

THE BOOK OF HABAKKUK

“Woe to the Covetous”

Habakkuk 2:9-11

Review

1. The international scene is well known. At the expense of Babylon, Egypt, and Israel, Assyria had gained the place of prominence.
2. In part, Israel was overrun because of her sins. She was unresponsive to God (1:2), unrelenting in sin (1:3) and uncontrollable in society (1:4). As a response, God brought the Assyrians to punish her (1:5-10). Regretfully, the Assyrians felt their own gods had provided their victories (1:11).
3. The situation with sinful Assyria being allowed to overpower God’s people, the prophet Habakkuk was perplexed (1:12-17). He was sure Israel would not succumb totally (1:12), but God told him to quietly wait in faith for the solution to his perplexity (2:1-4).
4. Meanwhile, Assyria, addicted to wine and pride (2:5) seemed to prosper. But God promised a divine intervention (2:6) which was articulated in a series of “woes.” The fivefold woe consists of five strophes and each strophe contains three verses:
 - a. Woe #1 refers to rapacity and plundering of the Chaldeans (vv. 6-8).
 - b. Woe #2 refers to the efforts by the Chaldeans to establish his dynasty by force and cunning (vv. 9-11).
 - c. Woe #3 refers to Assyrian’s wicked ways to build (vv. 12-14).
 - d. Woe #4 refers to the scandalous treatment of subdued nations by the Chaldeans.
 - e. Woe #5 refers to the absurd idolatry of the Assyrians.

N.B. The first and fourth strophes end with the same refrain while the third and fifth end with a promise which supports the woes (vv. 14, 20).

5. Study now the specifics of the second woe:

- a. Assyrian GREED v. 5

- 1) Stated

The “woe” is right at the outset of the verse. It is addressed to “him” who covets. This is a word which refers to those who rob and defraud others by extortion and oppression. The verb actually means to cut out, tear in pieces, plunder, spoil, be greedy after gain. It is used of God (Isa. 10:12; 38:12).

- 2) Detailed

“Evil covetousness” speaks of unjust gain from bribe, wicked gain (cf. 1 Sam. 8:3). Whatever, it comes from unlawful means (Isa. 57:17) and is sinful covetousness.

- 3) Purposed

- a) For his house. This is not some private residence, but rather the Assyrian empire and dynasty.

- b) For his power. Like an eagle who puts his nest high in the air to protect it against destruction, so the Assyrian built formidable buildings under Nebuchadnezzar so as

to fortify his city and palaces (cf. Herodian, Mazada).

- c) For his safety. The Hebrew verb here means to snatch away, preserve, save. The thought is that the greed is all for self preservation. It is safety from calamity.

N.B. Do not forget that God has pronounced a “woe” on the sort of behavior described in this verse!

- b. Assyrian SHAME v. 10

- 1) Devised

The verb “consult” means to take counsel, purpose, determine. In this context it probably means to devise. Thus, Assyria prepared, by its own counsel, shame, i.e. disgrace, ignominy, confusion. Now that is something! The verse, therefore, proves that the Assyrians exposed their great miscalculation and mistake. The reverse will take place of what had been planned (v. 9).

- 2) Explained

- 1) Assyrian house. This is one area of shame -- the imperial family!

- 2) Assyrian enemies. This is another area of shame -- the cutting off of many peoples.

- 3) Received

This is the boomerang of the verse. What was intended for others’ suffering, comes back to the Assyrian “soul.” What the Assyrians did turns out to throw away their own soul (cf. Haman in Esther). The participle refers to the present time, but its action is completed in the future. What a verse! All the Assyrians do comes right back on themselves -- their own soul. That is a “woe.”

- c. Assyrian OUTCRY v. 11

Here is the reason for the destruction announced in v. 10 and the woe of v. 9. Stones and beams testify against the builder. They will cry out against the crimes committed by the Assyrians in his building (v. 9). They cry out for revenge because the materials were supplied by robbery. The house of such a robber will not endure. The outside stone wall and the inside rafters answer to one another in an outcry of “woe.”

Conclusion All right, Habakkuk gets a word from the Lord as to how He deals with a wicked nation. But do not let it rest there. Covetousness is one of the crying sins of today.

It is the unsatisfied craving of the heart for more than God has been pleased to give. Scripture says it is idolatry (Col. 3:5). Therefore, the man who puts gain between his soul and God is an idolater! Anything that turns our hearts from occupation with Him is an idol.

Test yourself now! Then make sure you are content with what God has given (cf. Phil 4:11; 1 Tim. 6:8; Heb. 13:5). Amen.

NOTE: Josephus comments on Nebchadnezzar’s building “. . . he adorned the temple of Belus, and the other temples, after an elegant manner, out of the spoils he had taken in this war. . . . So when he had thus fortified the city with walls, after an excellent manner, and had adorned the gates magnificently, he added a new palace to that which his father had dwelt in, and this close by it also, and that more eminent in its height, and in its great splendour.” (Antiquities I, 19, p. 867).