

We use that last line –

“The LORD is in his holy temple; let all the earth keep silence before him”
in one of our calls to worship.

It may seem odd, at first, to start talking as soon as we have said
that all the earth keeps *silence* before him!

After all, Habakkuk 2:20 is the *last thing* that God says in response to Habakkuk’s complaint!
Perhaps we *should* respond with silence!

But Habakkuk does not respond with silence.

He responds with a prayer – a Psalm – a song to be sung in the temple.

After all, the word translated “keep silence” is not even a verb.

It is the interjection, “*hush*” – which is closely related to the English word, “hush.”

God will shut the nations up.

They will have nothing to say –
just like their gods!

But what about Habakkuk?

What about God’s people?

When all the earth is silent before God,
then the people of God will sing for joy –
because we have a God who speaks!

And the Word of God loosens our lips and enlivens our tongues –
so that we can sing praise to him!

As we saw last time, chapter 2, verse 1, is essential to understanding the book of Habakkuk.

*2:1 I will take my stand at my watchpost
and station myself on the tower,
and look out to see what he will say to me,
and what I will answer concerning my complaint.*

First, Habakkuk complained that wickedness was overrunning Jerusalem.

“Destruction and violence are before me; strife and contention arise.

So the law is paralyzed, and justice never goes forth.

For the wicked surround the righteous; so justice goes forth perverted.” (1:2-4)

God replied that his answer was to send the Chaldeans against Jerusalem (1:5-11).

So Habakkuk replied by saying “wait a minute!

That’s even worse!

The Chaldeans are more wicked than Israel – so how is that right? (1:12-17)

But then in 2:1, Habakkuk announces that he will stand at his watchpost

and wait to hear the LORD’s answer – reserving the right to reply back to God!

As one commentator puts it,

“Having silenced himself before God, Habakkuk awaits the revelation of wisdom.
And in that moment we see that faith is the both the precondition and the content of wisdom.
Habakkuk’s watch enacts the very wisdom He seeks,
for wisdom rests not in human understanding,
not in protest or argument, dialogue or critique,
but in silence before God, in waiting for His revelation, in listening to His Word.
Faith waits for and listens to the wisdom of God’s revelation;
wisdom, in turn, speaks of faith.
Or we might say that as Habakkuk watches the horizon,
awaiting the judgment that is sure to come, stripped of all consolation and delusion,
he learns that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.”
(Andy Deliyannides, Habakkuk on the Watchtower)

1. The Vision of the Arrogant and the Righteous (2:2-5)
a. The Vision Will Surely Come and Not Delay (v2-3)

² *And the LORD answered me:*

*“Write the vision;
make it plain on tablets,
so he may run who reads it.*

³ *For still the vision awaits its appointed time;
it hastens to the end—it will not lie.*

*If it seems slow, wait for it;
it will surely come; it will not delay.*

Chapter 1:1 says that this is the “oracle that Habakkuk the prophet saw.”

We think of “oracles” as things heard –
but Habakkuk says that he *saw* it.

These are *visible words*.

And now Habakkuk is make this oracle that he *sees* visible in *written words*.

Now the LORD says *write the vision*.

Make it plain on tablets – so that he may run who reads it.

God had made his law “visible” by engraving it on tablets of stone.

Now, Habakkuk is to put the vision on tablets.

We saw last time that the Law (the Torah) was paralyzed by Israel’s rebellion.

And God said that he was bringing the Chaldeans against Israel.

His judgment would fall against Jerusalem.

The Law, weakened by the flesh, could not save Israel.

And so God says that we need something better than the Law –
a vision engraved on tablets.

But the vision – the answer to Habakkuk’s complaint –
awaits the appointed time.

But do not think that God is slow!
There is an appointed time – it is *hastening* to the end.
The vision does not lie.

And it must be written down so that he may run who reads it.
What does this mean?
“the one who reads” needs to be understood in the ancient sense!

“The one who reads” is the scribe – the herald –
that rare person who *knows* how to read!
And reading is not a silent matter.
“The one who reads” could also be translated “the one who proclaims” –
because, quite frankly, the one who reads – *reads aloud!*

[It is the word used in 1 Samuel 3 to refer to how the LORD called Samuel –
and in Isaiah 6 to the LORD’s call of Isaiah –
and in Isaiah 21 to speak of the one who calls to the watchman,
“What of the night?”
or in Isaiah 40, to the voice calling, “prepare the way of the LORD”
or in Joel 2, speaking of how the LORD calls people to himself.]

The point is not that someone passively reads the vision and runs.
Rather, the point is that the one who calls – the herald – can see the vision,
run, and announce it.

What is the vision that is to be written on tablets?
What is the message that must be announced by the runner – by the herald – the one who calls?

b. The Arrogant Contrasted with the Righteous (v4-5)

⁴ “Behold, his soul is puffed up; it is not upright within him,
but the righteous shall live by his faith.”^[c]

This is the message.
This is the vision.

This is the word that should be inscribed on tablets.
This is the word that may be compared to the Torah!
The word that can do what the Law, weakened by the flesh, could not do.

And if it seems slow – if it seems that the day will never come –
remember that it awaits the appointed time.

It would be easy to gloss over Habakkuk 2:4.
After all, the rest of verse 4, and all of verse 5, talks about the arrogant!
In Hebrew there are only three words about the righteous.

vtsadiq be’emunatob yichyeh

but the righteous by his fidelity lives

The righteous shall live by his faith – or, by his faithfulness –
the word could be translated either way.

(and quite frankly, if you lose either side of this
you truncate the meaning of the verse!)

This is one of those classic summaries of what God requires:

“but to do justice, and love *hesed* and walk wisely with God” – as we saw from Micah;
love God and neighbor – as Jesus put it;
believe in the Son and obey God’s commands – as John says it;
faith working by love – as Paul says it.

But as Habakkuk stands at his watchpost.

As he looks to see what God will say,
God answers:

“The righteous shall live by his faith.”

There are strong echoes of Genesis 15:6 here.

Abraham believed God and it was reckoned to him as righteousness.
God tells Habakkuk that Israel must live by faith – just like Abraham.

Habakkuk is not talking about *justification* by faith.
Habakkuk is talking about how the justified *live* – which is, by faith.

For Habakkuk, the Law is paralyzed.

The Torah has been rendered impotent by Israel’s rebellion.
What can the righteous do? – when justice goes forth perverted?

Well, the righteous can live by faith – *just like Abraham did*.

Abraham did not see justice prevail.

In his day the wicked ruled the land.
But Abraham saw – by faith – the city whose maker and builder is God.

But, like Abraham, in our day we see the triumph of the arrogant.

There are 33 words in Hebrew in verses 4-5.
Only three of them are about the righteous.
The other 30 are about the arrogant!

His soul is puffed up; it is not upright within him.

The “he” is not identified here –
but there is only one possible antecedent:
the same “he” of chapter 1.

But as we saw last time, this ambiguous referent opens up Habakkuk's meaning.
Yes, Habakkuk is referring to the king of the Chaldeans –
the arrogant one who comes to destroy the nations.
But it also will connect to the Romans of the 1st century –
and, for that matter, to every arrogant ruler who fits the bill!

⁵ *“Moreover, wine^[d] is a traitor,
an arrogant man who is never at rest.^[e]
His greed is as wide as Sheol;
like death he has never enough.
He gathers for himself all nations
and collects as his own all peoples.”*

The language in verses 4-5 sets up the woes in the second part of the chapter.
Wine is a traitor – it will betray you
(later, in 2:15, this will become explicit).

The city of man – and the rulers of the city of man –
are never content.

His greed is as wide as Sheol; like death he has never enough.
This is the way that greed works.
Whatever you are greedy for – greed never has enough.
They are puffed up – they are bloated in their attempt to swallow up the whole world.

But my righteous one shall live by his faith.
Paul will use this as the central text to describe the gospel in Romans 1:16-17 –
“For I am not ashamed of the gospel,
for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes,
to the Jew first and also to the Greek.
For in it [in the gospel] the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith,
as it is written, ‘The righteous shall live by faith.’”

And then Paul will contrast this
with the wrath of God revealed against all the unrighteousness of men in Romans 1-2.

2. The Taunt against the Arrogant (2:6-20)

And so the bulk of chapter 2 consists of the taunt against the greed of the arrogant man –
the king of Babylon –
or whoever follows in his path!

We often think of taunting in terms of “bullying.”
When I was in junior high, I was frequently the object of “taunts.”
There were a handful of kids who seem to have taken great pleasure in mocking me.
So it took me a while to realize that there is a *proper* use of taunting.

In the scriptures, you *never* mock or taunt those who are less fortunate than yourself!

Rather, the two chief objects of mockery in the Bible are

- 1) idols – the gods of the nations;
- 2) the powerful and arrogant – those who taunt and mock others!

In other words, the proper place for taunting is to thumb your nose at bullies!

A taunt is designed to have two effects:

- it is supposed to humiliate the one who is taunted;
- and it is supposed to encourage the victims of the bully to stand firm and resist the bully.

Think of Luke 11 or Matthew 23

where Jesus taunts the scribes and Pharisees with “woes”.

The chief difference between Jesus and Habakkuk
is that Jesus is speaking directly to the bullies.

Habakkuk is speaking to Israel *about* the bullies.

But Habakkuk says that the nations whom Babylon has plundered
will now rise up against Babylon
and mock him:

a. Woe to Him Who Plunders Many Nations (v6-8)

i. You Will Be Spoil for Many

⁶ *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!”

⁷ *Will not your debtors suddenly arise,
and those awake who will make you tremble?
Then you will be spoil for them.*

⁸ *Because you have plundered many nations,
all the remnant of the peoples shall plunder you,
for the blood of man and violence to the earth,
to cities and all who dwell in them.*

The woes against Babylon use a lot of plays on words.

Some are very clever – but are quickly lost in translation!

The word translated “debtors” in verse 7 actually means “those who bite” –
and refers to *creditors* rather than debtors

(because *creditors* are the ones who eat you alive!).

The reason why God refers to Babylon’s creditors

is because Babylon is living on borrowed capital.

Babylon may *look* like a powerful nations that will never crumble –
but Babylon is racking up major debts –

and the day will soon arrive when the bill will come due!

The United States would do well to pay attention.
I'm not now referring to the *financial debts* of the United States –
but to the fact that a nation that does whatever it wants
will one day find that other nations have a score to settle.

The gist of these taunts is that the plunderer will be plundered.
If you live by the sword, by the sword you will die.
With the same measure that you judge others, you also will be judged!

The purpose of this taunt is to encourage Israel.
Babylon will not triumph.
The gates of Hell will not prevail.

b. Woe to Him Who Seeks to Make His House Invulnerable (v9-11)

i. You Have Devised Shame for Your House

⁹ *“Woe to him who gets evil gain for his house,
to set his nest on high,
to be safe from the reach of harm!”*
¹⁰ *You have devised shame for your house
by cutting off many peoples;
you have forfeited your life.*
¹¹ *For the stone will cry out from the wall,
and the beam from the woodwork respond.*

The second woe then describes the one who tries to establish a safe haven from his enemies.
He uses the proceeds of his evil deeds to build an impregnable fortress –
“safe from the reach of harm” (literally, from the reach of “evil” or “disaster.”)
He gets “evil gain” for his house – but he wants to be out of the reach of “evil.”
(the same word is used both at the beginning and the end of the sentence.)

But, God says, in fact, he has only devised *shame* for his house.
You may have thought that by cutting people off, you have protected yourself –
but in fact, the result is that you have destroyed yourself.

How often have we sought a “safe place” by destroying others?
If we alienate others, and keep them far enough away from us,
then they cannot hurt us, right?
It's a basic human instinct – since the fall!

We don't want to get hurt, so we create an isolated “nest on high” –
where no one can reach us.

But whether we are cutting people off by killing them (like the Babylonians),
or simply by verbal assaults, or by withdrawing to “protect ourselves,”
we are preparing a harvest of judgment!

“For the stone will cry out from the wall, and the beam from the woodwork respond.”
When do stones and woodwork talk?
When a building is creaking and about to collapse,
the sounds of slipping and cracking can be quite alarming!
The very materials with which we have constructed our nest
will cry out against us.

But the righteous shall live by his faith.

The third woe then turns to the image of the city:

c. Woe to Him Who Builds a Town with Blood (v12-14)

i. The Earth Will Be Filled with the Knowledge of God’s Glory

¹² *“Woe to him who builds a town with blood
and founds a city on iniquity!*

¹³ *Behold, is it not from the LORD of hosts
that peoples labor merely for fire,
and nations weary themselves for nothing?*

Plainly, Habakkuk is interested in more than just “Babylon.”

The nations are wearying themselves for nothing – the peoples laboring merely for fire –

Why?

“is it not from the LORD of hosts?”

The futility of life is *from the LORD*.

That may sound strange.

But then again, Habakkuk has been asking, why are you sending the wicked against us?

Why do the Babylonians triumph?

Why do the wicked prosper?

Why are the gates of hell prevailing against your church?

And God’s answer is,

this is all part of my plan.

The wicked will pursue their ways – and weary themselves for nothing –

and in their efforts to devise ways to protect themselves from everything,

they are merely devising shame for themselves.

And the righteous will live by his faith.

Because

¹⁴ *For the earth will be filled
with the knowledge of the glory of the LORD
as the waters cover the sea.*

What a promise!

If you think that this is a challenge for us to believe today –
think about what sort of faith it would have taken in Habakkuk’s day!

David’s kingdom – *God’s kingdom* – had briefly spread to a few small nations around them.
But by Habakkuk’s day it had shrunk to a tiny corner of Israel
(less than a tenth of what it had been).
And within that tiny corner of Israel,
righteousness had perished.

How could anyone believe that the “earth will be filled
with the knowledge of the glory of the LORD as the waters cover the sea”?

This is why God had said to Habakkuk:
“the righteous will live by his faith”!

Of course this is hard to believe!
Because this is *not* what we see!

What we see is the fourth woe:

d. Woe to Him Who Makes His Neighbors Drunk (v15-17)

i. The Cup of the LORD Will Shame You

¹⁵ “*Woe to him who makes his neighbors drink—
you pour out your wrath and make them drunk,
in order to gaze at their nakedness!*”

This describes a bully who forces others into debauchery –
he cannot rest until he has drawn others into his depraved wickedness.

There are echoes here of Noah who became drunk,
and his son gazed on his father’s nakedness (Genesis 9:22),
or Lot’s daughters who made their father drunk so that they could lie with him (19:35)

The idea of “gazing on someone’s nakedness” includes the suggestion of sexual activity.
Alcohol lowers a person’s inhibitions.
If you get them drunk, you can get them to do things they might not do otherwise.
And God speaks of this as a form of assault – to “pour out *wrath*.”

If you think about the way that sex, alcohol, and violence are woven together in our culture,
you can see how deadly the combination can become.

It’s easy to point the finger at strip clubs, pornography and prostitution,
but the culture of modern entertainment –
whether sports, music, or movies –
has promoted the exploitation of others for our own personal pleasure.

But God says that those who seek to exploit others for their own personal pleasure

will likewise be put to shame.

¹⁶ *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 around to you,

and utter shame will come upon your glory!

¹⁷ *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 you have done to others will be done to you.

Babylon has used others for his own selfish pleasure.

Therefore Babylon will receive the same treatment in return.

How have you used others for your own selfish pleasure?

God says to be prepared to receive the same treatment in return.

And so Babylon must drink the cup of the LORD –

and utter shame will come upon your glory.

(Perhaps it is fitting, then, that it was at a feast, while King Belshazzar drank wine

from the cups of gold and silver from the temple in Jerusalem,

that the handwriting appeared on the wall

announcing the judgment upon Babylon – Daniel 5:4, 23)

It is also striking that Jesus will use this image of the cup regarding himself.

The cup of judgment will come around *to him*.

Jesus must drink the cup of God's wrath,

as he hangs on the cross, naked and put to shame before the nations.

Jesus drank the cup of God's wrath to the dregs –

and, as O. Palmer Robertson puts it,

“so became the Savior of all who would renounce their own pride and violence,

looking to him for salvation.” (p206)

And finally, the fifth woe focuses on the root of all the others:

idolatry.

e. Woe to Him Who Trusts in Idols (v18-20)

i. The LORD Is in His Holy Temple

¹⁸ *“What profit is an idol*

when its maker has shaped it,

a metal image, a teacher of lies?

For its maker trusts in his own creation

when he makes speechless idols!

¹⁹ *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.
²⁰ *But the LORD is in his holy temple;*
let all the earth keep silence before him.”

Notice how Habakkuk weaves together the language of idolatry with the language of speaking.

The idol is referred to in verse 18 as “a teacher of lies” –
but also as “speechless idols” and “a silent stone” (in verse 19).

Can this teacher of lies teach?
No, there is no breath (no *ruach*) at all in it.

The phrase “speechless idols” is a play on words that could be translated,
“dumb dummies” or “speechless nothings.”

In Hebrew it is, *elilim illemim*
[both words look and sound a lot like the Hebrew word for God –
but mean worthless and voiceless.]

We want our idols to speak!
We want our gods to give meaning and purpose to our lives.

Our habit is to turn from one idol to another.
When one object of our devotion fails us,
we simply manufacture another one!
But the LORD is in his holy temple.

The one God who does speak is the one we do not want to hear!

At the beginning of our passage we have visible words –
a vision written down – a vision that does not lie.
At the end of our passage we have all the earth silent before God.
[and silent idols of stone teaching lies!]

But God calls Habakkuk –
and he calls us – to “hush”
indeed, he calls all the earth to “keep silence before him.”

The LORD is in his holy temple.

It is really interesting to think about Jesus in Matthew 23.
In Matthew 23 Jesus announces seven woes on the scribes and Pharisees.
These seven woes announce that the Law is paralyzed,
and justice goes forth perverted.
These seven woes announce that the scribes and Pharisees
are guilty of many of the sins of Babylon.

And then, in Matthew 24, Jesus foretells the destruction of the temple.

Andy Deliyannides pointed out to me that the parallel passage in Mark 13 concludes with a command to “watch” (like Habakkuk on the watchtower) – and, of course, both Matthew and Mark speak of the lesson of the fig tree – a significant image from Habakkuk 3.

Even Jerusalem can become Babylon!

This is why we need to remember that “the just shall live by faith.”

But as the Commentator has said:

Before the statement “the just shall live by faith” is true of any man, it is true of Christ. When we say that we are justified by faith, we could say that we put our faith in Christ’s faithfulness. For Christ’s faithfulness unto death is the very eschatological act on which the hopes of the ages are pinned and in which all our expectations are fulfilled. For in the moment of His death, God visited upon Christ a judgment more vast and horrifying than all the host of Babylon and Assyria, Egypt and Persia, the judgment that should have been reserved for us, who, being dead in our sins, nailed Jesus to the cross, seemingly apostate beyond hope. And yet beyond all human understanding, by God’s mercy, the just shall live by faith. The revelation that God promised to Habakkuk, though it has lingered, has been revealed to us clearly in these last days, in Christ. It is none other than the gospel: “That if you confess with your mouth, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved” (Rom 10:9). The just shall live by faith. This is the wisdom that Habakkuk saw only darkly as he watched the horizon, knowing what must come, and he quieted himself with it. How much more should we, who were far off from God, facing the terrible judgment that is still to come— how much more should we cling to this truth. There is a sense of urgency about faith; it cannot be deferred. For faith understands that there is nothing between us and terrible judgment but that Christ has interposed Himself in His faithful service as the Son. (Andy Deliyannides, Habakkuk on the Watchtower)

The LORD is in his holy temple, let all the earth be silent before him.

Let us pray!