

Daily Devotions Monday 27th July

Habakkuk 2 vs 9-11

On our recent visit to the Lakes we stayed close to Bassenthwaite Lake. At the northern end is an Osprey nest on top of a long pole that sticks up out of the water. No doubt the Osprey mum and dad feel confident about the security of the nest and that they are totally safe from any threat to their well-being.

The Babylonians created similar security for themselves by conquering nations around them and therefore creating a buffer zone against any threats. They considered themselves totally in control and immune from any disasters.

People today are the same. We do all we can to protect ourselves from threats to our wealth, health, families, careers, and our futures. But can we really rely on those material things that we have built our lives on? 'The stones of the wall will cry out'. (v 11). The very things we consider so important will eventually speak to us of their meaninglessness.

Interestingly, King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon, built a palace with walls that were 41 metres thick!! Each stone of his wall had his name inscribed on it. Arrogant and invincible? But God says to him, 'you have forfeited your life'. Or as Jesus puts it in Mark 8v36, 'What good is it for a man to gain the world, yet forfeit his soul.'

A billionaire was reported to have said this from his death bed, 'Only now do I understand that once you accumulate enough money for the rest of your life, you have to pursue objectives that are not related to wealth!'

Steve Jobs, the multi billionaire man behind Apple said before his death, 'Almost everything - all external expectations, all pride, all fear of embarrassment or failure - these things just fall away in the face of death leaving only what is truly important.'

His last words as he woke temporarily from unconsciousness and looked at his sister, children and life partner Laurene were, 'Oh wow, oh wow, oh wow!'

The message in Habakkuk and for us is plain. One day we will die and then judgement will come.

How are we cultivating a sense of security around us? Cash in the bank, a pension plan, family close by, a comfortable house? While there is nothing wrong with these things, putting our trust in them at the expense of trust in God will lull us into a false sense of security with eternal consequences.

Daily Devotions Tuesday 28th July

Habakkuk 2 vs 12-14

Nebuchadnezzar would have built himself a fine palace. Thick walls, decorative stone and woodwork, gold, silver etc. and he would have surrounded himself with the best of everything since he was king of the greatest nation on earth!

What would have been so impressive to any passerby was seen differently through the eyes of God. He saw the bloodshed, oppression and robbery that had gone on to make such buildings possible.

The 'woe' of these verses was to remind the Babylonians of the futility of all their hard work. They had exhausted themselves for nothing.

Eventually as predicted also in Jeremiah 51v58, the thick walls would be levelled and the gates set on fire. Nebuchadnezzar's palace would go up in a puff of smoke and all the work would have been in vain.

The challenge for us is picked up by Paul in his letter to the Corinthians. He speaks of our lives being built on the sure foundation of Jesus Christ but warns that we should not continue to spend our lives building anything that can be destroyed by fire! 'If what he has built survives (the fire), then he will receive his reward.' (1 Cor 3v14)

'Unless the Lord builds the house, it's builders labour in vain' (Psalm 127 v1). God is not interested in us building up anything that is temporary (the material) but he wants us to use our time, talents and gifts to build something that will last for eternity (the spiritual).

As I'm writing this, I'm caused to think of all the 'building' work Lynda has been involved in over the last 30 years of Girl's Brigades. All the moral and spiritual teaching and the constant example of love and kindness shown to generations of girls.

That's building for eternity!

The last verse brings a little light to this dark woe. The example of water covering the sea and the earth being filled gives us an idea of just how complete the knowledge of God's glory will be. It won't just be the Babylonians who will see God for who he is but so will everyone who has lived, is living or will live in the future!

When this happens our earthly lives and what they have all been about will be put into perspective against the backdrop of God's glory!

It's never too late to start building!

Daily Devotions Wednesday 29th July

Habakkuk 2 vs 15-17

In this woe, Habakkuk laments that not only were the Babylonians engaged in wickedness but were also seducing their neighbours into sin. In this case by using alcohol to get them drunk then to take advantage of them.

This illustrates a broader point about how the ungodly can have little respect for human dignity. They can treat people as objects to be manipulated and exploited to achieve their own selfish purposes. The purveyors of pornography, gambling and drugs are present day examples.

In the same pattern as with previous woes, God says the tables will be turned. The punishment will match the crime. The shame they brought on others will be brought on them. The intoxicator will become the intoxicated. (v16)

No doubt when Belshazzar asked for the gold and silver goblets taken from the temple in Jerusalem to add to his feasting (Dan 5 v 2), he would never realise the symbolism used here when Hab speaks of the cup of God's right hand. As he drank wine from the goblets, he would give no thought to the cup of wrath that was coming round to him!

The 'cup' is a metaphor for the wrath of God's judgement. (Ps 75 v8, Is 51 v22, Jer 25 v15) For these ungodly Babylonians this was going to mean disgrace, being overwhelmed and terrified. (v17)

The truth of the Bible is that the same fate would await all the ungodly at God's judgement were it not for the fact that, 'Christ died for the ungodly'. (Ro 5 v6)

In the garden of Gethsemane Jesus was in anguish as he awaited his trial and execution. He would know all the Old Testament references to the cup of wrath and he says to God, 'Father, if you are willing take this cup from me, yet not my will, but yours be done.' (Luke 22 v42)

He drank the cup and drank it to the dregs (see Ps 75 v 8). He bore our sin and took our judgement.

Praise God that because he drank, we won't hear God's woes if we truly believe in Christ.

Daily devotions Thursday 30th July

Habakkuk 2 vs 18-20

The last of the 5 woes is to condemn idolatry. Idolatry is giving worth to created things rather than the creator. Hab. points out how pointless it is to search for answers in things that cannot speak or to believe false information that we may think has come from what we look to for help.

We often think of pagans worshipping carved poles, stones or statues when we think of idol worship. It's a jump in our thinking to see that it is also true of those who look for guidance to astrology, Ouija boards or New Age superstitions. We all have a built in need to worship (i.e. give worth to something). It's what motivates us. Commonly it will be wealth, health, power, ambition or pleasure. These become idols when they become more important than worshipping God (which, incidentally, is so much more than just singing to him).

The bigger jump in our thinking is to realise that the most powerful idol in our lives is, 'self'. It's a difficult jump because it's how we are brought up. We are surrounded by it and it has become normal in contemporary society. Consider self-help, self-esteem, self-confidence, self-realisation, mental health, well-being, identity, making the best of oneself, our rights!! All have self at the core!

Honest reflection will reveal just how much this affects our way of life. If it's greater than the effect of God in our lives then we too are guilty of idolatry!

God issues no punishment for this woe but makes it very clear how pointless it is.

John the Baptist was a very godly man yet still accepted his need to deal with self. He said, 'He must become greater; I must become less'. (John 3 v30)

Verse 20 is a fitting climax to the 5 woes and a transition to chapter 30. Its simplicity belies the depth of what it portrays.

- God in his temple. Remember Ezekiel's vision. God on his throne in a position of ultimate authority over all of his creation which he rules and sustains. He started creation and will end it. He is in control and can be relied upon.
- Be silent. This is a call for reverence. A call to stop boasting of our independence, stop arguing and debating and show humble submission to God. God created us for a relationship with himself, not idols of our own making.

Are we ever 'silent' before God in this way? In silence we are better able to listen! Two ears and only one mouth was a mantra I had at school!

As the Tremeloes once sang, 'Silence is golden'

Daily devotions Friday 31st July

Habakkuk 3 vs 1-2

Not much makes me smile when I get up in the mornings but one thing that used to was when I came downstairs to hear one of our boys singing in the shower. We often sing when we are happy. It made me happy to know he was happy.

After all the complaints and worry that has gone before, Hab. has heard God's reply and now breaks out in song. This prayer was a song. It was sung accompanied by stringed instruments (v19). The word 'selah' denotes a musical break (vs 3, 9 and 13). The word 'shigionoth' is a musical term calling for a strong up tempo rhythm. In other words not a dirge but a happy song.

There has been much in the media during lockdown about the positive effect of singing on our mental health with many people organising 'zoom choirs'. But this song comes from within. It comes from a state of mental well-being and a lack of anxiety! Hab. has changed.

I know many of us feel this peace and joy and it often inspires to sing. On Sunday we sang, 'I stand, I stand in awe of you'. After all that Hab. has heard from God he reflects on the facts. He recognises all that God has done and said is totally just. He sees God in his sovereign majesty and knows that he is in control and has a plan. The result is he sings, 'I stand in awe of you'.

Hab. was in awe of God's deeds. He didn't have the full picture like we do. When we think back about what God has done not just in our own lives but in history are we equally in awe? When we think of the infallible nature of salvation through Christ's love for us are we in awe? When we think of what God will do in the future are we in awe?

One of Hess's favourite choruses is,

'Our God is an awesome God
He reigns from heaven above
With wisdom power and love
Our God is an awesome God'.

Having written this I've now got the urge to get out the stringed instrument and belt out the song.

(Why has Lynda just run up the garden??!!)

Daily Devotions Saturday 1st August

Habakkuk 3 vs 1-2

Reading these verses makes me wonder about the topics that dominate my prayer life. Is it just like a shopping list? Praying for healing for the sick or for the material needs of ourselves and others?

I am challenged to pray more like Habakkuk did. He asked God to perform the powerful work he'd done in the past in his present day times. He wants God to renew his work and fulfil his promises in 'his day'.

We actually often pray this without giving much thought to it. 'Thy Kingdom come, thy will be done!'

The church is growing rapidly in the southern hemisphere where suffering, poverty and the daily challenges of living make people much more dependent on God than we are in the wealthy western world. They have a fervent prayer life and there is probably a correlation between this and the blessings they receive.

In the Old Testament there are more than 20 words for God's wrath and over 580 references to God acting in wrath! We often gloss over God's wrath to make Christianity more palatable to the unsaved. However, in order to be saved, we have to know what we are being saved from. The truth of the gospel is that because of our sin we face God's wrath. This will ultimately work itself out as an eternity in hell. The only way to be saved from this is true belief in the saving work of Jesus Christ.

God's wrath also gives us confidence that justice will be meted out on the unrepentant wicked. That said, we also would cry out to God that he would be merciful. Hab. had discovered the reality of God's judgement on the sins of his people but he pleads for God's mercy. Once again this prayer is a model for our prayers!

I think a good definition of prayer is, 'pleading God's character in God's presence.' Hab. says in effect, be true to your character, be merciful. As with Habakkuk our prayers should focus more on God achieving his purposes with his creation, on the works he has already accomplished and to ask him to be true to his just, compassionate, forgiving and holy nature.

The 4 words that end verse 2 encapsulate the whole of God's dealing with mankind.

Sin is an affront to God's holy nature and he is totally just in condemning us while we are happy to continue in it. But God has been merciful in providing his son to bear the wrath of God that is rightfully ours. In his wrath he has been merciful.

Praise God that we who truly believe continue to receive God's mercy despite our ongoing failure to conquer the sin in our lives.