and the pornography that promote sex and violence will be judged for this evil.

Furthermore, Babylon had pillaged the country of Lebanon by ruthlessly cutting down Lebanon's forests of stately cedar trees for building projects (v17). They showed no care for the wild animals that lived in those forests. God will judge those who don't conserve natural resources, and those who don't exercise proper dominion over the creation He entrusted to us. God pronounces woe for perversion and pillage.

## 5. God pronounces woe for idolatry.

Verses 18-19: *"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?"<sup>19</sup> 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."*

The futility of Babylon's idolatry was described in these verses. How foolish can a person be, to trust in a lifeless image that mere man has carved out of wood or molded out of metal? It may look nice if it's overlaid with gold and silver - but in the end it's lifeless and powerless! And it's a "teacher of lies," because it deceives and deludes people.

How foolish and stupid to worship idols! And yet many people are involved in idolatry today. They worship man rather than the Creator. They worship the work of their own hands and philosophies of their own minds, rather than the one true God who made their hands and gave them their minds! God pronounces woe for idolatry.

## Practical Application

### Let's not pull Habakkuk 2:20 out of its context!

Verse 20: *"But the Lord is in His holy temple. Let all the earth keep silence before Him."* This verse is sometimes used in a musical setting as a "Call to Worship" – a "call" for quiet contemplation, or a choral response in a church service. These ideas sound good, but unfortunately it's bad hermeneutics! They're taking this verse out of its context!

The verses that form the context of Habakkuk 2:20 are all about sin and God's judgment for sin. When properly viewed in its context, essentially this verse is saying: The God of this universe is on His throne in Heaven, and in contrast to all idols, He is living and all powerful. He will judge all evil because He is a holy God. He is completely sovereign. SO - let all the earth keep silent in His presence! Don't mouth off! Don't question God's ways! Be silent before Him!

Let's obey the command of Habakkuk 2:20. Let's stop doubting God's sovereign control of all things. Let's stop complaining about God's timing in dealing with sin. Let's stop questioning God's ways. Let's be silent before the power and majesty and omniscience of God, who is seated in His holy temple.

Let's not pull Habakkuk 2:20 out of its context!