

We're at the end of the first week of tennis at Wimbledon. Even while not playing at this time, Serena Williams has kept her name in the spotlight. For, Serena is a champion tennis player. But a few years ago, she got into a big mess. She was close to losing her match when the linesperson called a foot fault on her serve. The call greatly upset her. She started swearing at the linesperson and allegedly threatened her. As a result, Serena received a code violation. She lost that game. And then she lost the match.

Did Serena deserve her code violation, along with the point awarded against her? Yes, she did! Her language and behaviour were unworthy of a professional tennis player. So, in the end, it mattered very little whether she had foot-faulted or not. Justice had to be done for her bad behaviour. The penalty soon brought an end to the match. The umpires did the right thing. Justice was carried out immediately and that's satisfying to see. But it's not always the way it works. In Habakkuk's case, he would not see justice done so quickly.

At first, the nation of Judah caused Habakkuk much concern. Among God's people there was destruction and violence, strife and conflict (1:3). The law was paralysed. Habakkuk makes two comments about justice in 1:4, ***Justice never prevails... justice is perverted.*** But then God promises to do something totally amazing (1:5). We can imagine that this news would delight Habakkuk. Justice would be done. However, God tells Habakkuk that He'll send the Babylonians to deal with the violence in Judah. It was incredible! The violent Babylonians would overrun the land (1:6).

And God kept His promise. Under king Nebuchadnezzar, the Babylonians took many of the people captive to Babylon. But before they came, Habakkuk realised that history wasn't under his control. So he decided to watch and wait, in order to see what kind of justice God could bring about (2:1).

God encouraged Habakkuk by telling him that the end to Judah's trials would come. The proud and arrogant Babylonians would fall. Clearly, God will bring about this end. In fact, God raised up Cyrus. Cyrus eventually overthrew the Babylonians and let God's people return the Judah and Jerusalem (Ezra 1).

Meanwhile, the LORD says (2:4b), ***The righteous will live by his faith.*** By faith we enter into a right relationship with God. This faith (or faithfulness) then determines, even defines, how we live.

Before looking at today's passage (Habakkuk 2:5-11), what does Habakkuk want to see happen? In the first place, he wants justice restored to the land. His cry to God in 1:3 reads, ***Why do you make me look at injustice? Why do you tolerate wrong?***

When God promises to send the Babylonians this really stretches Habakkuk's mind. What kind of justice is it, to use the Babylonians to bring about justice? In 1:13b we get an idea of what he's thinking. ***Why are you silent while the wicked swallow up those more righteous than themselves?*** How could God use a people more wicked than Judah to deal with Judah's wickedness?

Put yourself in Habakkuk's shoes for a moment. In his situation, what would you want God to do? Clearly, you'd want God to bring about an end to violence and corruption. Normally, you'd expect the law courts to take care of the matter. But, we read in 1:4a, ***The law is paralysed.***

We don't know how the law was paralysed. However, we have a similar situation here in Australia. We have increasing violence, and not only just here in Melbourne. For one reason or another, the law is not our solution to this problem. (God may be using a similar answer to our problem as He did for Judah.)

God's solution surprises us, just as much as it did Habakkuk. This answer to Habakkuk's cry marks the contrast between the righteous and the wicked. We read in 2:4, ***"See, he is puffed up; his desires are not upright—but the righteous will live by his faith."*** In the rest of this chapter, the Lord outlines what will happen to the Babylonians. But first, He summarises His words from 1:5-11.

2:5 sets the scene, ***"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."*** The arrogant and proud have ungodly desires. They will never come to enjoy God's blessings. That's the way God works. For a time, they may appear to be blessed, but their sinful arrogance betrays them and ultimately destroys them.

The end of Babylonian rule ***will certainly come and will not delay*** (2:3b). Meanwhile, very strong imagery describes how ruthless the Babylonians were. Their *greed* is insatiable, unable to be quenched.

God compares this greed to the uncontrollable appetite of death (2:5). Death and the grave continue to swallow up life. So too, the Babylonians would swallow up all that was before them. They'd gather all nations and people under their control.

Selfishness would lead to their undoing. Habakkuk 2:5a, ***“Indeed, wine betrays him.”*** One man said that when he'd had a few drinks he was still a good driver. He suggested that alcohol improved his driving skills. But that's the effect alcohol has on the mind. It deceives people into thinking that they're in control of their actions. In fact they're not. Statistics reveal that alcohol is a major factor in causing car accidents. Alcohol is a drug of addiction. The more you have, the more you want. Thus the Babylonians became intoxicated with their own success.

Death and the grave continue to swallow up life. But they're ultimately conquered by the Author and Giver of Life. For Judah, this happened when Cyrus overthrew the Babylonians. Yet this prophecy has an immediate and a future meaning. For us, we have victory over sin and death through the Lord Jesus Christ. We read in 1 Corinthians 15:55, ***“Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?” The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.*** However, unlike Habakkuk, though we have victory now, we await Christ's return for this to be seen as finally complete.

In another context I heard someone put it in this way. In June, 1944, Allies troops landed on Normandy. It was near to the end of WW II. That day was called D Day. But it was not the end of the war. Yet it marked war's end. Victory finally came in May, 1945. At that time the Germans accepted defeat. That day is called V-E Day (Victory in Europe Day). It had been given that title since September, 1944. But the final victory had not been won. Victory was 8 months away. But victory was assured. It could be spoken of as if it had happened before May, 1945. So too, we can speak of Christ's victory as ours, even now, though the final victory awaits His return.

Psalms 37 is a commentary on Habakkuk 2. 37:1, 2, ***Do not fret because of evil men or be envious of those who do wrong; for like the grass they will soon wither, like green plants they will soon die away.*** Then, we read in 37:34, ***Wait for the LORD and keep his way. He will exalt you to inherit the land; when the wicked are cut off you will see it.*** Here are two more verses, 37:37, 38, ***Consider the blameless, observe the upright; there is a future for the man of peace. But all sinners will be destroyed; the future of the wicked will be cut off.***

In the New Testament, Christ's return will end this sinful age. 2 Thessalonians 1:6, 7, ***God is just: He will pay back trouble to those who trouble you and give relief to you who are troubled, and to us as well. This will happen when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven in blazing fire with his powerful angels.*** Just as it was in the time of Daniel, the 'handwriting is on the wall' for the Babylonian kingdom (Daniel 5). So too, it is for the wicked in our day and age.

Meanwhile, nothing can satisfy the appetites of the wicked. Habakkuk 2:5, ***He is arrogant and never at rest... never satisfied.*** And so the LORD's words bring promises of hope along with a grim future. Palmer Robertson writes, *“The justified (by faith) shall live by his steadfast trust”* summarises the essence of the Christian gospel, while the pride of the unbeliever explains his unending brutality against the people of the Lord.

God, having revealed an end to Habakkuk's problem, now examines the fate of the proud and arrogant. Indeed, the LORD had said in 2:2, ***“Write down the revelation and make it plain on tablets so that a herald may run with it.”*** This message for all people, is for all time. Five mocking statements assure us that God's people are always in His sight. (Today, we'll consider two.) The first is in Habakkuk 2:6, ***“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?’”***

The day will come when those who bully God's people will be mocked by those whom they bullied. Truly, this is *poetic justice* [= they deserve what's coming to them]. This is Old Testament justice, not vengeance. And the message is still valid today.

The Lord Jesus makes this point in His parable about the unforgiving servant. He threw a fellow servant into prison because he couldn't pay a small debt. Previously, his master had forgiven the unmerciful servant a huge debt. That unmerciful servant was then sent to prison until he could pay back all that he owed.

Habakkuk 2:7 speaks to Babylon. ***“Will not your debtors suddenly arise? Will they not wake up and make you tremble? Then you will become their victim.”*** The word *debtors* can mean ‘to bite.’ Figuratively speaking, that’s what a debtor does. Having lent you money, he bites a chunk from your possessions. So, the Babylonians’ debtors will suddenly rise up against them.

Keep in mind that this is divine judgment. Yet God is merciful. He gives sinners time to repent. (Thus, the Lord Jesus hasn’t yet returned to this earth.) However, mercy must be balanced with justice. Unrepentant sinners cannot presume upon God’s mercy.

We can never be sure that His mercy will continue any longer than the present moment. Palmer Robertson again, *Divine retribution is sure to come, and it may come without additional prior warning.*

In His parable of the ten virgins (Matthew 25:1-13), the Lord Jesus speaks about this. Five virgins were wise and five were foolish. 25:3, 4, ***The foolish ones took their lamps but did not take any oil with them. The wise, however, took oil in jars along with their lamps.*** The bridegroom was late, and all the virgins fell asleep.

Finally, the bridegroom arrived. But, the foolish virgins had no oil for their lamps. The wise virgins did not have enough to share. So, the foolish virgins were forced to go off and buy oil for their lamps. As a result, they were shut out of the wedding banquet.

The Lord Jesus reminds us that we don’t know the hour of His return. Meanwhile, His warning is clear. Be ready! But how? There’s only one way to prepare: with repentance for sin and faith in the Lord Jesus. In other words, we confess our need for the Lord Jesus. We need His death for our sakes, to satisfy the wrath of God against all sin. And so we come to Him, trusting that His death and resurrection were for us. For, it is in and through Christ that we enter into a right relationship with God. That’s *righteousness*. It is God declaring that we’re in a right relationship with Him.

In Habakkuk 2:8 there’s another reason for this divine judgment. 2:8, ***“Because you have plundered many nations, the peoples who are left will plunder you. For you have shed man’s blood; you have destroyed lands and cities and everyone in them.”***

Cruel violence had (and has) been done to the whole of creation. Clearly, the way that we treat God and His creation determines how God will treat us. This is a sober warning to those politicians and military leaders who brutally treat other people. One day, they shall receive the same treatment at the hands of those whom they oppress. And, if Habakkuk is any guide in this, God’s justice may come sooner than the return of Christ.

The first *woe* turned back on the Babylonians what they had done to others. The second *woe* is found in Habakkuk 2:9-11. 2:9, ***“Woe to him who builds his realm by unjust gain, to set his nest on high, to escape the clutches of ruin!”*** Nebuchadnezzar wanted to make an everlasting name for himself. To do this, he relied on *unjust gain*. This led Nebuchadnezzar to feel the need for security. He needed to ***set his nest on high, to escape the clutches of ruin.***

The same is true today of those who accumulate great wealth through extortion and oppression. You’ll find gates, guards, guns, dogs, alarms, walls and fences around the dwellings of such people.

As for Nebuchadnezzar, his palace had walls that were about 50 m thick. Each brick in the outer course of wall had his name inscribed on it. He pursued his own glory. But this too would lead to his destruction. 2:10, ***“You have plotted the ruin of many peoples, shaming your own house and forfeiting your life.”*** In effect, he was laying the foundation of his own demise, his own end.

2:11, ***“The stones of the wall will cry out, and the beams of the woodwork will echo it.”*** By evil gain Nebuchadnezzar had built Babylon. His ‘hanging gardens’ were one of the Seven Wonders of the World. Yet the voices of those people whom he oppressed would cry out from the materials used in his buildings.

This is not as strange as you may think. A castle in Austria was used in WW II by Himmler as his headquarters. In that place, Himmler conducted many appalling experiments on women and young girls. In the 1960s it was bought by a Christian group.

Constant prayer has been necessary to remove the forces of spiritual evil from that castle. Even as late as 1994, sensitive Christians were still aware of the spiritual forces of evil in that place.

The prophet Isaiah predicted that Babylon would fall and be left as a heap of ruins (Isaiah 14:22, 23). That city’s fall started when Cyrus overthrew it in 539 BC. From that time on, it slowly fell into

decay. Alexander the Great tried rebuilding Babylon. He failed to complete the project and died there in 323 BC.

In the twentieth century, Saddam Hussein wanted to restore Babylon. He saw himself as the reincarnation of Nebuchadnezzar (the king who'd destroyed much of Jerusalem by 586 BC.). However, Saddam Hussein was (in the words of one Jewish writer) reduced to the dust bin of history. He was hanged in 2006.

This message from Habakkuk shocks us. How could a loving and merciful God allow the treacherous Babylonians overrun Judah in the first place? Then, we wonder how could He allow them to bring about their own destruction through pride and arrogance?

If you think of God as a sweet and kindly gentleman, then you've got the wrong picture of Him. He is a jealous God who will not allow another to share His glory. Furthermore, He will not tolerate sin.

When Adam and Eve rebelled against Him they were removed from the Garden of Eden, God's paradise. When the people in Noah's time sinned greatly, God destroyed them from the earth in the Flood. Later, the people built a tower at Babel (Babylon) claiming to make a name for themselves (Genesis 11). God dispersed the people from that place and confused their languages. I could go on, for I've only covered the first 11 chapters of Genesis.

At the same time, God is faithful to the promises He has made to His covenant people. Yes, He will allow them to be punished. He even disciplines His children, for a time (Hebrews 12:7-11). But He will also rescue His faithful remnant. In doing so, God knows that the wicked cause their own end, destruction. Their time will come, and does come. We have many examples of this in the Bible—in the exodus from Egypt; the defeat of the prophets of Baal; and the time when Babylon was overrun by Cyrus.

God's faithfulness doesn't end there. Babylon becomes a symbol of the evil world 'dead set against' God. Revelation 16-19 give us a picture of judgment against that evil. An angel declares in a mighty voice (Revelation 18:2), "***Fallen! Fallen is Babylon the Great!***" While this is yet to happen, it's announced as though it had come to pass. And this is made sure and certain through the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ.

We read in Galatians 6:7, ***Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows.*** That's as true for us today as it was when the apostle Paul wrote it, about 2,000 years ago. And it serves as a summary of Habakkuk 2. Yes, we deserve what's coming to us. But that's what makes our God so amazing. In His mercy and grace He offers us what we do not deserve: forgiveness of sin, eternal life and peace with Him. All of this is yours and mine, through faith in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Some of the most frightening words in the Bible come from the Lord Jesus Christ. He says in Mark 8:38, ***If anyone is ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will be ashamed of him when he comes in his Father's glory with the holy angels.***"

Amen