

## Waiting for Justice

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Habakkuk 2:5-15

Bernie Madoff was a guy who did a lot of damage with his greed. If you don't know the story of Bernie Madoff, he was a stockbroker who owned a giant firm that turned out to be the largest Ponzi scheme in history. Madoff wanted to be rich. He wanted the comfort, and notoriety, and power of wealth. In a word, Madoff was greedy. Investigators say we will probably never know the true losses that Madoff's investors experienced, but they suspect the total fraud was around \$65 billion. In 2010, Madoff was convicted of 11 felonies and sentenced to 150 years in prison. But the real depth of Madoff's crimes is not found in the length of his sentence or in the dollar numbers of his Ponzi scheme. It's found in the lives of his victims. Hundreds of people (rich and not so rich) were cheated out of their entire life's savings, and Madoff showed absolutely no remorse. He did an incredible amount of damage with his greed and showed no sorrow.

Let me ask you a question today: What happens to people like Bernie Madoff? What does God do about greedy people, people who pursue gain by any means possible? What are the consequences of their actions?

The prophet Habakkuk really wanted to know that. If you remember, Habakkuk started his prophecy by asking God why God didn't do something about all the sin that Habakkuk was seeing in the nation of Judah. Habakkuk asked God if he was going to do anything about sin, injustice and violence.

If you remember, God gave the shocking answer that he WAS doing something about it. He said He was sending the more sinful and more unjust and more violent Babylonians to invade the nation of Judah as punishment. He was going to send sinful people to deal with sin. Now surprisingly, Habakkuk did not like that! Shocking, isn't it? In last week's passage, Habakkuk asked God how He, as a holy God, could send people that were more sinful to judge people that were less sinful. Last week, God gave Habakkuk the big picture answer to that question, and the big picture answer is the Gospel. God said "The proud will not stand in my presence, but the one who is just by faith shall live." He promised true life eternal life to those who trusted God. That is the overarching big picture, most meaningful answer to the question "What is God doing about sin on earth?" He has sent us the gospel, so the one who is just by faith will live eternally.

Fair enough. But what about the here and now? This leaves unanswered the question of what happens to greedy people? Will God deal with the person who harms others for the sake of greedy gain? How will God deal with them? What are the consequences of greedy gain?

Our passage today answers that question. Today we are going to begin to look at a section of Habakkuk called "The Five Woes." These are "Five Oracles of Woe," five prophecies of doom and judgment that God gave to Habakkuk to answer, in more detailed terms, the question

“What are you going to do about sin?” Today we are going to look at the first three “Woes” Habakkuk gives us, three woes that all revolve around the topic of Greedy Gain.

Let me invite you to turn in your Bibles to Habakkuk 2:5-14 (three-fourths of the way through Old Testament). Today as we look at this passage, we're going to see a couple of verses about the nature of greed. Then we'll look at the three woes which show us three consequences of greedy gain. As we look at this, we are going to learn something about how we should view possessions and how we should view others who mistreat us because of their greed. So let's read Habakkuk 2: 5-14. God has just stated to Habakkuk that the proud will not stand in his presence, but that the just shall live by faith when he writes these words. This is still God speaking:

*“Moreover, wine is a traitor, an arrogant man who is never at rest. 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.” 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!” Will not your debtors suddenly arise, and those awake who will make you tremble? Then you will be spoil for them. 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.*

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

*“Woe to him who builds a town with blood and founds a city on iniquity! Behold, is it not from the Lord of hosts that peoples labor merely for fire, and nations weary themselves for nothing? For the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.*

- Habakkuk 2:5-15

So as we look at these three woes today, Habakkuk is going to show us three consequences of greedy gain. But before he does that, he has to introduce his topic so he starts in verse 5 to talk about the topic of Greedy People. Look at:

*“Moreover, wine is a traitor, an arrogant man who is never at rest. 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.”*

- Habakkuk 2:5

So Habakkuk is describing the nation of Babylon here, which enslaved nation after nation after nation, but what he says is true of any greedy person, because what Habakkuk is saying is “There's no such thing as enough.” To a person who is greedy, there's no such thing as enough. Habakkuk says their greed is like Sheol, which is the Hebrew word for “grave.” The grave always wants more bodies, always, and the greedy person always wants more stuff. They will never be

satisfied, because they're trying to fill an eternal hole (a God-sized hole) with temporary stuff. There's never going to be enough stuff to do that.

We will see that this is true in our passage, because as we go through these “three woes,” we’re going to see that each one gets bigger than the last. With each “woe,” the crime gets worse and the scope of the crime gets bigger. They go to greater and greater lengths to get more stuff. Why? Because it's never enough. Greed always wants more.

We know that’s a problem. But there is a bigger problem with greed. It has consequences. Greed always has consequences. When we are moved by greed and when we act on greed, there are consequences, and they aren't pleasant! So in our passage Habakkuk gives us three consequences of greedy gain. He presents these consequences in an unusual format. Look at:

*Shall not all these (the nations Babylon has overthrown) take up their taunt against him, with scoffing and riddles for him*

- Habakkuk 2:6a

Habakkuk is going to present these consequences, as if they were a taunt like a mocking funeral song that is sung by the nations Babylon has conquered. These nations are going to sing a little song called “Woe to Babylon.”

“Woe” is an interesting word in Hebrew. It doesn’t mean like “stop,” like you would say “whoa” to stop a horse or like a surfer would say “whoa, dude!” It’s not like that. Actually, the word “woe” is what you would cry out at a funeral. It’s a cry of lament. The New Century Version translates it “how terrible for the one who.” The Good News Bible translates it “You are doomed”. The NET Bible translates it “As good as dead is the one who.” “Woe” is a mournful cry but here it’s stated in a mocking way.

So Habakkuk is going to use this mocking funeral chant to describe the three cons of greed, so let’s just going through these one at a time. The first consequence of greed is this:

## **MAN’S VENGEANCE**

In verses 6-8, our passage states the first “woe” that is pronounced on the greedy, the first reason they are doomed. Look at what it says:

*“Woe to him who heaps up what is not his own for how long? and loads himself with pledges!” Will not your debtors suddenly arise, and those awake who will make you tremble? Then you will be spoil for them. 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.*

- Habakkuk 2:6-8

Notice that at the beginning of this woe (and at the beginning of each woe), Habakkuk states the reason that the Babylonians are facing judgment here. This is why they are in trouble. The reason in this first woe is what we might call “white collar crime,” not blue collar crime, but white collar crime. Let me show you what I mean. Habakkuk says “Woe to him who heaps up what is not his own and loads himself with pledges!” This is talking about giving someone a loan and charging exorbitant interest or stealing the collateral. Here’s how it worked. In the Ancient Near East, people gave loans the way many people give loans today. It was common if you loaned something to require collateral or a pledge. For example, someone might say “I will loan you a plow since you can't pay for it right now, but in exchange you have to put up collateral. If you can't pay me for the plough at harvest time when you make your money, I’m going to take your twenty acres to the west or your prize bull or whatever.” So they would require a “pledge” or collateral.

Now the collateral was always of greater value than the loan, the bull or the field might be worth five times more than the plow was but it was what you had to offer. So if a lender was smart and if he was greedy, he could swing a deal that he knew the borrower would not be able to keep. In doing that, he could get twenty acres for just the cost of a plow.

You could really get rich this way. They were desperate. You were in power. I call it white collar crime, because it’s legal. The Old Testament Law had strict rules to limit this kind of thing but some Israelites, and other people, especially the Babylonians didn’t care about the Old Testament Law. So in most cases, this was legal. If you did this, the law was on your side. The authorities were going to protect you and not the borrower. It was totally legal.

But it was also totally wrong! God looked at that practice and said “Just because it’s legal, doesn’t make it right. Just because nobody will blame you, doesn’t make it right in my sight. Woe to you!” God is saying “This is wrong.”

White collar thievery is still thievery. It's still wrong. It may be that no one can catch us. It may be that no one would blame us. It may even be that what we are doing is allowable by law, but taking something that doesn't rightly belong to us is wrong. Cheating on your taxes is wrong. Committing a little bit of insurance fraud is wrong. Lying, so you can get more unemployment is wrong. Christians should be as honest as the day is long. We should be the kind of people who are known for doing what is truly right.

In our business dealings, we should be honest and generous. No price gouging, no profiting off the misery or powerlessness or ignorance of other people. We shouldn’t sell people things we know they can’t afford. That little motto “Let the buyer beware” should not be our motto. Whether we are the buyer or the seller as Christians, we should be honest.

I have a friend who recently went to an auto mechanic business for their car that very publicly claims to be a Christian business. He was in there for something else. But while this car was there, they told him “Oh man, you really need a brake job. I'm not even sure you should drive that home. It's really bad!” He went down the street and another mechanic looked at his brakes

and said “Your brakes are just fine for several thousand more miles.” That’s not the first time I’ve heard that from that mechanic. That should not be us. As Christians, we should be known as people who deal fairly. We shouldn’t engage in white collar thievery. God tells us one reason we shouldn’t engage in it:

*Will not your debtors suddenly arise, and those awake who will make you tremble? Then you will be spoil for them. Because you have plundered many nations, all the remnant of the peoples shall plunder you.*

- Habakkuk 2:7-8a

One reason we should not engage in white collar thievery, one reason we should not take greedy gain is that if we do we might face human vengeance. The people we have tricked out of their money might just rise up and decide to give us a little bit of the treatment we gave them. It’s funny. In Hebrew, the word for “interest” comes from the word “bite.” If you owe money on your house, or your car, or your credit card, you know why! The bank always takes its bite! But Habakkuk says “The people you’ve been biting might just bite you back!”

He says “Your debtors are going to arise.” In other words, God is saying that he will empower the conquered nations. He will raise them up to take vengeance on the Babylonians, and God did that. When the Babylonians were overthrown in 539 AD (sixty years after this), do you think any of the nations they overthrew said to the Babylonians “Well, here you can come stay with us until you get back on your feet”? No! They took vengeance. They rejoiced at Babylon's defeat! Taking greedy gain, even if it’s by white collar crime, brings human vengeance. The first consequence of greedy gain is human vengeance, but there’s a second consequence of greedy gain and it’s this:

## **DIVINE JUDGEMENT**

This consequence is found in the second woe. Look at what Habakkuk says:

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

- Habakkuk 2:9-11

Notice with this second woe, things are escalating a bit. The crime is getting bigger. It’s more obviously wrong. In verse 5, he “loaded himself with pledges” but here he has what is called “evil gain.” In Hebrew, the word for “unjust gain” is repeated twice. It literally says “Woe to the one who profits unjustly by evil unjust gain for his house.” This is more like regular crime. He’s taking stuff by force or by means that are obviously wrong, not just extra interest but actual crime.

And notice, the scope of the crime is bigger. In the first woe, he was just taking it for himself. In this second woe, he's trying to build something. He's taking it for his family, and he's trying to build a dynasty. It's growing, and why is it growing? Because there's no such things as enough. Right? Greed knows no limits.

In spite of the fact that this guy is doing what he knows is wrong, he imagines to himself that he can reach a place of safety and legitimacy. In verse 9, he says "I'll build my nest on high to be safe from the reach of harm." The idea is "I'm going to do whatever it takes to build my future: steal, hurt people, use underhanded tactics. I'm going to cheat, and then I'm going to build a big ol' house and start my dynasty, and then maybe I'll just go legit. My dynasty will be secure, and my house will be unassailable. I'll put a mote around it, have a security system, some Rottweilers, a safe room and no one can touch me. I'll be like an eagle with his nest in a cliff." He says "I'll just do what it takes for now. Then I'll go legit, and no one will ever know." And you know what? People can sometimes have that attitude.

Empires and nations, including parts of our nation, have been built on evil gain, on land taken dishonestly, on things built by slavery. Powerful corporations have been built on evil gain. Even churches have been built at times on evil gain. I remember one church in Wichita in the 90's, where the pastor was laundering drug money to pay for their giant, shiny new building. We can say to ourselves "It's OK. I'm just doing what I have to do for now, but I'll go legit. Think of all the good I can do, and no one will ever know!" That's what that pastor said when he got caught: "We're doing so much good. I just had to do what it took to keep it going."

We tell ourselves no one will ever know. But there's a problem. There's a witness. Habakkuk says "The very stones you are building with are stolen and the timber you put into your wall came from theft. So like Abel's blood that cried out for justice from the ground, your fortune itself testifies against you." Do you see the irony? The very house they thought would make them unassailable, the dynasty they built to make themselves safe is the source of their undoing. The stones and timbers are the prosecution's star witness in their trial! So Habakkuk says "You've built shame and your life is forfeit." He's saying "God sees it, and He's going to judge you!"

We may escape man's vengeance when we take greedy gain, but we won't escape God's judgment. He overturned Babylon in just one night. You can read the story in Daniel 5. God sees what we do, and He enforces consequences both in this life and in eternity.

We should not engage in greedy gain because it brings 1) human vengeance, and 2) divine judgment. That should be enough to make us not want to do this, but there is a third consequence to greedy gain, and it's this:

## ETERNAL IRRELEVANCE

Greedy gain causes not just human vengeance and divine judgment, it also causes eternal irrelevance. Let me just say this is something that very few people think about, but it is hugely important, especially for the Christian. Let me show you what I mean. Look at the third woe:

*“Woe to him who builds a town with blood and founds a city on iniquity! Behold, is it not from the Lord of hosts that peoples labor merely for fire, and nations weary themselves for nothing? For the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.”*

- Habakkuk 2:12-14

Notice again that scope of the crime and the crime itself continues to grow. Now he’s not just trying to build his own wealth or his family’s wealth. Now he’s trying to build a city. Notice also that the crime is bigger. First, it was white collar crime. Then it grew to regular crime, and now it’s bloodshed. It’s violence. The crime and the scope of the crime are growing. But having stated the crime, the passage goes on to say something really strange. Look at verse 13 again:

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

- Habakkuk 2:13

That’s an unusual verse. In fact when I first saw that verse, I thought I had misread it. I thought the verse should read “It is not from the Lord,” like God doesn’t do that. But it says “Is it not from the Lord.” In other words, the verse is saying “This is very much something God does.” He actively causes people’s work to go up in smoke. God has the ability and God uses his ability to make people work and work and work and have it amount to nothing. Now I find that to be a strange verse. But if we keep reading, we find an even stranger verse. Look at verse:

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

- Habakkuk 2:14

Now that verse is not strange because of what it says. It’s actually quite beautiful in what it says. It’s talking about the restoration of the earth in God’s eternal kingdom. It says the whole earth is going to recognize God’s glory! In other words, everyone who dwells on earth in the eternal Kingdom, all the people, all the animals, all the plants, all creation, will worship God and be restored to what God made them to be. The entire earth will be based once more on who God really is. It’s a beautiful verse, a beautiful picture of what will be!

So it’s not the content of the verse that’s strange. Rather, it’s the placement. What does the knowledge of the glory of the Lord filling the earth have to do with God causing people’s work to come to nothing? It seems so out of place that some people think that it’s not actually a part of the third woe, that it was just added on as an encouragement. But it’s not just added on. This

verse fits perfectly with the context, because it's telling us how this is all going to go down. See, verse 14 gives us the explanation of how verse 13 is going to happen. The reason that people labor for fire, the reason that the nations weary themselves for nothing is that the earth is going to be filled with the glory of the Lord.

What Habakkuk is saying when he talks about "laboring for fire" is that the riches of this age (all the things people and nations wear themselves out pursuing) are going to be irrelevant in eternity. Those things will all be completely useless when the earth is filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord. What Habakkuk is saying is "You can't take it with you! It's not going into the Kingdom." None of the things we think are so valuable in this age will translate to the next. Everything we have pursued out of greed or worldly-mindedness is going to lose its value. Your big pile of money, your large comfortable house (with your mote and your Rottweilers), your fancy car, your Beanie Baby collection, the things we value so much are all going to lose their worth. They will be worthless in the next age.

You may have heard about the guy who loved his wealth so much that prayed day and night for God to let him take some of it with him to heaven. Finally, God said "OK, you can take one suitcase." So the guy took his biggest suitcase and jammed it full of bars of pure gold. When he got to heaven, Peter asked him what was with the suitcase. The guy proudly explained that God had let him bring some valuables. Peter opened it up and took one look and said "You brought pavement?" The point is your gold is going to be useless currency in the next age.

But listen closely. It's not just your wealth. It's the other things we value so highly in this age: Your popularity that you jealously guard, it isn't going to matter one bit. Your beauty or strength and everything that goes with it. The fact that your beauty opens doors, the fact that people respect and fear your strength. It's passing away. Your hobbies. Your awesome golf handicap, your personal best large mouth bass, the number of views you get on Tik-Tok, it's all going away. Your title and accomplishments at work your corporate climbing all the things that make you feel like you are someone who matters are going to be gone. Here's what I want you to understand. Christians, this is for you! This isn't just a truth for non-Christians. As Christians, we often think Well when I get to heaven, all my sins are forgiven and everyone is on equal footing, so it doesn't matter what I've done. That is absolutely not true. Our sins are forgiven, but we are going to be evaluated.

In 1 Corinthians 3, Paul is talking about the things we build into the church and into our lives and he tells us to be careful about how we build, because there is no other foundation we should build on than Christ and then he says this. Each builder's work (in other words, what you build into your lives) will be plainly seen, for the Day will make it clear, because it (the Day) will be revealed by fire. The fire will test what kind of work each has done.

*If what someone has built survives, he will receive a reward. If someone's work is burned up, he will suffer loss. He himself will be saved, but only as through fire.*

- 1 Corinthians 3:14-15



What Paul is saying is our work is going to be tried by the fire of God's evaluation. And Christians, we could lose everything, everything we work so hard to have, everything we work so hard to achieve, it could all go into the fire. If that happens to you, you will be saved (if you're a believer). You will not be eternally punished. Your sins will all be forgiven, but your life could amount to nothing. All the things you've achieved could go up in smoke!

If you're sitting there telling yourself that won't be a big deal, that you somehow won't feel that loss of all your achievements, ask yourself one question: Why am I working so hard for it now? Why do you burn the candle at both ends for your job? Why do you work overtime? Why do you practice, practice, practice for your hobby? Why do you carefully guard your investments? Why? Because you want to be significant and have resources, right? Well, what would it be like to go into eternity with no significance and no resources? What if you went into eternity with nothing? What if you were surrounded by other people who got it right, people who invested their lives in the things that the Bible says will bring eternal reward, things like helping those who can't help you back? Or building God's church for his glory? Or sharing the gospel with those around you? Or suffering for doing what's right? What would that be like? Habakkuk wants us to know that's a possibility.

I have in my hand a note of currency from Zimbabwe. This is a note for \$100 trillion Zimbabwe dollars, and it's genuine. When we first came to Zimbabwe, the exchange rate to the U.S. dollar was 11:1. So this bill would at that time have seemed like it was worth a fortune. It would have been worth nine trillion U.S. dollars. That's a stack of US \$1,000 Bills that, if the internet is correct, would be about 540 miles high. That's a lot of money!

When we first came to Zimbabwe, a person might have invested everything they had. They might have spent all their resources, sold their house, their car, their wedding ring, their clothes everything just to get their hands on one of these and it would have seemed wise. In 2006, I moved back to America. You know how much this bill is worth in America? Nothing. Not one cent. Why? Because I was in a different kingdom, a different nation, and once the Kingdom changed, the currency changed. This is useless in this kingdom except as a novelty. In fact, I can't even go back and spend it. Zimbabwe doesn't even take this currency any more.

See the point? What once seemed so valuable is now completely worthless. That's the way our worldly wealth will be in the kingdom. That's what greedy people are wearing themselves out to accumulate: useless currency! Useless, because the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord.

So these are the three consequences of greedy gain: 1) human vengeance, 2) divine judgment, and 3) eternal irrelevance. Now, what do we do with this information? Well, it's simple. There are two lessons that this passage teaches us. The first one is this:

**Don't do this.**

Don't pursue greedy gain. Don't value the things of this world so much that you will engage in white collar crime or blue collar crime or violence to get them. Recognize that that only leads to human vengeance, and divine judgment, and recognize that this only leads to eternal irrelevance. This world is headed to a time when the whole earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of God as the waters cover the sea. So don't be fooled into going after greedy gain. By all means, develop your talents, do an honest day's work, and enjoy the prosperity that God gives you. But don't turn wealth into something God never meant it to be. Don't be greedy. Don't do what this passage is describing. That's the first lesson we should learn from this passage. Don't do this. The second lesson is this:

**Don't fear this.**

This is a big part of what God was saying to his people in writing these woes. He's saying we should not live in fear of those who do these things. The Babylonians were powerful and dreaded. Just as God predicted they would be in Habakkuk 1, they did an incredible amount of damage in the Ancient Near East at the time Habakkuk was writing. It was truly awful. But in this passage, God is saying they and their works are headed for the fire. None of their greed, none of their earthly power, none of their wealth is going to survive. They're not to be feared. They're not to be envied. They are to be pitied! Woe on them. They're as good as dead! This earth is headed for one simple destination, a time when it will be absolutely flooded with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord. That's where it's going, not just for the few decades that the Babylonian empire lasted, not just for a century or two, but for eternity. We can live with that joyful realization, and that gives us faith and not fear. We can live our lives in confidence and joy! The proud will not stand in God's presence, but the one who is just by faith will live.