

Consequences for Injustice

Bible Background • HABAKKUK 2 | Printed Text • HABAKKUK 2:6-14

Devotional Reading • PSALM 130

Aim for Change

By the end of the lesson, we will: RECOGNIZE why injustice will be punished, APPRECIATE the fairness of divine punishment of injustice, and DECIDE to follow God's commandment to act with justice.

In Focus

Terri struggled to keep her car on the road as she sped home from the office. After 13 years with the school district, the administrators had decided to eliminate her position. As Terri drove, she thought about the hundreds of overtime hours she had freely given. Worst of all was that two of the special education people, Lauren and Crystal, were remaining after Terri had covered for both of them countless times. Yet the district cut her job. Since her husband's death, Terri was the sole supporter of their three kids. She related the whole story to her friend Karla over coffee. Karla listened patiently through the long, angry rant. "What do you think of that?" Terri finally asked. "Terri," Karla softly began. "Do you think God doesn't know all of this already? Do you think He's not watching you?" Karla held Terri's hand. "Be patient. He will protect you, and He will bring justice to them. Just watch!" Just as Terri's severance pay was going to end, she was hired by a Christian charity at a higher salary than her last job. The next month, Terri turned on her computer to check the news, and the first headline said that her former district supervisor and several staff were under investigation for fiscal mismanagement. Terri shook her head and said, "Won't He do it?"

Why do you think God delays justice? Where have you seen delayed justice in your life?

Keep in Mind

"What sorrow awaits you who build cities with money gained through murder and corruption!" (Habakkuk 2:12, NLT).

Words You Should Know

A. Taunting (v. 6) melitsah (Heb.) — A mocking poem or satirical song

B. Vex (v. 7) zua' (Heb.) — To make tremble and shake.

Say It Correctly

Chaldeans. kal-DEE-ans.

Pre-exilic. PREE-ex-ILL-ic.

KJV

Habakkuk 2:6 Shall not all these take up a parable against him, and a taunting proverb against him, and say, Woe to him that increaseth that which is not his! how long? and to him that ladeth himself with thick clay!
7 Shall they not rise up suddenly that shall bite thee, and awake that shall vex thee, and thou shalt be for booties unto them?
8 Because thou hast spoiled many nations, all the remnant of the people shall spoil thee; because of men's blood, and for the violence of the land, of the city, and of all that dwell therein.
9 Woe to him that coveteth an evil covetousness to his house, that he may set his nest on high, that he may be delivered from the power of evil!
10 Thou hast consulted shame to thy house by cutting off many people, and hast sinned against thy soul.
11 For the stone shall cry out of the wall, and the beam out of the timber shall answer it.
12 Woe to him that buildeth a town with blood, and stablisheth a city by iniquity!
13 Behold, is it not of the Lord of hosts that the people shall labour in the very fire, and the people shall weary themselves for very vanity?
14 For the earth shall be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea.

NLT

Habakkuk 2:6 “But soon their captives will taunt them. They will mock them, saying, ‘What sorrow awaits you thieves! Now you will get what you deserve! You’ve become rich by extortion, but how much longer can this go on?’
7 Suddenly, your debtors will take action. They will turn on you and take all you have, while you stand trembling and helpless.
8 Because you have plundered many nations, now all the survivors will plunder you. You committed murder throughout the countryside and filled the towns with violence.
9 “What sorrow awaits you who build big houses with money gained dishonestly! You believe your wealth will buy security, putting your family’s nest beyond the reach of danger.
10 But by the murders you committed, you have shamed your name and forfeited your lives.
11 The very stones in the walls cry out against you, and the beams in the ceilings echo the complaint.
12 “What sorrow awaits you who build cities with money gained through murder and corruption!
13 Has not the Lord of Heaven’s Armies promised that the wealth of nations will turn to ashes? They work so hard, but all in vain!
14 For as the waters fill the sea, the earth will be filled with an awareness of the glory of the Lord.

The People, Places, and Times

The Babylonians. The battle of Carchemish in 605 BC (Jeremiah 46:2) was an important one because the king of Babylon defeated the Egyptians and added Syria-Palestine to the Babylonian Empire, including Judah. For several years, King Jehoiakim was loyal to his new Babylonian masters. But after three years he rebelled against Nebuchadnezzar. Later the Babylonian army invaded Jerusalem. During the siege, Jehoiakim died or was possibly killed in action. Jehoiakim’s son, Jehoiachin, took the throne after his father’s death but surrendered the city after a reign of three months. He and his staff were taken to Babylon as captives along with ten thousand others (2 Kings 24:14). This was the beginning of the Babylonian captivity.

Background

In the age of goal setting seminars and vision boards, Christians and non-Christians alike have likely heard some paraphrase of Habakkuk 2:2: “Write the vision, make it plain upon tables, that he may run that readeth it.” While many reference this Scripture as part of conversations around the importance of writing down one’s goals and dreams, in context, these words serve as a much more pointed rebuttal to the prophet Habakkuk’s charges toward God on behalf of the people. The book of Habakkuk reads as both a prophecy and a heated conversation between God and the prophet. Habakkuk begins the conversation with a complaint against God. For the

prophet, God seemingly cannot or will not hear His people’s cries for help and refuses to save them from the violence, wrongdoing, and injustice in their land (Habakkuk 1:2–11). God answers Habakkuk’s complaint by promising to do something unthinkable—raising up the ruthless and lawless Babylonians to execute God’s judgment (Habakkuk 1:6). In response, the prophet first affirms the holiness and wisdom of God but questions why God continues to tolerate the wickedness and injustice that the people of God faced in Jerusalem. The prophet questions the silence of God while the righteous seem to be “swallowed up” and compares God’s people to a sea of fish being hooked, tangled, and caught with ease by their foes, whom he compares to fishermen who worship their nets and hooks (Habakkuk 1:13–16). At the end of this second complaint, Habakkuk steps back and declares that he will wait to hear what answer God desires him to give to the believers (Habakkuk 2:1). It is out of this context that God responds with “write the vision, make it plain” as a way of instructing Habakkuk to ensure that everyone is able to hear the response from the Lord—a piece of which we examine in our text for this lesson.

At-A-Glance

1. The Power of The People (Habakkuk 2:6)
2. Destroyed by Their Own Devices (vv. 6–11)
3. God Will Get the Glory (vv. 12–14)

In Depth

1. The Power of The People (Habakkuk 2:6)

In response to Habakkuk’s second complaint of questioning God’s silence in the face of violence and injustice and what felt like an unwillingness of God to intervene on behalf of His people, God describes the enemy as puffed up, not upright in his desires, betrayed by wine, arrogant, restless, and greedy (Habakkuk 2:4–5) and chronicles how the enemy has prioritized taking captive the peoples of all nations. However, God then provides Habakkuk with a unique prophecy, declaring that at some point, those same people whom the enemy captured will overcome the enemy, taunting him and speaking unavoidable truths of the enemy’s demise (v. 6). This small portion of the text is packed with some big implications, namely that the beginning of the work of restoration is when God’s oppressed people tap into their own power to use their voices to speak to and against the injustices that they have witnessed. As in the day of Habakkuk, today God’s people have the power and obligation to speak to people, policies, and systems that are unjust and oppressive. This power is given to us like a spark plug for the change that God will bring about in His perfect time.

What injustices and oppression have you seen or experienced that God may be calling you to speak against?

2. Destroyed by Their Own Devices (vv. 6–11)

Next, God reveals at least three warnings or “woe” statements that the people would speak against the enemy. What is interesting about these statements is that, in each scenario, the enemy is destroyed utilizing the same methods that they used against God’s people. God reveals that those who gain their wealth by stealing and exhorting God’s people would come to ruin at the hands of their creditors (vv. 6–7). God declares that those who plunder many nations would eventually be plundered by the nations that remain (v. 8). Finally, God says that those who try to escape ruin by ruining others would be ruined during the end (vv. 9–10). These three woe statements illustrate the great irony of injustice—eventually, the very devices one uses to destroy others will be the devices of one’s own demise. This lesson foreshadows the lesson Jesus seeks to teach Peter: “All they that take the sword shall perish with the sword” (from Matthew 26:52).

Can you recall a time when the methods someone used to destroy others were eventually used to destroy them?

3. God Will Get the Glory (vv. 12–14)

The final statement of the text contains the good news! In the final “woe” statement of our text, God speaks directly to the violence and injustice that Habakkuk gave his initial complaint about. God declares that these efforts are ultimately futile as the Lord Almighty predetermines that the final glory would not be given to the work of the oppressors but that “the earth shall be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the LORD” (Habakkuk 2:14). This text serves as a reminder to Habakkuk and to the reader today that injustice, violence, and oppression cannot win. In the end, God will get the glory!

Can you name some instances where justice was delayed but ultimately was achieved on a local, national, or global level?

Search the Scriptures

1. Paraphrase God’s “woe” statements (Habakkuk 2:6, 9, 11). Where else in the Bible do we find “woe” statements and who is being warned?
2. Why is Israel being set upon by its enemies (v. 8)?
3. What promise does God mention in verse 13?

Discuss the Meaning

1. Why is it important to maintain hope that God will punish injustice as believers in Jesus Christ?
2. What does it look like to act justly and pursue godly justice in our private and public lives?
3. What hope does God provide in the midst of our despair regarding our need for justice?

Liberating Lesson

The theme of injustice has been a mainstay of American public discourse over the last decade—particularly as it relates to the violence experienced within black and brown communities. The murder of Trayvon Martin at the hands of an acquitted vigilante and the countless cases of unarmed black women and men killed at the hands of law enforcement with painfully few convictions have caused citizens and clergy to sing Habakkuk’s song. How long will this continue to go on? How long will we cry violence and God does not intervene? How long will God allow injustice to persist? The lesson of the text is that God is not asleep and God will ultimately get the glory—but God’s people must use their power to speak against the systems of oppression and injustice to spark the desired change.

Application for Activation

Justice work is not a cultural phenomenon but a biblical requirement. Micah reminds the believer that the Lord requires us “to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly” with God (Micah 6:8). As a group, create a list of potential justice issues that exist within the area

Follow the Spirit

What God wants me to do:

Remember Your Thoughts

Special insights I have learned:

More Light on the Text

Habakkuk 2:6–14

Habakkuk was a pre-exilic prophet (i.e., he lived prior to the Babylonian captivity), writing the book that bears his name before the Babylonian captivity in the seventh century BC. Every prophet of God communicates God's word to his own generation and beyond. Habakkuk is assigned to prophesy concerning the kingdom of Judah. Chapter 1 begins with Habakkuk's ongoing cry to God, who has not yet answered him. Habakkuk wants to know how long God would continue to allow the righteous to suffer and the ungodly to prosper. The moral and spiritual condition of Judah is getting worse and worse (2 Kings 21–22), and Habakkuk could not understand why God is allowing this to continue. It is extremely hard for Habakkuk to continue to look on sin, and he wants to know how a holy God could tolerate it. God answers Habakkuk by telling him that He is going to do a work that Habakkuk would not believe. He is going to raise up that bitter, terrible, and dreadful nation of the Chaldeans (Babylonians) to punish His people. Habakkuk has such a good relationship with God that he could ask God about anything that was troubling him. So Habakkuk asks God another question: Why would God use a wicked nation to punish Judah? After all, even the worst things that Judah had done were not as bad as the deeds of the wicked Chaldeans. Habakkuk has learned patience from his previous experience. This time, he would wait and watch expectantly for God's answer. The Lord answers him in a vision.

6 Shall not all these take up a parable against him, and a taunting proverb against him, and say, Woe to him that increaseth that which is not his! how long? and to him that ladeth himself with thick clay!

The Hebrew word translated “parable” is *mashal* (maw-SHAWL), referring to an aphorism or proverb. The downfall of this wicked people will be told as a cautionary tale to all. The Hebrew word translated “taunting” is *melitsah* (meh-lee-TSAW) and refers to a mocking poem or a satirical song. One usually hears taunting songs or mocking from the wicked about the righteous, as when Job was mocked by his enemies, who made up a song to tease him about his afflictions (Job 30:9). But when the righteous finally see God punish the unrighteous, they will boldly mock the wicked with their taunting songs. In the text that follows, God uses this sarcastic song or poem that the captives will sing to explain how He will punish the wicked Chaldeans. The song has several woes and addresses the Chaldeans as individuals. The first woe is directed at those who increase their wealth with things that do not belong to them. “Thick clay” here could be read two ways. It could be a euphemism for gold or silver, which come out of the ground like clay, and are just as worthless as clay when one gives proper weight to the truly important things of life. Otherwise, it is a mistranslation of the text that Jewish scholars have long since clarified. Instead of being translated as “clay,” it should be translated as “pledge,” referring to a piece of property a lender might take as collateral. Either way, this first woe is to those who gain by theft and cruel lending practices.

7 Shall they not rise up suddenly that shall bite thee, and awake that shall vex thee, and thou shalt be for booties unto them? 8 Because thou hast spoiled many nations, all the remnant of the people shall spoil thee; because of men's blood, and for the violence of the land, of the city, and of all that dwell therein.

“Booties” refers to the spoils of war. When a city was captured, everything belonging to the people of that city became the property of the conquerors. How the spoil was to be divided among the Israelites was called the “law of booty.” The distribution of spoils became a joyous occasion (Isaiah 9:3). Now the tables are turned; instead of the righteous becoming spoil for the wicked, the wicked would become spoil for the righteous. The righteous would suddenly despoil the wicked, as if awakening them out of deep sleep, to “vex” (Heb. *zua'*, ZOO-ah) them, or make them tremble and shake. The “remnant” (Heb. *yether*, YEH-ther)—those who are left in the land—will despoil the wicked; the very people most harmed by the Chaldeans will be the ones to regain the possessions that were originally theirs. What the Chaldeans have done to others will be done to them. All of this is punishment for the human blood that was shed and the violence inflicted on Judah.

9 Woe to him that coveteth an evil covetousness to his house, that he may set his nest on high, that he may be delivered from the power of evil! 10 Thou hast consulted shame to thy house by cutting off many

people, and hast sinned against thy soul. 11 For the stone shall cry out of the wall, and the beam out of the timber shall answer it.

Verse 9 contains the second woe of the taunting song. This woe refers to the household of “him that coveteth [Heb. batsa‘, baw-TSAH] evil covetousness [Heb. betsa‘, BEH-tzah].” Both Hebrew words are from the same root and include the idea of violently cutting away to take the coveted thing. Everything the object of this taunt gains is illegally obtained through unnecessary violence, just so that he could build a high place in order to be delivered from those who would harm him. Evil people know what evil people do and how they think, so they must constantly protect themselves from other evil people and from those whom they have victimized. The evildoer has “consulted” (Heb. ya‘ats, yaw-OTS) shame to come to his own house. He sits down, considers, and consults with himself and still thinks it is wise to treat people with violence and sin. The materials of the house itself speak in a call-and-response chorus, with the stone walls starting and the wooden beams answering, testifying to the evil that has been done. The familiar saying “If only these walls could talk” certainly applies here.

12 Woe to him that buildeth a town with blood, and stablisheth a city by iniquity!

Here we have the third woe of the taunting song. The Hebrew word translated “stablisheth” is kun (KOON), which means to fix or establish. Verse 8 spoke of violence and the shedding of innocent blood to support the individual evildoer’s theft or usury. Here, blood and iniquity build up and establish entire towns. The city of the oppressors has been built with human blood; it has been prepared with iniquity or injustice. These three woes increase in scope, from the individual to the city. We tend to think on an individual level, hoping our sin only affects the victim or maybe our household, but in truth, our entire community is affected.

13 Behold, is it not of the LORD of hosts that the people shall labor in the very fire and the people shall weary themselves for very vanity?

By referring to God as the “LORD of hosts,” Habakkuk answers the war imagery of spoils (vv. 7–8). The Babylonians had been taking spoils from Israel, but now the Lord of hosts is fighting for Israel. He fights their battles (Exodus 15:3) and controls their military operations. The taunting song turns into the question, “Is it not of the LORD of hosts ...,” that is, “Is it not [a promise from] the LORD of hosts ...” God’s decision is to destroy Babylon so that the people who labored and wearied themselves building it will have done so in vain. Babylonia is the land of the Chaldeans, and this verse is describing how the LORD will destroy them with fire (cf. Jeremiah 51:58). Any attempt to stop the destruction will be in vain. The Chaldeans wear themselves out for nothing.

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

Verse 14 is a promise from God that one day there will be as much knowledge of God around the world as there is water in the sea. Isaiah uses a nearly identical phrase to describe a time of complete peace and harmony among nature, animals, and people (11:9). At that time, the Messiah will rule the earth justly (v. 10) and will call all His people from all over the earth (v. 11). God knew that it would be many decades before His promises would be fulfilled in the Jews’ return from Babylonian exile (even long before the Messiah would come, and longer still before the Messiah comes to rule the earth). This was why God comforts Habakkuk before He gives him the vision, telling him that the vision is for an appointed time and that he should wait for it because it would surely happen (2:3). Even though things look as though they are not going to change, God tells Habakkuk to keep waiting because he would see the fulfillment of God’s promise in the end. Meanwhile, God encourages him with the knowledge that “the just shall live by his faith” (v. 4), a refrain the people of God remember throughout the Bible (Romans 1:17; Galatians 3:11; Hebrews 10:38).

Daily Bible Readings

MONDAY

Wait For Devine Intervention
(Psalm 130)

TUESDAY

Pay Attention To The Sentinel
(Ezekiel 33:1-9)

WEDNESDAY

The Risk Of Ignoring The Needy
(Matthew 25:41-46)

THURSDAY

The Righteous Live By Faith
(Habakkuk 2:1-5)

FRIDAY

Violence Leads to Destruction
(Habakkuk 2:15-17)

SATURDAY

Compare An Idol With The Lord
(Habakkuk 2:18-20)

SUNDAY

You Reap What You Sow
(Habakkuk 2:6-14)