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Sermon Notes

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## **A Tale of Two Empires, Part 1**

### **Habakkuk 2:2-17**

#### I. A Tale of Two Empires

##### A. Charles Dickens: *A Tale of Two Cities*

"It was the best of times, it was the worst of times. It was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness; it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity; it was the season of light, it was the season of darkness; it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair; we had everything before us, we had nothing before us; we were all going direct to Heaven, we were all going direct the other way..."

Dickens wrote those stirring words as the introduction to *A Tale of Two Cities*... introducing two worlds represented by two cities—Paris and London—at the time of the French Revolution

Yet... this concept well represents the history of the world... a Tale of Two Empires: one for God's glory, and one for the glory of Man

##### B. Saint Augustine: *The City of God*

1. 410 A.D. Alaric and the Goths sacked Rome... many feared the world was about to end

2. Three years later (413 A.D.) Augustine began to write *City of God*

3. Basic concept: human history can be seen as battle between two cities:

a. City of God: heavenly Jerusalem, company of God's people

b. City of the Devil: man's city on earth... one human empire after another

they rise, they dominate, they swagger... then they stagger, they fall, they sink into the dust

4. City of God advances against backdrop of rising and falling stages of city of man

5. Empires rise and fall at GOD'S command

Augustine: These things being so, we do not attribute the power of giving kingdoms and empires to any save to the true God, who gives happiness in the kingdom of heaven to the pious alone, but gives kingly power on earth both to the pious and the impious, as it may please Him, whose good pleasure is always just.

- a. kingdoms given to wise, righteous men
- b. kingdoms also given to wicked, insane men
- c. kingdom given to Jews who worshipped true God
- d. kingdom also given to Babylonians who worshipped idols

No one can trace out God's ways... but they are perfect anyway!

6. God judges wicked men for their wicked motives and actions
7. In the end, the City of God will stand alone, and the City of Man will be completely destroyed

This is the message of Habakkuk 2... the competition of two Empires, each questing after eternal glory

### C. Human History: A Tale of Two Empires

#### 1. The Empire of Human Glory

- a. rising forth from the earth, snarling like a beast, going forth conquering and to conquer more... following the drive and genius of a single great leader
  - he organizes the tribe into a military machine...sleek, hungry, devastating
  - they move out, taking on their own oppressors with a vengeance... punishing them for years of oppressions and suffering
  - then they move on to the next people... an innocent people, a peaceful tribe in a fertile valley, perhaps... they sweep in like a storm and devastate
  - they do it over and over again until there are no foes left to fight
- b. truly great emperors sought not just to crush and destroy but to BUILD
- c. stolen materials, plundered, stripped from the bodies of slain victims
- d. slave labor, pressed by the whip into great building projects

- Pyramids of ancient Egypt
  - Great Wall of China... thousands died
  - Roman roads, bridges, aqueducts
- e. they build fortifications to protect their empire
  - f. basking in stolen luxury, they recline at feasts on the backs of the people they conquered
  - g. they grow fat and lazy, rich and comfortable... ripe for the plucking themselves
  - h. soon, their day comes... a hungry, sleek enemy appears on the horizon and sweeps over them like a tidal wave
  - i. their mighty fortifications are reduced to rubble, sinking back into the dust
  - j. their great golden monuments—idols of their own glory—are toppled and stripped for their gold
  - k. the empire is gone forever... forgotten in the swirling sands of time

This is the history of the world... the rise and fall of The Empire of Human Glory... represented in one incarnation after another:

Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, Persia, Greece, Rome, Huns, Saracens, Franks, Mongols, Turks, Spanish, French, English, American... mighty empires all

Modern people decry the European conquerors who came and swept Indians from their lands... but the Indians themselves gained the lands by conquering other people

Aztecs built a mighty empire in what is now Mexico... they did it in the same fashion; warrior kings who built dynasties through military conquest and who used plundered wealth to built glorious cities with slave labor...UNTIL they were conquered by the Spanish **conquistadores** in the 16<sup>th</sup> century

Scripture teaches plainly that the rise and fall of the world occurs at God's command and for His own mysterious purposes...

***Daniel 4:17 the Most High is sovereign over the kingdoms of men and gives them to anyone he wishes and sets over them the lowliest of men.'***

***Daniel 4:34-35 His dominion is an eternal dominion; his kingdom endures from generation to generation. <sup>35</sup> All the peoples of the earth are regarded as nothing. He***

*does as he pleases with the powers of heaven and the peoples of the earth. No one can hold back his hand or say to him: "What have you done?"*

God's way cannot be traced out... but His overall purpose is clear: He is building an eternal empire for His own glory and for the delight of the humble who will live there

## 2. The Empire of God's Glory

***Habakkuk 2:12-14 "Woe to him who builds a city with bloodshed and establishes a town by crime! <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.***

- a. God is also building an empire to His own glory
- b. BUT unlike the Empire of Human Glory... His will last forever
- c. unlike the Empire of Human Glory, God's Empire is built through the quiet peaceful advance of the Gospel of Jesus Christ

### D. God's Answer to Habakkuk's Prayer

Habakkuk 2 is God's answer to the anguished prayer of a Prophet who cannot understand God's mysterious actions in history:

Q1) why He allows wicked Jews to prosper in Jerusalem in direct violation of God's own laws

A1) "I am bringing the Babylonians to destroy Jerusalem"

Q2) Why do you use a pagan nation like Babylon to destroy your own people? Why evict us from the Promised Land? **WHAT ARE YOU DOING, O LORD???"**

A2) Habakkuk 2

- 1) God will destroy Babylon in turn... for their wicked motives and vicious actions; God will use other conquered people to rise up and crush them when their time is up
- 2) Individual people will be saved by the righteousness that comes by faith
- 3) Nation will rise against nation and kingdom against kingdom to build their own glory, but they are WASTING THEIR TIME... all their efforts will be fuel for the fire

- 4) An empire filled with humble people who know God's glory will fill the entire earth as the waters cover the seas

## II. Message #1: Babylon Will Be Destroyed in Turn

Habakkuk concerned about God's justice! He need not have worried! Though God's ways are mysterious, His justice is perfect and will never fail!!

### A. Habakkuk's Anguish Answered

1. Babylon not specifically mentioned here... more on that in a moment
2. Babylon IS in view

***Habakkuk 3:16 Yet I will wait patiently for the day of calamity to come on the nation invading us.***

### B. Enemy Described (vs. 4-5)

***vs. 4-5 "See, he is puffed up; his desires are not upright--but the righteous will live by his faith--<sup>5</sup> indeed, wine betrays him; he is arrogant and never at rest. Because he is as greedy as the grave and like death is never satisfied, he gathers to himself all the nations and takes captive all the peoples."***

1. Arrogance

***"See, he is puffed up***

It all starts with lofty self opinion... boastfulness over other people, even lofty thoughts toward God himself

The future conqueror really worships himself... he starts with small successes over his own people; little by little people start to recognize his unique capacities... he has energy, intelligence, leadership, personal magnetism; he has a unique vision of the times and nations; he also begins to believe himself invincible

2. Unrighteous Desires

***"...his desires are not upright"***

He sets his heart on unrighteous things... ultimately he wants to be worshipped; he also wants a comfortable lifestyle, luxury and ease; he covets other peoples lands, houses, women, possessions, harvests, natural resources, gold, silver, gems... BUT more than anything, he sets his heart on personal GLORY... he wants to make a name for himself

***Genesis 11:4 Then they said, "Come, let us build ourselves a city, with a tower that reaches to the heavens, so that we may make a name for ourselves and not be scattered over the face of the whole earth."***

The name of that city was BABYLON... a name synonymous with human glory

***indeed, wine betrays him;***

Unrighteous desires are fanned by wine... he drinks and loses his inhibitions;

Illus. Alexander the Great was a notorious drunkard... killed one of his best friends Cleitus after both had had too much to drink and quarreled

BUT ultimately the "wine" is world-conquest... it buoys up the tyrant with overconfidence until it finally betrays him

Illus. Greatest danger of alcohol to a driver is bloated sense of confidence... he can do anything, conquer any foe, win any battle, drive as fast as he wants... but alcohol has impaired his judgment

So also a world conqueror gets drunk on self-worship and overreaches himself... "wine betrays him"

Illus. Adolf Hitler was drunk with the power of his undefeated Nazi stormtroopers... invaded vast Russia with its almost limitless reserves of men and vast ever-widening frontier... by September 1, 1941, his troops were holding a line over 1500 miles long!! WHAT WAS HE THINKING?? He was drunk with the wine of self-worship

### 3. Restlessness

***he is arrogant and never at rest***

a. restlessness is Satan-like

***Job 1:7 The LORD said to Satan, "Where have you come from?" Satan answered the LORD, "From roaming through the earth and going back and forth in it."***

***Matthew 12:43 "When an evil spirit comes out of a man, it goes through arid places seeking rest and does not find it."***

b. restlessness is caused by discontent

Not satisfied with the land God has given him, the conqueror rides forth for more

### 4. Greed

**vs. 5 *Because he is as greedy as the grave and like death is never satisfied, he gathers to himself all the nations and takes captive all the peoples.***

a. never satisfied

A fire never says "I have had enough"

The grave never says, "Enough people have died this month... no more until next month!"

A conqueror never says "I have enough land, enough wealth, enough tribute... I have won enough battles"

Alexander the Great: after Greeks had reached the Punjab region of India, they came to the Hyphasis river and refused to cross it; a delegation came to Alexander to persuade him to stop conquering and go home; Alexander gathered his troops and, according to ancient historian Arrian, he gave a rousing speech to his troops. [After listing the 27 regions they had conquered, he urged them to go on for more...]

***...all Libya to the eastward will soon be ours, and all Asia too, and to this empire there will be no boundaries but what God Himself has made for the whole world. Gentlemen of Macedon, and you, my friends and allies, [we must not halt!]. Stand firm; for well you know that hardship and danger are the price of glory, and that sweet is the savour of a life of courage and of deathless fame beyond the grave.***

The appeal was clear: endless conquest, eternal glory and fame

5. Power

Disposition to dominate... thirst for power

**vs. 5 *Because he is as greedy as the grave and like death is never satisfied, he gathers to himself all the nations and takes captive all the peoples.***

6. Culmination: Relentless Empire-Building

yearning for eternal glory

building an empire that will last forever

making a name for yourself, like the names of the greatest in human history

THIS IS THE SPIRIT OF BABYLON... this is the spirit of Satan in man

C. Judgment Day Approaches: Five-fold Woe

**vs. 5-6** *Because he is as greedy as the grave and like death is never satisfied, he gathers to himself all the nations and takes captive all the peoples. <sup>6</sup> "Will not all of them taunt him with ridicule and scorn, saying, " `Woe to him*

1. Taunts from the Oppressed: Oppressed people look to God
  - a. nowhere else to turn
  - b. God hears their prayers and delivers them
  - c. ultimately they rise up
2. "Taunt song": A cry of exultation when the oppressor falls at last

Illus. Charleton Heston in "Ben Hur"... Romans childhood friend Marcellus asks Judah Ben Hur to betray his own people and act as informant against Jews, Zealots, who seek to overthrow Roman tyranny. They begin to argue. Marcellus boasts: "Rome..." Judah ben Hur answers: "Rome is an affront to God... I tell you, on the day Rome falls there will be such a cry of freedom..."

Bible filled with similar taunts: the cry of celebration when the tyrant dies

**Isaiah 14:3-7** *On the day the LORD gives you relief from suffering and turmoil and cruel bondage, <sup>4</sup> you will take up this taunt against the king of Babylon: How the oppressor has come to an end! How his fury has ended! <sup>5</sup> The LORD has broken the rod of the wicked, the scepter of the rulers,<sup>6</sup> which in anger struck down peoples with unceasing blows, and in fury subdued nations with relentless aggression. <sup>7</sup> All the lands are at rest and at peace; they break into singing.*

3. Five-fold woe:

"Woe" means "Judgment is coming!!!"

**vs. 6** *" `Woe to him who piles up stolen goods and makes himself wealthy by extortion!"*

**vs. 9** *"Woe to him who builds his realm by unjust gain to set his nest on high, to escape the clutches of ruin!"*

**vs. 12** *"Woe to him who builds a city with bloodshed and establishes a town by crime!"*

**vs. 15** *"Woe to him who gives drink to his neighbors, pouring it from the wineskin till they are drunk, so that he can gaze on their naked bodies.*

**vs. 19** *Woe to him who says to wood, `Come to life!' Or to lifeless stone, `Wake up!'*

All of these immediately directed to ruthless conquering nation, the Babylonians

Judgment is coming because of your wicked motives and your wicked actions!!

D. Why God's Justice Descends: Wicked Motives Leading to Wicked Actions (vs. 6-17)

1. Wicked Motives

- a. pride
- b. unrighteous desires
- c. discontent
- d. covetousness
- e. greed
- f. evil plotting

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

The conquest is no accident... but only comes as the result of careful planning; thus this is premeditated murder on the grandest scale! No act of passion, but a result of a careful plan

- g. love of ease

***vs. 9 "Woe to him who builds his realm by unjust gain to set his nest on high, to escape the clutches of ruin!"***

The conqueror thinks that he will live securely without fear because of his military prowess... once his empire is built, he will live safely forever and no foe can touch him

Babylon trusted in their massive walls around the capital city: Herodotus's description & that of modern archaeology

- 14 miles square
- huge outer walls: 87 feet thick, 350 feet high (35 story building); thick enough at top for a chariot with four horses to rise along easily
- 100 great bronze gates in the walls
- inner/outer wall system, moat in between fed by flowing Euphrates

- great Euphrates flowed down center of the city under the wall
- within the walls: beautiful avenues, parks, palaces
- a great bridge, spanning the Euphrates connected eastern/western portions of city
- famed "hanging gardens of Babylon" large enough to support trees

Therefore, Babylon had never been conquered... the walls were too high to go over, too thick to go through... the Euphrates guaranteed a constant water supply, and the walls were large enough to include small farmlands... the city was amply supplied to withstand a siege of several years

Most armies could not siege anywhere near that long

Babylon assumed that their great fortification and military power made them invulnerable to being conquered... they trusted in themselves, rather than God

***Jeremiah 51:53 "Even if Babylon reaches the sky and fortifies her lofty stronghold, I will send destroyers against her," declares the LORD.***

h. power

Wicked motives... yearning to dominate others simply for the pleasure of ordering them around

i. perversion

***vs. 15 "Woe to him who gives drink to his neighbors, pouring it from the wineskin till they are drunk, so that he can gaze on their naked bodies.***

j. self glorification

***Isaiah 47:7 You said, 'I will continue forever—the eternal queen!'***

The spirit of Babylon was self-worship

God is a God of perfect justice: He looks at the motives of the heart, and for these He will judge Babylon. Conquering another people is not evil if God commands it... but it IS evil if done from these motives:

Pride... unrighteous desires    discontent    covetousness    greed    evil plotting... love of ease...  
power... perversion... self-glorification

From wicked motives come a stream of wicked actions:

2. Wicked Actions

**vs. 6 " `Woe to him who piles up stolen goods and makes himself wealthy by extortion!  
How long must this go on?'**

- a. violence
- b. extortion
- c. plunder (theft)

**vs. 9 "Woe to him who builds his realm by unjust gain**

- d. murder
- e. destruction

**vs. 8 For you have shed man's blood; you have destroyed lands and cities and everyone in them**

- f. cruelty

**vs. 17 The violence you have done to Lebanon will overwhelm you, and your destruction of animals will terrify you. For you have shed man's blood; you have destroyed lands and cities and everyone in them.**

God's justice is perfect!! He will use victims of Babylon to rise up against her!

F. Judgment Predicted: Your Victims Will Arise

**vs. 7-8 Will not your debtors suddenly arise? Will they not wake up and make you tremble? Then you will become their victim. <sup>8</sup> Because you have plundered many nations, the peoples who are left will plunder you.**

1. Conquerors rule in ease... get lazy and soft
2. Conquered grow in resentment and power... rise up and overthrow their tyrants

**vs. 15-17 "Woe to him who gives drink to his neighbors, pouring it from the wineskin till they are drunk, so that he can gaze on their naked bodies. <sup>16</sup> You will be filled with shame instead of glory. Now it is your turn! Drink and be exposed! The cup from the LORD's right hand is coming around to you, and disgrace will cover your glory. <sup>17</sup> The violence you have done to Lebanon will overwhelm you, and your destruction of animals will terrify you. For you have shed man's blood; you have destroyed lands and cities and everyone in them.**

3. Predicted also by Isaiah & Jeremiah

- a. Isaiah: 200 years beforehand!!!!!! A drunken feast predicted

***Isaiah 21:5 They set the tables, they spread the rugs, they eat, they drink! Get up, you officers, oil the shields!***

- b. Jeremiah: exact words

***Jeremiah 51:56-57 A destroyer will come against Babylon; her warriors will be captured, and their bows will be broken. For the LORD is a God of retribution; he will repay in full. <sup>57</sup> I will make her officials and wise men drunk, her governors, officers and warriors as well; they will sleep forever and not awake," declares the King, whose name is the LORD Almighty.***

Jeremiah predicted that Babylon would be in a drunken sleep... wine betrayed them literally!!

Then, Jeremiah uses the exact same words as Habakkuk:

***Jeremiah 51:58 This is what the LORD Almighty says: "Babylon's thick wall will be leveled and her high gates set on fire; the peoples exhaust themselves for nothing, the nations' labor is only fuel for the flames."***

G. Judgment Accomplished

1. Described in Daniel

Daniel 5: Belshazzar's Feast... the final night of the Babylonian Empire

2. Validated by Archaeology

- a. famous story from the ancient world: Herodotus & Xenophon
- b. the date was Oct. 11-12, 539 B.C.
- c. Cyrus the Great of Persia advanced against the walls
- d. A brilliant Persian general, a forgotten canal
  - diverted the water of the Euphrates river to the old abandoned canal
  - sent his men under the walls where the river had flowed
  - if the Babylonians had been watching they could easily have killed the soldiers sent under the walls... but they were all lying in their beds drunk

- the Persian army flooded through the city and killed all these drunken soldiers while they lay in their beds

## IV. Summary and Application

### A. Wait Joyfully for God's Powerful Word

1. Habakkuk asked for wisdom, waited and got it!!
2. God's word the only comfort when the world comes crumbling down
3. God's word will be fulfilled no matter how improbable it seems
4. Habakkuk believed that word and rejoiced

**3:16-18 I will wait patiently for the day of calamity to come on the nation invading us. Though the fig tree does not bud and there are no grapes on the vines, though the olive crop fails and the fields produce no food, though there are no sheep in the pen and no cattle in the stalls, <sup>18</sup> yet I will rejoice in the LORD, I will be joyful in God my Savior.**

### B. Be Humbled by God's Absolute Sovereignty

1. God raises up the Babylonians in His own time, and crushes them in His own time
2. No one can say to Him "What are you doing??"
3. God's ways are not ours... His chosen people are hereby expelled from the Promised Land, never to rule it completely again UNTIL the "times of the Gentiles" are complete
4. God is working out a plan so vast and complicated we could never understand it all
5. God gives us no explanation... but just calls us to trust His love, power, and justice

### C. Never Doubt God's Perfect Justice

1. Some of God's ways seem unjust... but they never are!
2. Every wicked motive and wicked action is carefully recorded and will be punished... either on Judgment Day or at the cross
3. Do not doubt God's justice no matter what your circumstances

### D. Flee to the Only Place of Safety: Christ

**vs. 4 *"The righteous will live by faith***

1. Babylon thought they could set their nest on high to escape the clutches of ruin
2. Some people trust their education, work skills, large bank accounts, resume, awards, people skills
3. True threat: God's sovereign power... from His power there is no escape; Judgment Day comes
4. Only true place of safety is JESUS CHRIST

Next time: God's Empire will Fill the Earth