

Recognizing Good News in Prophetic Judgement

DAVE BAST

What do you imagine when you hear the words: Old Testament prophet? Probably you think about a tall, gaunt figure with a long beard and a flowing robe. His expression is stern, and when he speaks, thunder rumbles and lightning flashes, and his message is all doom and woe. In fact, when something spectacularly bad happens in the world, we sometimes describe it as a disaster of biblical proportions. That is how strongly we identify the Bible – at least its prophetic books – with apocalyptic disaster. As we will see today in our study of the little book of Habakkuk, there is some truth to that caricature, but it is not the whole truth. Stay tuned.

SCOTT HOEZEE

From Words of Hope and ReFrame Media, this is Groundwork, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Scott Hoezee.

DAVE BAST

And I am Dave Bast; and Scott, we are right in the middle today of a five-part series on Habakkuk, which only has three chapters, so that is kind of interesting. We are going to take several messages out of Chapter 2, where we are today, because that has probably the most famous verses in the book of Habakkuk, including verse 4 of Chapter 2: The righteous will live by faith.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And indeed, Habakkuk, as we have said earlier in this series, Dave, he is living at a time of transition. There has been some peace for his land, but he has been assured by God that it is temporary. The Babylonians are going to come and they are going to be God's instrument of punishment to the people; and so there is a lot of doom and gloom, as you said in the introduction, a lot of predictions of disaster that are going to come; but in the middle of the book is a famous verse, which as we saw in the previous program, became more famous because Paul quotes it in the New Testament: The righteous will live by faith. But it is important to see that that was actually set in a context of contrast because the first part of that verse was:

⁴See, he is puffed up. His desires are not upright; but the righteous will live by faith. So, it is a contrast with two different ways of coming at life: Are you a proud, arrogant, boastful person...

DAVE BAST

Puffed up, that is the puffed up idea.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, you are kind of a self-made individual. You don't need any reference to God; or are you living a faithful life of faithful service to God? That idea that there are proud people who live without reference to God is very important in this chapter, and in, as we are going to see, a lot of the woes and judgments that are expressed.

DAVE BAST

Yes, right; in fact, in Chapter 1 Habakkuk talks about people who sacrifice to their own fishing nets as if those are their gods. We might, to put that in modern terms, talk about people who sacrifice to their own – I don't know – e-mail stock trading programs because they think they are so smart – they are so powerful; they

are self-made people, as the saying goes, who worship their own creator. Those are the proud; and then in contrast, the people of faith, the people who live by trusting God, and the people who faithfully go on trusting God even in the midst of questions and sometimes setbacks, and even disasters, as Habakkuk speaks of the coming judgment. So, all of this issues in this wonderful promise that also comes in Chapter 2, which we looked at in the last program of how the day is coming after the disasters, after the judgment, when the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord as the waters cover the sea – beautiful, beautiful promise in Habakkuk 2:14.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And so, as we will see elsewhere in this book, and have already seen, there is that tension between judgment and hope, but the bad news comes first in that there is this judgment; and the bad news for the people of Habakkuk's day is that... So, we talk about the righteous living by faith, it would have been nice if that would have meant the righteous were all the people of Israel – all of Habakkuk's fellow citizens – but unfortunately, we know that it was exactly the failure of God's own people to live justly; that was what was bringing about the woes. The woes here are not directed to the other nations, you know, Egypt or somewhere; no, this is for God's own people who have not lived up – and most of the minor prophets talk about this: Amos, we know, particularly Micah, a lot of the minor prophets like Habakkuk are targeting God's own people for their failure to live justly; and again and again like a drumbeat in Chapter 2 it is that word *woe* – *woe to you* – that comes up again and again.

DAVE BAST

Yes, right. You know, it sounds kind of antiquated: Woe to you. I mean, when was the last time you heard a sermon that starts out or introduces a section by saying: Woe to you. Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees; woe to you, church goers; woe to you, pew sitters. It does sound a little bit quaint; and the word really is a combination of ideas, one being lament – like oh, woe, you know; alas – alas and alack – there are some other old-fashioned words that we don't use, but a combination of lament and warning sort of: Woe to you – watch out is what the phrase means.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Watch out, yes.

DAVE BAST

And there are five of them in Habakkuk Chapter 2, just paragraph after paragraph in which a different group of people is identified by the prophet, and this combination of lament and warning is spelled out to them. So, in verse 6:

Woe to the one who piles up stolen goods and makes himself wealthy by extortion. People who live by unjust gain, who exploit others, who take advantage. I mean, these are very modern sounding crimes or sins. Later on, those who employ violence: Woe to you who shed blood. Woe to the one who builds his house by unjust gain. You think about the crimes of the one percent, really; that is what is in view here, people who really enrich themselves by taking advantage and exploiting common people.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And interestingly, one of the last woes in this chapter also, in verse 15 is: Woe to the person who throws these lavish parties just in order to get all the party-goers drunk and then to take advantage of the people who become drunk; which, you talk about sort of modern sins, also...

DAVE BAST

Right, basically, seduction is what they are talking about. So, sexual sins, economic sins, even ecological sins. There is a passage in here that talks about those who abuse the earth or somehow pollute or destroy nature in order to achieve their ends; so again, really very modern sounding, and the judgment that is pronounced also strikes us as being, in a sense, somehow appropriate because what Habakkuk basically says in each of these cases is that they are going to get what they have done to others. What goes around comes around, as we say. They are going to receive the same kind of treatment that they have been meting out to

other people.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And there is a sense in which we can be glad that that is so, right? That we can be glad that we serve a God of justice. Is reading a series of woes a pleasant thing? No, but even Jesus, in the New Testament, will warn the Pharisees and warn other people in His day. There are some sections – Matthew 23 and some other passages – where Jesus also utters woes of warning: Watch out! Shape up or bad things are going to happen to you; although, interestingly, I was noticing recently, Dave, when the lectionary that a lot of churches use as their guide to preaching through the Bible had a section where they just had... The minister was supposed to read the first four verses and the last eight verses of this chapter, and it skipped a bunch in between, and I thought, I wonder what the in-between stuff was – whether it was all the woes?

DAVE BAST

Yes, there you go.

SCOTT HOEZEE

We don't want to hear Jesus saying: Woe! But He did and God did, and it is a good thing because it means that God does want things to balance out; God does want fairness in the universe; and so there is always that message to repent – that there is a chance for turnaround and renewal – and that is what we will want to talk about next.

DAVE BAST

I am Dave Bast, along with Scott Hoezee, and you are listening to Groundwork, where today we are digging into Habakkuk Chapter 2, and we have been talking about these woes, which, interestingly, Scott, you mentioned how in the modern church we tend to skip these kinds of passages of scripture. We don't even want to read them anymore. We sort of edit them out of the Bible, but in order to get a full picture of God's truth we need to listen to this. These are serious and somber warnings, especially against people who are willing to exploit their neighbor or take advantage of them or in some way abuse them for their own enrichment, and God takes a very dim view of that kind of behavior, for which, frankly, we should be grateful. This is, in a sense, good news – the fact that God cares about these things. Imagine if we lived in a world where He didn't care; and as you pointed out just at the close of our opening segment, it is also good news because whenever there is a pronouncement or a warning or a statement of judgment, implicit within it is the invitation to repent – to turn back to God – to renounce that behavior – and then experience God's forgiveness.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And experience the presence of God, which the evil, the rich, the proud, the boastful somehow manage to live without. They live without reference to God. It is interesting, when we get to the very end of Chapter 2, we get these words; all of which are meant to reorient us back to the reality of God. So let's listen to these words. This starts in verse 18 of Habakkuk 2:

Of what value is an idol carved by a craftsman, or an image that teaches lies? For the one who makes it trusts in his own creation. He makes idols that cannot speak. ¹⁹Woe 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. (And now this verse) ²⁰The Lord is in His holy Temple. Let all the earth be silent before Him.

DAVE BAST

Yes, that is great. That is Habakkuk 2:20, and whenever I hear that verse I am kind of sent back to my childhood because the church in which I grew up, very often the choir would sing those words at the beginning of our morning worship service: The Lord is in His holy Temple. Let all the earth keep silence before Him. It is a beautiful statement, really; especially when you consider how noisy our world is.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes. We don't have a lot of reverence sometimes even in worship, alas. We don't have a lot of silence; and so this is a reorienting word to us to remind us that there is a very, very majestic God who exists in the universe, and you have to live with reference to Him. So, how foolish it is to carve a piece of wood, sculpt a piece of stone, make something and then say, "Well, this is my god," and then talk to it as though it is alive when, of course, it is clearly dead as stone – dead as a doornail – dead as wood; but when we lose sight of the living God, who is in His Temple – and we want to find out what that means in just a second – now we have a larger frame of reference, which hopefully will keep us from all the things that all the woe condemnations and warnings earlier in the chapter were aimed at. "God is in His Temple;" now, what does that mean, that God is in His Temple?

DAVE BAST

Well, you know, that is a great question. The Lord is in His *holy* Temple – to raise that issue is to prompt the question: Does that mean that in the Old Testament they believed that God actually lived in a building? I mean, the Temple, of course, was this great structure in the city of Jerusalem built by King Solomon, David's great son, his very wealthy son, who lavished just incredible amounts of money and energy on building this magnificent building, which itself was a copy of an earlier structure, a tent or the tabernacle that had been designed by Moses in the wilderness during the exodus; in fact, much of the later part of the book of Exodus is devoted to the plans for the tabernacle, which was then replicated in permanent form in the Temple, and both tabernacle and Temple were believed to be copies on earth of the heavenly sanctuary where God dwelt in His splendor; but they did not really believe that God lived inside the Temple.

SCOTT HOEZEE

The presence of God, they believed, was accessible in a special way there. I mean, the people did pray toward Jerusalem; they did believe that God was symbolically seated on the Mercy Seat of the Ark of the Covenant in the Holy of Holies, but there certainly is plenty of other evidence in the Old Testament that people knew – at their best, anyway – they knew that God was not localized like that. So, you think of Psalm 139:

⁷Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from Your presence? ⁸If I go to the heavens, You are there. If I make my bed in the depths, You are there. ⁹If I rise on the wings of the dawn; if I settle on the far side of the sea, ¹⁰even there Your hand will guide me; Your right hand will hold me fast.

So, they knew that, although there were places to focus your worship of God, they also knew that God was spirit – that God is everywhere, which in the context of Habakkuk, is a very good point, that God is everywhere. His Temple is in a sense His creation, so why do you think you people who build cities on bloodshed and you robbers and thieves who steal and get ahead by dishonest gain, why do you think God is not watching? Why do you think that your actions will escape the judgment of God? There is a God, and we must be respectful and silent in the sense of having holy reverence – fear in the good sense – because this is a God who has a certain blueprint for life, and when we live without reference to that God, and outside of that blueprint, we bring destruction, we hurt, we vandalize shalom.

DAVE BAST

Right; yes, I really think there is kind of a double meaning to this statement: The Lord is in His holy Temple. On the one hand, it is saying God is in heaven. Where is God? Well, He is in heaven. That is where the real Temple is. The earthly Temple is just a physical representation of that; and where is heaven? Well, that is a deep question, too, that probably we cannot get into here. It does not mean it is up in the sky behind the stars, but it is God's dwelling place, and the truth that is trying to be expressed here in picture language is that God is in control; God is on the throne; God is sovereign; God is the Holy One who does see; but as you said, in another sense, the earth is His temple. There is a strain of Old Testament thought that sees the whole of the creation as a kind of copy of the Temple in Jerusalem. So, when the Old Testament talks about the earth being founded on pillars, it is a suggestion of those great big pillars outside the entrance to the Temple. So God is not only above all things, but He is within all things as well. He is close to us. He is in His creation, and therefore, He knows and sees what is going on.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And so to the people in his day, there is a sense in which Habakkuk's bottom line message is: There is a God and you are not it. Right? You are not the reference for all of the universe. You are not the center of all things. Only God is, and you have to live every day with respect toward that truth.

DAVE BAST

Well, and exactly what that means and how that should happen is implied in Habakkuk's injunction to us. He has a declaration: The Lord is in His holy Temple; but he also has a suggestion for how we should respond to that truth, and that is what we will look at next.

SCOTT HOEZEE

You are listening to Groundwork, where we are digging into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Scott Hoezee.

DAVE BAST

And I am Dave Bast. So this is the prophet's great declaration: The Lord is in His holy Temple. And then he comes back with this, what should we call it, suggestion? Let all the earth keep silence before Him. Honor God; honor His greatness and honor His presence among us by keeping silent, which is rather interesting when you think about it because you would suspect maybe that our first impulse would be to shout and sing and, hey, hallelujah, you know; and there is plenty of that in the Old Testament as well – there are plenty of exclamations of praise – but how about the idea of silence and what that might imply for our response to the awesomeness of God?

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; so clearly, if we take the Bible as a whole, including even just the Old Testament as a whole – if you take the book of Psalms as a whole, clearly worship of God and service of God is not only silence. There is supposed to be singing. There are choruses of hallelujah; in fact, most of the psalms that begin with hallelujah – that is an imperative – it is a command form – commanding other nations, other princes, other kings, clouds, wind, and snowflakes to praise God; so clearly, the worship of God and being reverential with God does involve noise and music and singing and dancing; but it starts here, and that is a point right there worthy of pondering. So here is Habakkuk in the midst of a very evil society, a society that has fallen very far from God's intentions for it, and the corrective that he is offering after this long series of woes that fill up all of Habakkuk Chapter 2, the corrective is silence – reverential silence. How does that help? Why is it important? And we could say even today, why is it important that worship begins there? It does not end there, but it begins there. Why?

DAVE BAST

Well, you know, there are Christians today who kind of almost take a gleeful delight in the idea of these woes being poured out on the world, and they want to jump on that bandwagon and say: Oh, you sinners; you are going to get it. You are going to... At the farmer's market in our city where we go there is often a man standing outside on the edge of it holding up a sign. I mean, he looks... You talk about Old Testament prophets proclaiming death, you know – death to you sinners; but I think our first reaction to this news of God's holiness and His judgment, frankly, ought to be the silence of humility, where we ask: Could You be speaking to me, Lord? You know, rather than pointing the finger at others, silence means the first thing we do is stop and reflect and ask if God is something...

You know, there is a wonderful place in the Gospels where Jesus is telling a parable and the disciples say to Him: Lord, are you telling this to us? Are you talking to me? Are you talking to me here? And that is what silence means. We start by asking God: Are You talking to me here? God, what is there in my life that I need to repent of and turn and bow before You in humility and silence?

SCOTT HOEZEE

You know, some time ago on Groundwork we did a series on spiritual disciplines, and some of them involved meditation and prayer and silence; and one of the things we said then, and one of the things I think many of us know about modern societies – the U.S., Canada, all over the world, really – is that people are afraid of silence, even in the Church today, five seconds of silence feels like forever to most people. In fact, if I have a time of silent prayer and I am leading it as a pastor, I have to be honest, I have to kind of watch my wristwatch or I will be tempted to break in after seven seconds. If I want to leave 30 or 45 seconds or a whole minute, I have to watch my watch because it feels like forever because we never have it... what are we afraid of in the silence? Well, exactly the questions that come to you in the silence: How am I living? How am I measuring up to God? What are my fears? These are the things that come to you when you are not filling in every gap in your life with music through your earbuds and through your iPod and iTunes account. So silence can be threatening, but God calls us to begin our worship there because this is what helps us align with His sensibilities, with His ways. It may lead us to confession: I don't always do it right, Lord. That is not comfortable, but it is necessary, and then we go from there in opening ourselves up to also the beauty of God.

DAVE BAST

You know, there is that old story of the prophet Elijah, who ran away from Queen Jezebel after the contest with the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel, and he went off into the wilderness and he came to Horeb, to the mountain of God, and there he waited and waited for God, and you remember the story, Scott...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Sure.

DAVE BAST

There was an earthquake and a fire and God did not speak in those things, but it was in the stillness and the silence that a voice came with the word of the Lord to Elijah. You know, I think our worship would be greatly enriched if we observed this kind of silence as part of it regularly.

Scott Hoezee;

I think we sometimes think that – and television reinforces this for us, and I suppose even radio shows do... hopefully not ours, but – we sometimes think we can talk our way out of anything. Talk, talk, talk. No silence, just constantly fire off your own opinion, split screens on TV, silence does not play well on TV, so you have to be talking, talking, talking all the time; and Habakkuk is saying sometimes it is good to just sort of arrest all of that and stop and be still and to realize again there is a God and you are not it, and to align ourselves as closely as we can with God. Habakkuk's day was as fallen and as bad as it could be, and destruction was coming as a result; and still, in the midst of all that, Habakkuk senses that reverential fear and silence is a good place to begin in realigning our lives.

DAVE BAST

Well, you know, the great theologian, John Calvin, once urged his readers with these words: Let us glorify God by our silence; and that is a beautiful thought, too. It is possible to glorify God, not just with our words, but by bowing before Him and submitting ourselves to His sovereign rule and glorifying Him with silence. Well, thanks for joining our Groundwork conversation today. I am Dave Bast, along with Scott Hoezee, and we would like to know how we can help you continue digging deeper into scripture. So visit groundworkonline.com to tell us what topics or passages you would like to dig into next on Groundwork.

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