

## March 15 Lesson 3 (NIV)

### CONSEQUENCES FOR INJUSTICE

DEVOTIONAL READING: Psalm 130

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE: Habakkuk 2

#### HABAKKUK 2:6–14

- <sup>6</sup> “Will not all of them taunt him with ridicule and scorn, saying,  
‘Woe to him who piles up stolen goods  
and makes himself wealthy by extortion!  
How long must this go on?’
- <sup>7</sup> Will not your creditors suddenly arise?  
Will they not wake up and make you tremble?  
Then you will become their prey.
- <sup>8</sup> Because you have plundered many nations,  
the peoples who are left will plunder you.  
For you have shed human blood;  
you have destroyed lands and cities and everyone in them.
- <sup>9</sup> Woe to him who builds his house by unjust gain,  
setting his nest on high  
to escape the clutches of ruin!
- <sup>10</sup> You have plotted the ruin of many peoples,  
shaming your own house and forfeiting your life.
- <sup>11</sup> The stones of the wall will cry out,  
and the beams of the woodwork will echo it.
- <sup>12</sup> Woe to him who builds a city with bloodshed  
and establishes a town by injustice!
- <sup>13</sup> Has not the LORD Almighty determined  
that the people’s labor is only fuel for the fire,  
that the nations exhaust themselves for nothing?
- <sup>14</sup> For the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the LORD  
as the waters cover the sea.”

#### KEY VERSE

*Woe to him who builds a city with bloodshed and establishes a town by injustice!* —Habakkuk 2:12

# JUSTICE AND THE PROPHETS

## Unit 1: God Requires Justice

LESSONS 1–5

### LESSON OUTLINE

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- A. Gone with the Fire
- B. Lesson Context
- I. First Woe (HABAKKUK 2:6–8)
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  - B. Unexpected Punishment (vv. 7, 8)
    - To Rob a Thief*
- II. Second Woe (HABAKKUK 2:9–11)
  - A. Built to Escape Evil (vv. 9, 10)
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- III. Third Woe (HABAKKUK 2:12–14)
  - A. Fiendish Cities (v. 12)
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- A. Justice for All
- B. Prayer
- C. Thought to Remember

### HOW TO SAY IT

Babylonians Bab-ih-low-nee-unz.

Jehoiachin Jeh-hoy-uh-kin.

Edom *Ee*-dum.

Habakkuk Huh-back-kuk.

Obadiah O-buh-dye-uh.

seraphims *sair*-uh-fim.

Zechariah Zek-uh-rye-uh.

### Introduction

## A. Gone with the Fire

One of the most riveting scenes in the classic movie *Gone with the Wind* is the burning of Atlanta. The scene is incredible to watch—the intensity of the flames, the collapse of all the buildings. As the city burns, Rhett Butler says to Scarlett O’Hara, “There goes the last of the Old South.” Everything they had amassed was gone with the fire.

The destruction of all that Judah had amassed took several years to accomplish. However, when God had finished with his discipline of the people, the old Judah was just as surely gone.

## B. Lesson Context

Today’s lesson is taken once again from the writings of the prophet Habakkuk (see lesson 2). The Lesson Context from last week’s study therefore applies, and so that material need not be repeated here. Even so, more can be said. Habakkuk 2 begins with Habakkuk’s description of himself standing watch on a tower to wait for the Lord’s response to his objections (Habakkuk 2:1). The Lord tells Habakkuk to record on tablets the “revelation” he is about to receive so that a messenger can deliver it (2:2). Though the prophecy could be read and understood easily, it was ambiguous regarding its timing. But when the time came, events unfolded quickly (2:3).

The Lord also described the lawless, arrogant attitude and lifestyle of the typical Babylonian leader (Habakkuk 2:4, 5). In this way, God emphasized that he was not unaware of their faults; nevertheless, he had work for them to do.

## I. First Woe

(HABAKKUK 2:6–8)

### A. Unbridled Greed (v. 6)

#### 6a. “Will not all of them taunt him with ridicule and scorn, saying,

*Him* refers to the Babylonian Empire, personified as a single representative person. The word *them* refers to nations and people who are the victims of the Babylonians’ aggression and brutality (Habakkuk 2:5). The Babylonians will experience an unpleasant role reversal: the people they victimize will be in a position to *ridicule* them (see also Isaiah 23:13).

The Hebrew word translated *taunt* can also be rendered “proverb” (examples: 1 Kings 4:32; Proverbs 1:1; Ezekiel 12:22). In certain contexts like this one, the word can take on negative overtones, such as “byword” (example: Psalm 44:14). In context, Habakkuk describes a mocking kind of speech, perhaps similar to what is referred to today as trash talk. It is only fitting that such language be directed toward the Babylonians, a people who have become renowned for ravaging other peoples and their lands and possessions.

#### 6b. “‘Woe to him who piles up stolen goods

*Woe* introduces judgment (Amos 5:18; see lesson 1). This particular woe is the first of five within Habakkuk 2 (see also Habakkuk 2:9, 12, 15, and 19). The judgment introduced is directed against the one who takes what is not his, a clear violation of Israel’s eighth commandment (Exodus 20:15).

We do well to note that the Babylonians never pledged faithfulness to a covenant with God. Though they have their own laws that prohibit stealing and other offenses, they are not bound by

the Ten Commandments in the same way that the Israelites are. Even so, the Babylonians still violate what they know to be right (compare Romans 2:14, 15). The Babylonians simply do not care about theft when conquered people are concerned. The wealth of weaker nations is theirs for the taking.

**6c. “and makes himself wealthy by extortion! How long must this go on?”**

The phrase *makes himself wealthy by extortion* probably is an idiom that implies involvement in threats of violence. Such a person is part of a group whose members are as “thick as thieves.” Like any thief or extortionist, the Babylonians’ trade practices burden their trade partners and take no concern for the needs of others. Habakkuk points out that even the Babylonians’ normal legal practices are unethical and immoral.

The prophet himself has already asked the question *how long?* (Habakkuk 1:2; see lesson 2). Here the question is a part of the taunt that the people of the earth direct against the seemingly invincible Babylonians.

## **B. Unexpected Punishment (vv. 7, 8)**

**7a. “Will not your creditors suddenly arise? Will they not wake up and make you tremble?”**

The word *creditors* refers to those in the previous verse whose possessions have been unjustly seized by the Babylonians. The vagueness of this word could refer to many different groups of people since Babylon oppresses many different nations. This prophecy therefore expresses God’s concern not only for Judah but for all who suffer because of Babylon. Eventually, however, the Babylonians will be on the receiving end of hostile treatment.

Although this verse is addressed to *you*—the Babylonians—this text may never be read by any of them. Even if they do read it, they are not the intended audience. Judah remains Habakkuk’s focus. The prophecy’s intent is to reassure Judah that the people’s oppressors will not always have the upper hand.

The role reversal pictured will be sudden and unexpected. This agrees with the Lord’s earlier word that when the fulfillment of the prophet’s “revelation” occurs, it will come without delay (Habakkuk 2:3). God says that the problem will not continue indefinitely. The Babylonians will receive their just deserts. The tables will be turned when the abuser becomes the abused.

The language anticipates the description of the suddenness of Jesus’ return. People will be feeling quite comfortable and at ease when sudden destruction comes—destruction they cannot escape (1 Thessalonians 5:1–3).

**7b. “Then you will become their prey.”**

This idea builds on the previous one. The word translated *prey* refers to the spoils of victory (compare the translation of the same word in Isaiah 42:24). The Babylonians take an abundance of spoils from those they conquer. But soon it will be their turn to experience the trauma of powerlessness in the face of a stronger foe (compare Proverbs 29:1; Ezekiel 39:10; Zechariah 2:8, 9). Indeed, Babylon will fall to the Persians in 539 BC (see 2 Chronicles 36:20).

**8. “Because you have plundered many nations, the people who are left will plunder you. For you have shed human blood; you have destroyed lands and cities and everyone in them.”**

This verse again emphasizes the reversal of fortunes that the Babylonians will suffer. Those who have suffered because of the Babylonians’ cruelty will no doubt take pleasure in gaining the

upper hand on their tormenter. Obadiah's rebuke of Edom also applies to Babylon: "As you have done, it will be done to you" (Obadiah 15; compare Isaiah 33:1; Habakkuk 2:17; Galatians 6:7).

Condemning the Babylonians for destroying both *lands and cities* is a way of holding them accountable for the mistreatment that happens throughout every nation where they hold power (compare Jeremiah 50:17, 18). The note of violence against *everyone in them* further emphasizes the totality of Babylonian guilt. They have not harmed just one city or one group of people; everyone who deals with Babylon suffers.

## **II. Second Woe** **(HABAKKUK 2:9–11)**

### **A. Built to Escape Evil (vv. 9, 10)**

#### **9. "Woe to him who builds his house by unjust gain, setting his nest on high to escape the clutches of ruin!"**

This is the second of the woes uttered by Habakkuk in our lesson text. It calls attention to the Babylonians' breaking of the tenth commandment by their *unjust gain* brought on by covetous desire (compare Exodus 20:17; see on Habakkuk 2:6b, above). Such a person *builds his house* with self-centered pride (compare Jeremiah 22:13). Habakkuk compares him to a bird that sets its *nest on high* in order to escape potential threats. The higher the structure, the more secure is the resident from *ruin* or harm—or so he thinks (contrast Isaiah 10:12–14). This person seeks to remove himself or herself from the problems of society by residing above it all. This person wants to live in the fortress of an enclave of wealth, which is untouched by the poor and needy.

The prophet's language echoes again what the prophet Obadiah says of the arrogance of the people of Edom. They have built their dwellings in "the clefts of the rocks," and they feel safe from any danger (Obadiah 3). But the Lord says, "Though you soar like the eagle and make your nest among the stars, from there I will bring you down" (v. 4).

#### **10. "You have plotted the ruin of many peoples, shaming your own house and forfeiting your life."**

The Lord highlights the violence wrought by the Babylonians against *many peoples*. The Babylonians view what they do as a legitimate expression of their power and dominance. The plotting of the *ruin* of these people described here may refer to the way in which the Babylonians abuse helpless people and take their goods in the process of constructing their own lavish homes.

According to the Babylonians' worldview, "might makes right." But God sees their actions for what they really are: a sin against him and against themselves (compare Jeremiah 26:19; Habakkuk 2:16, not in our text). From the safety of a fortress-home, the greedy person continues to oppress the poor. The sin is so serious that God says this person has shamed his *own house*, referring to the inner person. Therefore, that person's *life* is now forfeit; the God of justice will respond with wrath.

### **B. Buildings Protest Evil (v. 11)**

#### **11. "The stones of the wall will cry out, and the beams of the woodwork will echo it."**

We sometimes say, “If these walls could talk.” Oh, the stories an old house could tell! The aforementioned house has been constructed with suspect motives and methods. Habakkuk pictures the *stones* and wooden *beams* crying out against their selfish builders (compare Joshua 24:27; Luke 19:40). The house may be solid structurally and made of the highest quality materials, but it will not be able to withstand the Lord’s judgment.

Sadly, the Babylonians are not alone in their repulsive building practices. The prophet Jeremiah, a contemporary of Habakkuk, speaks of how King Jehoiachin of Judah has constructed his house unrighteously. He has done so by withholding fair wages from those who did the work (Jeremiah 22:13). A king who rules the Lord’s covenant people should possess an understanding of what he requires (Deuteronomy 17:18–20). But this king has acted no better than the Babylonians.

For this reason, Jehoiachin and his people will find themselves in Babylonian captivity (Jeremiah 22:25–27). This will happen even though the Babylonians overall are arguably more wicked than the people of Judah.

### **III. Third Woe** **(HABAKKUK 2:12–14)**

#### **A. Fiendish Cities (v. 12)**

##### **12. “Woe to him who builds a city with bloodshed and establishes a town by injustice!”**

Habakkuk now presents his third *woe* against the Babylonians. This woe builds on the previous two. The prophet pronounces judgment on the Babylonians for the heartless way in which they have built entire towns and cities. Accusing them of building *a city with bloodshed* does not mean that blood is literally a building material. Instead, the accusation focuses on the means by which the people came to build. In this case, violence and *injustice* account for the prosperity that built the cities (compare Ezekiel 22:2). Spilled blood will cry out like the stones and beams in Habakkuk 2:11 (above), and it will cry out for the Lord’s vengeance, even as Abel’s blood cried out from the ground to indict his brother Cain (Genesis 4:10).

Once more the Babylonians are not alone in their guilt for such deplorable actions. The leaders in Jerusalem, the site of Solomon’s great temple, built that city using the same resources highlighted by Habakkuk: *bloodshed* and *injustice* (Micah 3:9, 10; see lesson 4).

#### **B. Futile Human Efforts (v. 13)**

##### **13. “Has not the LORD Almighty determined that the people’s labor is only fuel for the fire, that the nations exhaust themselves for nothing?”**

Thus far in this series of charges directed against the Babylonians, the Lord’s name has not been mentioned. Now it becomes explicit that he is the one who will hold these people accountable for their actions. His intention is that all that the Babylonians have constructed—the houses and towns of which they are so excessively proud—will be cast into the *fire* (compare Isaiah 50:11). The builders are willing to *exhaust themselves* as they pour themselves into their work, since they are certain that what they do will last far into the future. But God says that their work will come to *nothing*.

Jeremiah uses language very similar to Habakkuk’s as part of an extensive message of judgment on Babylon (see Jeremiah 50; 51). The walls and gates of Babylon will be destroyed by

fire (51:58). Centuries later, the apostle Peter will write of a similar conflagration to occur on the day of the Lord, the day when Jesus returns (2 Peter 3:10).

### **C. Future Divine Plan (v. 14)**

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

Like many passages from the prophets, the predictions of doom and gloom are not the last word. Habakkuk ends this section with a word of hope, looking forward to a time when there will be universal acknowledgment of the Lord God.

The prophet Isaiah, whose ministry began well before Habakkuk’s, also spoke of a global *knowledge of the glory of the Lord*, even using the same water comparison that Habakkuk does (Isaiah 11:9). All people will be engulfed by this spiritual deluge. There will be no holdouts who continue to deny the greatness and majesty of the Lord.

People such as the Babylonians, who view themselves as invincible, will find themselves brought to their knees before almighty God. They will learn what real glory is (compare Exodus 16:6, 7). It is not found in the accomplishments of empires such as Babylon, which are destined for the fire as Habakkuk has just declared. Rather, it is found in the worldwide recognition that the Lord reigns supreme as “all in all” (1 Corinthians 15:28).

It is true, as the seraphim proclaimed to Isaiah during his prophetic call, that even now “the whole earth is full of [God’s] glory” (Isaiah 6:3; see also Numbers 14:21). But the knowledge or recognition of that glory is something that proud, defiant individuals and nations refuse to acknowledge. Individuals see evidence of that glory every day, but will not humble themselves in worship to the source, the creator God.

But a day is coming when “every knee should bow ... and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father” (Philippians 2:10, 11; compare Isaiah 45:23). Habakkuk sees that day of global glory coming. The administration of final judgment at the end of time when Jesus returns may well be part of what Habakkuk meant when he declared that the whole earth will fully know the glory of the Lord. True justice carried out by an all-wise God will be something glorious indeed!

In the last chapter of his book, Habakkuk looks forward to a time when God’s glory will cover the heavens and the earth will be filled with his praise (Habakkuk 3:3). This promise comforted the suffering saints of Habakkuk’s day and gives hope to Christians today. Centuries after Habakkuk, the apostle Peter offered similar hope when he wrote that we “participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed” (1 Peter 4:13).

## **Conclusion**

### **A. Justice for All**

What *Gone with the Wind* so dramatically portrayed about the 1864 burning of Atlanta is what Habakkuk said awaited the Babylonians. All their possessions would be fuel for the fire (Habakkuk 2:13). This is in fact the future that awaits the entire world (again, 2 Peter 3:10). Today’s lesson reminds us that the Lord will make certain that justice is carried out against evildoers.

“Justice for all” is very easy to say and desire. But putting hands and feet to this desire is quite another matter. Cries for justice echo throughout every society. Acts of violence against individuals or groups are followed by demands that justice be served and those responsible for the violence be punished. Systems that methodically keep people in positions to be mistreated are protested because they perpetuate injustice—sometimes on a massive scale. The whole world longs for justice.

Today’s study from Habakkuk, along with the testimony of Scripture as a whole, assures us that God will right all wrongs committed by human beings. Sinners may escape the punishment required by human law, but they cannot dodge Heaven’s law so cleverly.

### **B. Prayer**

Father, may the works of our hands anticipate the day when the earth will know your glory. We pray in Jesus’ name. Amen.

### **C. Thought to Remember**

The Lord, the righteous judge, makes certain that justice prevails.<sup>1</sup>