

Why the Worst of Times?

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- [0 : 0 0] All right, we're gonna read together from the Old Testament, from the book of Habakkuk, the prophet, chapter two. I'm gonna start reading at verse six instead of verse five.
- So we do have Bibles at the back. Feel free if you'd like to grab one. There's people grabbing them now. Feel free at any time to grab one. That's no problem at all. And we're gonna read from just the top of page 786, starting from verse six.
- This is God's holy word, verse six. Shall not all these take up their taunt against him with scoffing and riddles for him and say, woe to him who heaps up what is not his own for how long and loads himself with pledges.
- Will not your debtor suddenly arise and those awake who will make you tremble, then you will be spoiled for them because you have plundered many nations. All the remnant of the people shall plunder you for the blood of man and violence to the earth, to cities and all who dwell in them.
- Woe to him who gets evil gain for his house to set his nest on high, to be safe from the reach of harm. You have devised shame for your house by cutting off many peoples.
- [1 : 1 9] You have forfeited your life. For the stone will cry out from the wall and the beam from the woodwork respond. Woe to him who builds a town with blood and founds a city on iniquity.
- Behold, is it not from the Lord of hosts that people labor merely for fire and nations weary themselves for nothing? For the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.
- Woe to him who makes his neighbors drink. You pour out your wrath and make them drunk in order to gaze at their nakedness. You will have your fill of shame instead of glory.
- Drink yourself and show your uncircumcision. The cup in the Lord's right hand will come round for you and utter shame will come upon your glory. The violence done to Lebanon will overwhelm you as will the destruction of the beasts that terrified them for the blood of man and violence to the earth, to cities and all who dwell in them.
- What prophet is an idol when its maker has shaped it, a metal image, a teacher of lies, for its maker trust in his own creation when he makes speechless idols.
- [2 : 3 0] Woe to him who says to a wooden thing awake, to a silent stone arise. Can this teach? Behold, it is overlaid with gold and silver and there is no breath at all in it.
- But the Lord is in his holy temple. Let all the earth keep silence before him. This is God's word. Thank you, Corey.
- So this is our fourth of five sermons going through the book of Habakkuk. So if you have a Bible, please don't, hopefully you've just had it open there to read, but please don't close it.
- Very often in the Bible, something that you'll see is that God draws people close to himself, lets them get really close, maybe close enough to wrestle with him even.
- And in that experience, in that proximity to God, the person has changed. And having changed the person, what God does is send them back into the world, send them back into their lives.

[3 : 39] Okay, you think of, if you know the Bible and the prophet Daniel, you know, at the end of the book of Daniel, God draws him close, God gives him an utterly astonishing apocalyptic vision of the end of history, of the world changing.

And at the end of all of it, God tells Daniel, in effect, okay, go back and live your life now as a changed person. We think of Jesus and his disciples spending three years close to him.

And what does he do then, having drawn them so close, I send you into all the earth. And that's an experience that Habakkuk, the prophet has as well.

If you're joining us, this is your first time in this sermon series, looking at the book of Habakkuk. It's this short book, it's only got three chapters. It's one of the minor prophets in the Bible.

And it's the story of a man who can see terrible times on the horizon. There's an invading army that's about to come and take over where he lives, with the goal of assimilating them to its own worldview, to its own religion, to its own ethics, its own language.

[4 : 48] And Habakkuk is someone who can see all of that coming. He knows it's coming, and he wrestles with God. He calls out to God, God lets him come close, close enough to ask, what are you doing? And I won't let you go until you tell me.

And in the midst of all of that wrestling with God, of Habakkuk being so close to God like that, God blesses him by telling him something really profound, profound enough to change his life.

And that is that God tells him when he's up close like that, about the kind of person that Habakkuk needs to be, bearing in mind the evil times that are coming. And that is that Habakkuk needs to be a righteous person in an increasingly unrighteous world.

He needs to be a just person in an unjust world, and the way that he needs to do that, or how to become that is by faith. Okay, God tells him that he has to be a just person who lives by his faith.

Now, if you've read the New Testament, you'll know that the way that the New Testament teaches us to understand Habakkuk on that point, with what God tells him, this truth that changes him, it's that we are saved by our faith in Jesus, in his faithfulness to God on our behalf.

[6 : 02] And that then becomes that gospel, that good news becomes the source of how we live in the unrighteous worlds in which we live. But Habakkuk is someone who gets close enough to God to hear that in his own way, in his own day.

God shares the gospel with him up close, tells him that he needs to be a righteous person by faith in that unrighteous world. And then having told him that, this transforming truth, God is about to send Habakkuk back out into this world where the Babylonians are coming.

The times are bad and they're about to get a lot worse. So God calls him close in order to send him back into that world. And back into a world where the rubber is about to hit the road with Habakkuk learning, what will it mean to be a righteous person by faith in evil times?

So the key question that we're thinking about in this sermon tonight is that question there. How do you live by faith in the worst of times? And we're thinking about that tonight just with two points for the sermon.

And the first is why are these evil times? Are what's so wrong with the Babylonians? What's so wrong with the world that we live in?

[7 : 23] So why are these evil? Why are the times evil? And that's our first point. And that's an important question for you to think through as you listen to this tonight and as you think about the book of Habakkuk.

It's important for you because Christianity comes to you assuming that the way things are in the world around us and the way things are in every human heart, bar one in history and that's Jesus, but the way things are in every human heart is wrong.

It's not how things should be. And Christianity comes telling us that everything needs to change. The world needs to change. You need to change. I need to change. And it comes to us asking, do you want it to change?

But if your assumption is actually fundamentally, I quite like the way the world is. I don't think the world needs to change. And I want to stay as I am.

If that's your assumption starting off, then the Christian message will seem really counterintuitive to you. So it's really important to ask why are the times evil?

[8 : 34] What's actually wrong with Babylon? And then our second point is, how do you remember God in these evil times? So our first point then, why are the times evil?

What was actually wrong with Babylon? So we're jumping into the chapter at verse six here. Shall not all these take up their taunt against him with scuffling and riddles for him?

And say, if you think of where we are in the book of Habakkuk, God has just told him to live by faith. And then God starts to give his own perspective on the Babylonians, on this evil empire who are about to arrive to try and assimilate them.

And there's a really important detail here in verse six that's staring you in the face as you read it, but it's very easy to gloss over and to miss as you read through the verse, which is that this, so the part of the chapter that we read there is actually, it's a song.

And it's a specific kind of song. It's a funeral dirge. So a dirge is a song of lament. You sing it when someone has died or when something has died.

[9 : 49] And there are two kinds of dirges in the ancient world and also in the world today. If you are sad about the person or the thing that has died, if you thought it made the world a better place, then your dirge is tremendously sad and you lament.

But we live in evil times, in a fallen world. And there are plenty of people who die or regimes that fall and lots of people don't think that they made the world a better place.

So the dirge becomes a celebration. People rejoice that something has fallen, that some evil person has died. And if you live in Habakkuk's day and an evil regime has fallen, the kind of dirge that you sing becomes a sort of taunt, a mockery, a mocking song for the thing that has just ended.

And that's what we have in verse six. All the people who have been oppressed by the Babylonians shall not, all of those people, take up their taunt against them with scuffling, with mockery, with riddles.

This is a kind of song that's about to come up. So the kind of dirge for someone whom you're really glad to see the back of becomes, you proclaim the woes against that person, that regime, all of the ways that they were awful and that you're glad that they're not there anymore.

[11 : 15] So this, what we have next is five woes, W-O-E, not W-O-W. Ways that this funeral dirge for the Babylonians is going to be sung.

And one way you could think about this section of Habakkuk two is this is the Old Testament version of a really important chapter in the New Testament, which is Revelation, last book of the Bible, Revelation chapter 18.

In Revelation 18, it's like Habakkuk but amplified, and it's about the whole of human history from the fall up until judgment day at the end, where the world is all held together as Babylon the Great, this evil world, this fallen world, this world in rebellion against God, and Babylon the Great in Revelation 18 falls.

History as we live in it now comes to an end. And when Babylon the Great falls, when Jesus returns and judgment day happens and the world is going to be made new, when Babylon the Great falls in Revelation 18, there are two groups of people who react to Babylon the Great falling very differently.

There are people who loved Babylon the Great, who loved its food, the spices, the fine clothes that they could wear. They loved the life of luxury and comforts, pleasure that they had within it.

[12 : 43] They profited from it, they did well through it. And they mourn, they weep bitterly that Babylon the Great has fallen. But there's another group of people who paid the price for all of that luxury, people who were oppressed, people who were trampled on by Babylon the Great, and they were joyed, and they say hallelujah that Babylon the Great has fallen.

Now, this might, you might sit here tonight listening to me talking about this right now and think that these two worlds that I'm describing both sound incredibly alien, a million miles away from your experience, because you don't live in Bronze Age Babylon, and also some kind of future apocalypse in Revelation 18.

You might think this is all really detached from your experience. But if that's you, what I want to do tonight in the first point in the sermon, why are the times evil, what's wrong with Babylon, what I want to do is show you that, that the Babylon that Habakkuk describes, or that God describes the Habakkuk, Babylon the Great that you see in Revelation 18, those are the worlds that you live in, and that is the world that you live in, and that I live in, and it's a world that needs to change, and it's a world that is going to change.

And that's why these verses begin with a dirge, with a funeral march, and there's something about that. You might just read this, in our culture we don't read out loud, usually, we read silently in our heads, which is quite a recent invention in history.

If you were reading this in Habakkuk's day, it's all out loud all the time, and Habakkuk only got three chapters, and each chapter is a song, song one in chapter one is his How Long O Lord Sam, the song in chapter two is the funeral dirge, which is almost the comedic moment, because Habakkuk is looking at this invading army who are about to come to take over, and the song that they've got playing in their heads is a triumphant, you know, the march of the conquerors, but God chooses a completely different song, and they arrive to a funeral dirge because their doom is already secure.

[15 : 02] Okay, so you have to think about this musically as you read the book, and then chapter three then becomes Habakkuk's song of praise, living amongst the Babylonians. And so God actually is the one who chooses a funeral dirge for the Babylonians because he thinks that the world that they represent needs to change.

So as we get into then the five woes, it's really important that you get this sense that hits you in all your senses, that God is at work changing this world.

So the dirge, this lament, this taunting of them has five woes, and the first one, we're gonna go through these pretty quickly. There are five of them.

So the first one is a woe against people who are trying to get wealth and power based on dishonesty and greed. So this is in verses six to eight, where it talks about woe to people who heap up water on their own for how long, and who loads himself with pledges.

Now what this is talking about is people who become wealthy by taking advantage of the poverty of others to trap them in unfair exploitative contracts.

[16 : 15] Some of you will have seen Wonka, the movie, came out last year, great film, and it's this backstory to Charlie and the Chocolate Factory, but it's really a story about exploitation because there are these people who take advantage of the poor by making them sign contracts that they haven't really read, and then once you sign the contract, you spend the rest of your life as their slave, and then Wonka is the savior figure who manages to save them from it, okay?

And it's a powerful story because of, even as a kind of fun story, it's a really powerful story because of the evil that explains this, okay? But actually, you can find this all throughout our world.

The level of global politics with the ways that wealthier nations exploit poorer nations, you could start zooming in, okay?

In the UK this summer, the wealthiest family in the UK, four members of their family were sent to prison in Geneva because they had taken people from India, and they were paying them, I think it was seven pounds a day, in effect to be their slaves.

They were paying more for their dogs than for these human beings who were working for them. We could zoom into Scotland, where we have ongoing problems with workers being taken over from the Philippines, from West Africa to work on Scottish fishing boats.

[17 : 40] Their passports are confiscated, they're made to sign contracts that are well below the minimum wage, and they're made to work in brutal conditions. Okay, so this is a thing, not just in Babylon in the Bronze Age, or in Revelation 18, this is talking about woe to the kind of world that we live in.

Second woe is people who want to build dynasties for themselves, verses 9 to 11. So this isn't so much just dishonest gain for yourself, but it's the way that you want to build up a house, and that's not house in terms of a building, more like the house of Medici, or the house of Bonaparte, or something like that.

You want to build a dynasty for your family, and here's how this worked in Babylon, the kind of mentality that you needed to have if you were like this.

I am going to build a house, a dynasty, and it will be great, but it has to be greater than yours, and you are now my competition.

We are now, you are a threat. I want my house to be safe from your house, so we're now in effect in an arms race. And what's astonishing here is the way that God, God's perspective on it, really exposes the idolatry that goes with, you know, empire building, thinking.

[19 : 02] The house you are trying to build, the house you think you're trying to protect, will actually turn around at the end and tell you that it hates you for what you've done to it. That's there in verse 11.

You build up this house, a place of safety, and the bricks and the rafters call out against you. Now, let me take this story again into, let's say, our world of stories, the kind of stories that grip us.

Have you seen the Godfather? Michael Corleone starts off with an idol, which is his family, and the family business, and it's a criminal business, but it's a family business, and the bigger his commitment to building up his house, his dynasty, to making it a place that is safe from all threats, the more he gives to that, the more the family starts to hate him.

And at the end, he's bitter, he's isolated, his idol has turned its back on him. Have you seen Breaking Bad? Some of you will have. Walter White, his idol is his family, and he will do anything to look out for them, and then decides even crime, and then he really does build a huge empire, a drugs empire, all the while thinking, but this will make my children's future secure when I'm gone, and at the end, spoiler alert, his family hates him.

Have you seen, or read, Frankenstein, that someone who has this idol, which is, I will create life, and he makes his creature, Frankenstein's monster, and then the idol, the thing that he creates eventually turns around and says, I hate you, I want to kill you.

[20 : 41] And all of those stories in our culture are all retellings of the same story from the Bible, really, which is the story of how we ruin things by turning them into idols.

You will do anything to build up your idol, to serve your idol, you give it all of your love, and at the end of the day, because you've asked it to be something that it cannot be, it turns around and says to you, I hate you for what you've done to me.

And don't we live in a world where the temptation to build our own little empires, maybe you're not Walter White, but you have your own little empire, and the way that we imperil things that we think we love through that kind of idolatry ends up where this ends up.

The next one was really short, and it's about violence in verse 12, people getting what they want, not by persuasion, not through love, but through power and coercion.

And so, the world has not changed since Bronze Age Babylon, from international war to playground bullies.

[21 : 53] And then there's a woe in verse 15, that's against people who degrade things that God made to be good, and who treat them as though they're worthless.

And it starts off by talking about wine and the human body. And the Bible has a lot to say about wine. There's a lot to say about the misuse of wine, but fundamentally, the Bible, so here I'm thinking of Psalm 104, which is a long Psalm all about God's creation of the world, of good things, and the way that he provides for that world and sustains it.

And it's a really epic, it's like an Attenborough nature documentary, but with God as the narrator. And wine features there, and it says that God gave human beings wine to gladden their hearts.

So fundamentally, it's a positive thing, a good thing that can be misused. And the Bible says a lot about that as well. And the Bible also has a lot to say about the human body, that God is the Lord of our bodies, that the human body is a sacred thing, that it is a beautiful thing, that God made our bodies free.

And God has made our bodies for His glory. And because of that, our own bodies, and the bodies of other people, are things that we should honor. But the woe and Habakkuk starts off by talking about people who take these two things, wine and other people's bodies, and twist them, degrade them, use wine to get other people drunk so that you can exploit their bodies.

[23 : 32] And this is an exceptionally hard thing to talk about in a sermon, because this isn't abstract, and this is not ancient history.

We still live in Babylon. And Babylon in this way is a terrible place, a place that needs to change, a place where men do awful things to women.

We live in a city, we live in an age where a lot of women in nightclubs don't take their eyes off their drinks, because we still live in Babylon.

We live in a world where it's just, it's not a surprise when you turn on the news. And another super rich, powerful man is exposed as having used that power, and often alcohol as well, to entrap and to abuse the women who are part of the empire that he has built up.

There was another, it's regular in the news cycle. We still live in Babylon. But then the war moves from degrading wine and human bodies, it moves from that to animals and trees.

[24 : 50] So in verse 17, it talks about the violence at Lebanon. And you can see by reading other, elsewhere in the prophets in the Bible, that that's actually, the thing in the Bible that Lebanon is really significant for is its trees.

Spectacular, glorious trees, it's still the national symbol. And the violence at Lebanon is people who turn up to this place of beautiful ancient trees and hack them to bits for short periods of time.

For short term conquests with no care, no gratitude to God for the creation, for those trees are God's trees. So there's woe to those who trash God's creation, and also who inflict destruction wantonly on animals.

We still live in Babylon, and God hates those things. And then the last woe in verse 18 is against Babylon as a place where people worship idols.

Now, you know, I said in the first sermon that you can see a lot of Babylonian cultures though, if you go to the British Museum in London, if you go to the City Museum in Berlin.

[26 : 06] And if you've done that, you'll have seen Babylonian idols. And they're these tiny, a lot of them just little bronze figurines, like tiny little toys. And it might feel easy for you today if you're an irreligious, secular, Western person to say, I kind of looked down on that.

My culture is way more sophisticated. It seems stupid to me to think that this little bronze thing is something that you would bow down before and worship. So I can't be an idolater because I don't have any, I don't worship idols.

I just don't have them. And I'm from a more sophisticated culture. Maybe you find it ridiculous that someone in the Bronze Age had this little metal figure that they worshiped.

But here's the thing, if you were to say to an ancient Babylonian, you are an idolater, that person would say, no, I'm not, because this is not an idol, this is my God.

Okay, because the thing in Christianity that makes an idol an idol is that it's a false God. It's a thing that you take from within this world and you treat it as though it is God, but it's actually not. You take, you create an idol whenever you take anything that is not the living God and you make it your ultimate, you make it your guiding star, your highest good.

[27 : 30] And that can be something that you don't have yet in your life, but that thing convinces you, you need me and if only you had me, then you'd finally be happy.

Your life would finally have its meaning, you would finally be satisfied. And it can be things that you have, that you think, I just need to keep on getting more and more of this, and then eventually, it will satisfy me.

And the thing is, you can turn anything in this world into an idol. If you were an ancient Babylon, you would express that by having this little bronze figurine and saying, this is my God and I will do anything for it because it's the ultimate thing in my life.

But the city of Edinburgh is full of people whose lives, all have things like that. Have things, having a life that worships something, that's not optional.

We all have that. The question is just, what do you worship or whom do you worship? Will it be an idol or will it be God? Will you take a finite thing and expect it to, even if it's a good thing, will you expect it to be your life's ultimate thing?

[28 : 48] Or will the true, the infinite eternal God be that for you? If you choose to center your life on a finite thing, the last of Habakkuk's woes puts this challenge to you, which is that you take something and you ask it to be what it never can be.

Inherently, it is not. You take a finite thing and you ask it to give you the satisfaction that only something infinite could give you. You take a normal thing and ask it, feel to me like an ultimate thing, be that in my life.

And you ask it to do what it can never do, what it can't deliver. And the way that Habakkuk challenges you to think like this is if you do that with your career, if you do that with the ideal of a relationship or living in a particular neighborhood or having a particular look or being accepted by a particular group or any of those things, if you take one of those finite things and say, be my ultimate and my infinite thing, give me that satisfaction that makes my life worth living every day, are you any more sophisticated?

Really, can you look down at all on someone who takes a wooden statue and says, awake? Or takes a bronze figurine and says, speak to me.

Habakkuk's woes says that these are the same things. You have no superiority over them for that. So this is why the times are evil.

[30 : 32] This is why we still live in Babylon, this world that God wants to change. And in that world, it's our second point, you're called to remember God in those evil times.

I wanna say this really briefly. There are two verses here in the middle of this dirge where the tune completely changes. If you think of the dirge all as being in a minor key, there are two verses where all of a sudden it's like a completely different piece of music is breaking through.

And they're in verse 14 and verse 20. In verse 14, all of a sudden, in the midst of this dirge, for the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.

But then you're sucked back into the dirge for a moment. And then at the end of the dirge, verse 20, but the Lord is in his holy temple, let all the earth keep silence before him. So verse 14 says everything will change.

And verse 20 says that's the thing that your faith latches onto in this world. Let the whole earth keep silent before him. A great example of this, I wanna try and summarize extremely briefly because it's quite a long story, but it's Nicholas Nicolby by Charles Dickens.

[31 : 46] It's a great story of someone, of actually a couple of people, a family, who are trying to live by faith in effect in evil times. And it's a picture of what it looks like to live through truly awful circumstances and to see all the kind of woes and violence and exploitation and everything that Habakkuk talks about.

And but the story changes at the end and there's this powerful redemptive ending. It's a very Christian story. And the turning point at the very end before finally all these wrong things in the story are put right is the most evil character.

He's like the king of Babylon in the story. He looks out the window into this gloomy street in London. And what does he see but a busker who is singing words? And the words that he's singing are Habakkuk 2,14.

He's singing for the glory of the Lord will fill the earth as the waters cover the sea. And it's a turning point in the whole story. So that's just a tip on the side that if you want to get a feel for the kind of effective power of Habakkuk's woes and how good news bursts into those woes, that's what Dickens is drawing on at the end of Nicholas Nicolby.

And knowing that that's the case, having this burst into the worst of times, that one day everything will change is the thing that helps you keep silent in peace before God.

[33 : 08] I started off with the question, what's wrong with the world? And I'll save this to conclude. The reason I asked that, I said, is because Christianity assumes that there's a lot wrong with the world and that the world needs to change and that we need to change.

And there are lots of things in Habakkuk's dirge that are easy for us to see at a cultural level. Yes, we want that to change. We want less violence. We don't want the oppression of the poor. We don't want people to be degraded.

Now if you sit and really stare at these woes though, it's a harder picture for our culture to embrace. Did you notice in the fourth woe that it condemns what the culture around us would say are sort of good progressive liberal sexual values, which alienates, let's say, the secular left wing of our society.

But then right after that, it condemns the kind of attitude that would say, let's burn down the rainforests and do intensive cattle farming so that we can have cheap hamburgers at McDonald's, which would be more like the secular right wing of our culture.

And Habakkuk's woe there challenges both of those. Okay, so there are ways that our culture would sort of wrestle with these woes to say, we want the world to change, but if you sit and think about them for long enough, it's a hard change that's being asked.

[34 : 25] But nonetheless, I think for a lot of people in our culture, and maybe this is you, you look at Habakkuk's big picture and say, I agree that the world needs to change, but because in our culture, what we assume is that we're the masters of our own lives, I don't need to change.

And I'm much less comfortable with God saying that I need to repent, I need to become different, but I'm happy for the rest of the world around me to change. God can change the world, but He has no right to change me.

And if that's you, Christianity says, don't you see that the world is you, that you need to change, you need to embrace a completely new way to live in this evil world.

And through Habakkuk, God's message to you is, you need to be a righteous person by faith in Jesus in this world if you are going to be the first fruits of the change that God is bringing, that He promises in verses 14 and 20.

In the gospel God draws you in, He lets you get close enough to wrestle with Him in order to share that good news with you, that you can change, that you must change, and that by faith you can.

[35 : 29] Even though you're an unrighteous person from an unrighteous world, He will gift you righteousness in Jesus, and having done that, He will then send you back out into this world to live out that faith there.

What will that look like? Come back next Sunday nights for the last sermon. We'll look at this in chapter three. Let's pray. Father God, we thank you for the hope of the gospel, for the light that it shines into our dark world.

We thank you for your commitments to this world that you have made for your own glory. And we thank you that one day, as you promised us through Habakkuk, the knowledge of your glory will fill this world as the waters cover the sea.

So Lord, because of that, we pray that you would help us to be still before you, to be calmed, to be quieted, to know that you are with us. And because of that, you would help us to live by faith in this world.

Amen.