

Kings and Prophets 15-12-03

This is Thursday, the 3rd of December, 2015. We're fixing to wrap another year up and rip it off the calendar. And we continue our study in kings and prophets.

We're approaching as well the end of the monarchy in the southern kingdom of Judah. And we're coming to the last very significant period of time, the reign of King Josiah, having studied Ahaz and Hezekiah in some detail. Let's take a moment to go to the Lord in prayer and then we'll begin.

Father, it's a wonderful privilege to be sustained by your grace, to be enfolded in your compassion and your watch care because of the Lord Jesus Christ. We thank you for him and for the privileges that we enjoy because of him and through him. We look forward to the day when we will be fully sanctified and qualified to be in your presence.

We know that the time that we now spend is a time of preparation, a time of opportunity. And we pray that as we study your word together tonight that your Holy Spirit will minister it to each heart, that we can grow in grace and knowledge of the Lord Jesus and be thoroughly equipped for every good work, that each one will find motivation and blessing in this portion of your word that we look at this evening. We ask it in Jesus' name, amen.

This particular period as we draw near the close of the Southern Kingdom of Judah has as prophetic witness three of the minor prophets. And that group comprises Nahum, Habakkuk and Zephaniah. And it's helpful perhaps to pause as we go forward in the history of events and who's on the throne and so on in Jerusalem and see the message that God sends to his people through those prophets.

And not only to them, but indirectly through them to us. We can easily imagine that our nation is in a not dissimilar condition. There have been some things in the news this past week that I couldn't help but relate to where we are in our study.

One, the more interesting, I've shared this with one or two of you, I think, but if you haven't seen it, they have discovered in Jerusalem a clay bulla. They've seen these before, but they usually show up in the black market. Nobody knows exactly where it came from or what its provenance was.

But in an official dig by Eilat Mazar, Dr. Eilat Mazar, she's from a family that's very renowned in Israelite archeology. But she's been supervising a dig and they found a clay seal. And it's really fascinating.

I wish I could show you a big picture of it here because it's in the old Hebrew script, the very same script that's on the Hezekiah tunnel inscription. And to me, it just looks like English. I'm familiar enough with the old Hebrew alphabet.

And so if you imagine it here, and I'll do it in reverse for you, but across the top, it says Chazakiah Ahaz. Can you figure out what that is? Hezekiah, the Ben isn't on there. I guess they didn't have enough room.

So it just says Chazakiah. And there's actually kind of a flaw in the clay. You know, it wasn't a perfect imprint, but you can see the Chazak real clearly.

And then you can see Ahaz over here. So it's Hezekiah Ben Ahaz, basically. Then down here, just clear as day, it says Melech Yudah.

And in the middle is a sun disk with wings. And there's an Ankh looking symbol of life over on this side. And it's fascinating.

Look it up and read the article. And they'll talk about that they think it was made during the time of Hezekiah's reign. And in the latter part of his reign, after he recovered from his illness, because this life symbol is a harking back to his brush with death.

And he's very happy to have his additional 15 years. But having just covered that, and then to see this thing published just a few days ago was really stunning. But it so clearly connects to our study.

And then, of course, we have yet another mass shooting that has taken place here in the last day or two. And the puzzlement that people seem to have about why this is going on, it doesn't seem to be a great mystery. But people say, well, our gun laws aren't good enough.

We have a culture of violence. We, this, that, and the other. Here's, I made this point elsewhere earlier today.

Our access to weapons in this country hasn't changed since the first European with a blunderbuss over his shoulder set foot on the East Coast. We've always had easy access to firearms. It's not like we suddenly changed the laws, made them much easier to get, and then violence went up.

So if access to weapons is pretty much the same as it has always been, what changed? Well, what has changed is the degree of mental instability that is increasingly prevalent in our culture. There is, if I can use sort of an oxymoronic description, there is an increasing lack of self-discipline, of grit, of perseverance, of character, of integrity, of the things that used to be instilled indirectly as a result of Judeo-Christian values, but it was instilled in our educational system. You had to buckle down and study and learn.

You had to remain quiet. You had to hold still. You had to follow rules.

You had to submit to things that were greater and more important than yourself, whether it was in military service, whether it was in culture or society. But of course, from our perspective, it begins at the spiritual level and extends to the cultural and the educational levels, but the

decline in those areas inevitably breeds mental instability. Look at a graph on the web.

You can find this over the last 20 or 30 years of dependence on opioids, of dependence on various kinds of drugs, both legal and illegal, mood-altering and otherwise, but if you graph at the same time the Gallup information on religious affiliation in America, it goes like this, and the exact opposite is dependence on other things, and yet at the end of it, what they're depending on now doesn't replace what they used to depend on, and the result is there is so much mental instability. There's a great summary of mass shootings. I think there's a website called, I've heard of it before, but I think the first time I visited it was today.

It's called Mother Jones, and on there, if you look up mass shootings and Mother Jones, you'll see that there's a really nice summary beginning in the 1980s, and there's a list of the number of mass shootings of this type going all the way back to the turn of the last century, from 1900, and listed by decade how many there were, so from 1900 to 1910, guess how many mass shootings there were? Zero. From 1910 to 1920, including the time that we were involved in World War I and so on, you know the number, and mass shootings, by the way, is defined as one person killing four or more people in a 24-hour period, so between 1910 and 1920, there was one. 1920 to 1930, very low numbers.

It goes up a little bit during Prohibition because there was a lot of rum running and so on going on. Then in the World War II decade, there's a few, and then in the 1950s and 1960s, it drops back down to a low number. Then beginning in the 1970s and going to the present, it's like all of the other hockey stick graphs you have seen.

It goes wildly up, and beginning in the 1990s and over the last 20 years, as you know, there's just been a rash of them, and yet access to, everybody says it's gun laws and gun culture and we can't get away from our cowboy roots in the Wild West. Nonsense. What has changed? We've always had weapons, and we've always had stress.

We've always had good and bad people. What changed? We have never had the low levels of Christian influence in our society that we have now, and with that disappearance has gone self-discipline, work ethic, recognition of the greater good, so that wanton self-interest and self-centeredness didn't run rampant, and people get involved in their own little world and decide that they've got a grievance and they've got a righteous cause in their own mind, and they go off. And it's not just shootings, that's just one of many symptoms.

But I say all that to say this, as we look at these three prophets, Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah, they lived in such a time in the Southern Kingdom of Judah, where the increasing decrease, the increasing lack of influence on the part of the people, lack of recognition of God, that's what was happening to them. And they had the same societal fissures and cracks and structural breakage. And each of them takes a different tack.

And I'm gonna quickly summarize the message of each of these three prophets, and then we're gonna begin to take a look at one of them tonight. But all of these men, it's tough to pin them

down. We do it more by knowing just from a few clues in their prophecies when they ministered.

But pretty much all of them extend from the time of Hezekiah down to the time of the captivity. So this is the last hundred years or so of the Southern Kingdom of Judah, somewhere in there. Now, interestingly, Nahum, I checked McGee to see what he had to say about Nahum.

And he said, some people call Nahum ho-hum, because Nahum is pretty much just a pamphlet about the destruction of Nineveh. It's a prophecy of the destruction of Nineveh. What's Nineveh the capital city of? Assyria.

Who have we been seeing taking away the Northern Kingdom and coming down with Sennacherib and Ashurbanipal and all that? Who was that? Those were the Assyrians. And so as their power begins to wane, the bitter and hasty Assyrian, the rod of mine anger and the staff of mine indignation, God says, Nahum is the prophet who details their coming destruction, the destruction of their capital city, Nineveh. And that's pretty much his whole message.

Well, why is that even in the Bible? Hold onto that thought. Then you have Habakkuk. Habakkuk sits between Nahum and Zephaniah.

And we're gonna hold up on Habakkuk for the moment because he's the one we're gonna begin to look at tonight. But on the other side, you have Zephaniah. So you have an instrument, an external foreign instrument of God's judgment on wayward and unrighteous people.

In the form of the Assyrians. God says, I will use them as a rod to chastise my people. And he does so very aggressively.

Well, now that is removed. And Nahum gives the prophecy of the lifting or the taking away of that particular instrument of God's judgment. That one isn't gonna be used anymore.

And so you could imagine that people would hear this with a great sense of relief. Ah, so God's not gonna do to Judah what he did to the Northern Kingdom using the Assyrians. Look at this wonderful prophecy where Nahum says, Nineveh and all the rest of the Assyrians, they're going away.

Wonderful. That's because they're, you know, the bitter and hasty Assyrian, they're evil people. They're not the people of God.

And it's always kind of confused and confounded us that God would use them to chastise his people. Why didn't God do it a different way? So Nahum is sort of a, they can look at him the way you look at some other Bible passages in Ezekiel, for example, where the woes to the nations are prophesied. And say, yeah, get those rascals in Edom and in Moab and in Philistia and these other countries.

The wrath of God needs to come on them. Never stopping to think, God isn't sending those

letters to those nations. He's talking to you.

He's reading those letters of destruction to you. And there's a reason for it. You should learn by this objectification of God's judgment on various evils.

Maybe we ought to take a look at ourselves and see to the extent that those are present, that those same judgment would come on us. Sometimes an accusation coming directly at us, we're so defensive, we don't actually listen to it. Our guard goes up and we're immediately attacking who we perceive to be the attacker and we don't actually listen.

So God is so gracious and so clever, if I can use that word, in presenting material to his people in a non-confrontational way sometimes. And he says, look at what I'm gonna do over here to these people. And it allows any spark of objectivity, any bit of teachability to assert itself and for people to in calm and without feeling directly threatened and directly warned to take warning and to turn.

Lot easier to see a mistake someone else is making and in the calm of your own mind say, I wonder if I'm doing that, rather than someone wagging a finger directly in your face, so to speak. So that's what Nahum is. Nineveh will be destroyed.

It's sort of the fulfillment of the Jonah prophecy that was forestalled by what? Jonah delivers the original of the Nahum prophecy. Why wasn't it fulfilled in 40 days? What happened? Repentance. So if you put together Jonah and Nahum, what does it tell you? If there is a likelihood or a need or a prophecy of impending judgment, what can turn it? Repentance.

That's Zephaniah. Zephaniah looks at the sin that characterizes the Southern kingdom. And he says, people, you've got to turn.

You need to repent. Or destruction will come upon us just as it did in the Northern kingdom. That's the essence of Zephaniah.

Well, in between those two, these are three completely different approaches that you get in Nahum, in Habakkuk, and in Zephaniah. Some people are gonna perhaps get it from Nahum. Some of them are going to perhaps respond to the sort of the direct approach from Zephaniah.

And others are going to get it by sympathizing with the very elegant, beautiful, some of the highest, most gorgeously, exquisitely constructed Hebrew in the whole Old Testament is in Habakkuk. The literary quality of it, the imagery, the poetry, the excellence of expression, and just the eloquence of the message in Habakkuk. It's a shame, but I think when we get to the kingdom and we all can, our native Hebrew speakers will come back to Habakkuk and just appreciate it as some of the most beautiful of all of Old Testament literature.

It is an appeal at an intellectual level, at intelligent people who are thinkers, who can grasp, who can detect shades of meaning and subtleties of expression, who can read between the lines, who can grasp inferences and implications, allusions, suggestions. You wish sometimes

that you could, I wish this sometimes because I circulate in some places that purport to be hangouts for people who can think, chess club and things like that, but you wind up with these just ham-fisted, bat to the head, opaque. Any elegantly expressed idea is just completely lost on them.

They can't identify fallacies, and certainly not in their own argumentation. And you long for a room full of people like Habakkuk where people catch the drift. Really, really great humor is of this nature where it's not broad and it's not slapstick.

Sort of the Churchillian humor. If you've ever read some of the things that Winston Churchill would say. Now, don't get me wrong.

I like broad humor as well, but there is a time when the sort of the dry wit humor can be really appreciated, especially when you have something to say. You can do anything for entertainment, but if you're trying to get a message across and you want to do it with humor, the Saturday Night Live brand of humor isn't the way to do it. It is the literary wit that we used to have in this country and certainly in England in days gone by.

That's what Habakkuk is, okay? So because of that, we're gonna start with Habakkuk. Now, he is probably a little bit later than Hezekiah. He is probably toward the end of the reign of Josiah and getting down to the time of Jehoiakim, but we're going to study him anyway because his observations have been taking place before he writes.

This is a question that he's been brooding over for some time. So as you think about the decline, even though there is a fair amount of reform and superficial recovery in the days of Hezekiah and there's gonna be more reform and more superficial recovery in the days of Josiah, it is a veneer. It is painting over the rotten wood.

It is painting over the rusty metal. It looks great as long as you don't push on it, as long as you don't rely on it, as long as you don't depend upon any structural strength. It is the... You remember in World War II when they were trying to fool aerial reconnaissance, Germans were flying around and putting blimps up and so on and they wanted to think we were much stronger than we weren't.

So they made a bunch of tanks and convoys and weapons and things all out of papier-mâché and from the air looked like, oh my goodness, look at all of these tanks, look at all of these trunks, look at all of this vast quantity. Well, shepherds and people that were going around there, it was all just sticks and canvas and paint. And that is much of what you see in the recovery in Hezekiah and Josiah's day.

And man looks on the outward appearance, where does the Lord look? On the heart. And God is not fooled, be not deceived, God is not mocked, and they are sowing the seeds of destruction. How do I know this? I know it from these books, from Habakkuk and from Zephaniah.

I also know it from what happens. If those were genuine revivals and genuine repentance, what does Jonah and many other passages in scripture tell you? What does 2 Chronicles 2.14 in that area tell you? I think it's 2.14. Remember when Solomon is praying about the temple, if my people who are called by my name will humble themselves, turn and seek my face, I will heal the land. If they will turn.

Genuine repentance does not eventuate in judgment. The Southern kingdom eventuates in judgment, so what does that tell you about any apparent repentance? It's not real. If it were real, the judgment would not have come.

It's just that simple. So, here's the question, and it's a question you and I can ask ourselves, because we are in this situation. We are now floating in a sea of evil.

We are surrounded by decay and decline and departure from faith, from respect for God and for his word, for recognition of the Lord Jesus Christ, for understanding of the Christian life and our responsibilities and our opportunities. It is, as I said, increasingly scarce. I always like that description where they said, people are staying away in droves.

This is kind of what's happening when it comes to Bible teaching churches and genuine faith and obedience. Christians, nominally so, nominal Christians, are staying away from the essentials of the faith in droves. So, we are in a similar situation.

So, here's the thing. Say all of that to say, Habakkuk goes to God and says, what's with this? This is what we're gonna see tonight. We'll cover Nahum and we'll cover Zephaniah.

Zephaniah is a much more what you would expect, hey, everything's going into the handbasket here. Let's all turn, shall we? That's kind of what you would expect. But Habakkuk is a much more elegantly delivered message and we wanna start looking at it tonight.

So, that's the background. That's the historical context. That's the cultural milieu and the spiritual situation into which Habakkuk speaks.

So, if you turn to that book, let's just quickly scan this. It's not a long book. I can practically read the whole thing as we go.

The burden which the prophet Habakkuk saw. The burden here is masa in Hebrew. And this is the case.

This is the issue. I think a good modern interpretation of this would be the issue. This is the issue that Habakkuk saw.

By the way, the word Habakkuk, the name Habakkuk is from the Hebrew word that means to embrace, to hug. And it's a almost tongue in cheek. The title tells you a lot about the book.

The name of the prophet tells you a lot about the book. This is not really a prophecy per se. In fact, this whole thing is set to music.

We are looking at the lyrics of a song, mostly in the book of Habakkuk. And that's why it is poetic. That's why it is artistic.

And it communicates in sort of a right brain kind of way. So Habakkuk, this is an embrace. Now what kind of embrace? Well, as we look at the message, I think it will become clear.

So this is the issue which the prophet Habakkuk saw. And in your New King James, if you've got one like mine, you now have a heading that says the prophet's question. See if this is not our question in our day and our situation as well.

Oh Lord, how long shall I cry and you will not hear? Even cry out to you, violence. Look at the violence. Look at the, and this is not just violence in terms of violent crime.

This is violence done to the word of God, to the way of life that the people of God are called to. What has been done to Christianity, we would say. Look at the violence that has been done to the plan and purpose of God that we are called to so clearly it would seem in the New Testament.

What are the priorities? What is the call? What is the hope of his calling in the New Testament? We've seen it over and over in our recent New Testament studies. Look at the violence that has been done to that. And so he just issues this one word exclamation, violence.

Lord, how long shall I cry and cry out to you? Violence, and you will not deliver. Why do you show me iniquity and cause me to see trouble? Now, what does he mean by this? As you learn the mind of God, divine viewpoint it has been called, as we cultivate and come to think in terms of God's standards of what is righteousness and what is truth and what is faith and what is life, the more clear those things are from the word of God to us, the more sin and violence and shortcoming is revealed both in ourselves and around us, in our culture and in our society, right? The more you know about what it ought to be, the more devastating what it actually is appears. Make sense? You show me iniquity and you cause me to see trouble.

It's kind of like Paul in Romans, when he says, I was alive once apart from the law, but when the law came, sin revived and I died. I wouldn't have known so much about sin if it wasn't for the law, but the law showed me not only the sin, but the penalty of sin, the wages of sin, which is death. The law came, sin revived and I died.

I was alive once apart from the law. As if Habakkuk kind of says the same thing here. You've caused me to see trouble and you've shown me iniquity for plundering and violence are before me.

There is strife and contention arises. There's just debate and argument. There's gridlock in our government.

There is, there are opposing views and nobody can appeal to a standard that allows us to resolve questions. Is there any resolution of the abortion question? No. Is there any resolution

to a perversion and the desecration and dissolution of what marriage is in our country? No.

Is there any resolution and agreement on what the Christian walk and Christian life is and ought to be in Christian denominations? No. Even within denominations, there's constant strife and contention and bickering and staking out territory and assaulting everybody else about this and that and the other. Where, what is the mark of a disciple of the Lord Jesus Christ? By this shall all men know that you are my disciples, that you argue with one another, that you disagree with one another, that you can't find any agreement on any issue, any policy, any tack, anything.

By this shall all men know that you are my disciples, that you what? Love one another. And sadly, Christianity today isn't marked by love. We're not known.

Remember the old, we are one in the spirit, we are one in the Lord, you know, the old camp song, they will know we are Christians by our love, by our love. They will know we're, it has a nice little minor chord deal there. I used to like that song when I was a sprout.

But that doesn't characterize us anymore. Strife and division, acrimony, contention, opposition. Paul says, I hear there are wars and divisions among you in Corinthians.

Remember that? It shouldn't be that way. Why are you saying I'm of Paul, I'm of Apollos? You're splitting, it's the first generation of the church and they're already splitting into denominations. And Paul says, I can't believe you've got the Petrenes and the Paulines and the Apollines.

Don't you know that you're all of Christ? All things are yours. Don't limit yourself to just what's in one little narrow view and be united. There's a spirit of peace.

The Lord Jesus has broken down the middle wall of partition. But why is there necessarily disagreement and division? We necessarily disagree and we necessarily separate. Now, why? Because there aren't enough people who have got the truth of God's word.

And have got it right. That is what unites. It is the common faith.

One Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and father of us all. Well, nobody can agree on who God the father is or if God the father is. So this is what Habakkuk is looking at.

In his society, as in ours, there is nothing but violence and strife and contention and selfish pursuit of individual victories, individual goals. Why do you show me iniquity and cause me to see trouble? Plundering and violence are before me. There is strife and contention arises.

Therefore, the law is powerless and justice never goes forth. The law is God's standard. Justice is the right decision made in the light of God's word.

And those things don't go forth. It doesn't prevail. It doesn't take place.

There is injustice and there is prevailing wrong everywhere. Sound familiar? So Habakkuk looks

at this and he says, Lord, how can you allow this to continue? The wicked surround the righteous. How many does there have to be? Which one is more numerous? When you've got the surroundee, you've got the surrounded, and then you've got the surrounders.

Which are there more of? You have to have more people to surround a thing than there are in the thing. If you've got 10 people in the fort, you need more than 10 to surround them. So when the righteous are surrounded, it means there's a lot more unrighteous.

This is what's gonna happen, by the way, at the end of the millennial kingdom, at the time of Gog Magog, when it says that Satan is released and all of the lawless and these that have been chafing and biding their time under an oppressive and hateful thousand-year millennial reign, he's gonna draw them like flies and they will surround the camp of the saints because, as always, the wide way and the broad gate is gonna be much more populated than those that are in the camp. Is he gonna surround the camp? It's a camp of the saints. It's not the gigantic country of the saints that gets surrounded, is it? So Satan will be released and he will take all of his little followers and minions and surround the camp of the saints.

Mahanaim, it comes from that word for camp. So the wicked surround the righteous and perverse judgment proceeds. Laws change, standards fall, righteousness disappears.

So this is a great book for us because Habakkuk is a man who loves God, who knows God's word, and he sees this. God has showed it to him because he is a man of God, a man of faith, and a man of understanding. So here's God's reply.

Habakkuk asks a question, God replies. After this reply, Habakkuk now is gonna have a new question. And it's great because we are supposed to be questioners and we bring our questions to the Lord.

It's the right place to ask. It's much better for us to be asking God than for God to be asking us, why are you where you are? Have you eaten of the tree that I, you know, that kind of question. It's better for us to go to God and ask him questions than the other way around.

So this is what Habakkuk does. He asks God a question and God answers. Ask and it shall be given.

Seek and you will find, knock and it will be opened. So the Lord's reply here is, look among the nations and watch. No, the word there in the Hebrew text is hagoyim, but I am very convinced that that's not the original.

It is something else. There has been a confusion of Yod for Dalet and instead of hagoyim, the nations, it is hogadim, the transgressors. Now, lest you think that I'm just using the authority of Sam to push this idea across, keep your finger here and turn to Acts chapter 13.

Acts chapter 13, Paul and Barnabas go to the Gentiles. They go to Antioch of Pisidia and in verse 16 of Acts 13, Paul stands up and motions with his hand and says, men of Israel and you who

fear God, listen. That's a great opening line.

Then he is going to proceed to summarize the history of Israel down to the time of the Lord Jesus Christ coming, having been identified by John the Baptist. Verse 27, those who dwell in Jerusalem and their rulers because they did not know him or the voices of the prophets which are read every Sabbath have fulfilled the prophets in condemning Jesus. Though they found no cause for death in him, they asked Pilate that he should be put to death.

They fulfilled all that was written concerning him. They took him down from the tree, laid him in a tomb, but God raised him from the dead. He was seen for many days by those who came with him from Galilee and so on.

Look at verse 35, he says in another Psalm, you will not allow your holy one to see corruption. For David, after he had served his own generation, the will of God fell asleep, was buried with his fathers and saw corruption. But he whom God raised up saw no corruption.

This is the resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ, Paul, the apostle preaching the resurrection. Therefore, verse 38, let it be known to you brethren that through this man, Jesus Christ is preached to you the forgiveness of sins and by him, everyone who believes is justified from all things from which you could not be justified by the law of Moses. Beware therefore, lest what has been spoken in the prophets comes upon you.

He is now quoting our passage in Habakkuk. Behold you despisers, behold you transgressors. So do you think Paul knew the Hebrew text of Habakkuk and knew what it said? I think he probably did.

And he doesn't say behold you nations. He says, behold you transgressors. And it is simply the confusion of one letter for another.

A yod is a little sort of a right angle apostrophe looking thing. It's like a piece of three quarter round on edge. You know, it's just like a backward seven.

And a dalet is just a bigger one of those with a little tittle on it, a little corner. And somebody writing, you know, handwritten manuscripts, somebody mistook one for the other and the masoretic text has come down to us, text. And of course it's preferable to think that this is talking about the nations and not talking about us ourselves as transgressors.

Oh, that's the nations. And you can see that, you know, the subtleties of human nature conspire with a slight textual problem here to fix the text in a less unhappy way. So Paul knew what it says.

Behold you despisers, you transgressors, you who depart from the law of God. So back to Habakkuk, verse five, look among the transgressors and watch. And doesn't this make sense? Was Habakkuk asking about the nations? Is he Nahum talking about the Assyrians and Nineveh? Is he, you know, talking about Moab and Edom and Philistia? No.

He says, in our own nation, evil prevails and the righteous are surrounded by those who are embracing strife and contention and the wicked are surrounding them. Perverse judgment is proceeding. This is a domestic issue.

So why would God answer about, well, go look at the nations? It makes no sense. He says, look among the transgressors and watch. These people you were just describing, this majority that you just brought before me in your question, look and watch.

Be utterly astounded for I will work a work in your days. This is how I deduce that Habakkuk lives within a few decades of the destruction of the Southern kingdom. Because apparently it is within his lifetime that the judgment of God falls on the Southern kingdom.

So this would put him in the high to mid to low 600s BC. He could be anywhere six something BC. Nebuchadnezzar makes his first incursion in Jerusalem in 605.

So 605 is within the lifetime of Habakkuk. 597 is within the lifetime of Habakkuk. 586 is within the lifetime of Habakkuk.

So let's say 650 BC or so. And that's right where we are in our study. In your days, I will work a work which you would not believe though it were told you.

Even when it's told you, you won't believe it. Now, isn't it interesting how Paul takes this same passage? This is talking about a judgment that is gonna be so astounding that when somebody describes it, it's just unbelievable. You think about the early reports on 9-11 and what the World Trade Center has fallen.

Somebody that was hearing about that and hadn't seen the film and didn't have access to media, just could hardly believe it. It's just so unexpected and so astounding. It was a judgment.

That's what you have in Habakkuk. What does Paul use that same phraseology, that quote, what does he use it for? Jesus Christ has come and has been judged and this astounding thing has been done in your hearing and don't be those who are told about it and don't believe. Just because it seems incredible that the Messiah has actually come and has actually fulfilled the Old Testament types, you've been so long in the traditional mode, you're Hebrews, he's talking to men of Israel, right? And he says, I know it's hard to believe that this has happened in your days, but remember what God said to Habakkuk? This is gonna happen in your days and you'll be astounded.

Well, something has happened in your days of a positive nature that is astounding, but be objective. Many people can't be objective. It's, they say, literally, it's incredible.

I cannot give that, I can't credit it, I can't give it credibility, I refuse to believe it. That's what he says here. I will do a work in your days which you would not believe though it were told you.

You'll have to see it to believe it. For indeed, I am raising up the Chaldeans. Now, again, timing of the prophecy of Habakkuk.

If this was in the latter days of Josiah's reign, if it's toward the close when the Babylonians are a mighty power and have rolled up many other nations, would it be very astounding that the Babylonians would crush the Southern Kingdom of Judah? It wouldn't be an astounding thing. When would it sound astounding? When Assyria is still on the scene, but is waning and Babylonians are just an upstart. They're known, but they're small and haven't done anything yet.

You remember when we didn't worry about Islam? Well, those Bedouin, they're over there, you know, we've built some, we're taking oil out of their desert sands, but they're all over there. You know, there's camels and sand and headdresses and ladies in bags and stuff, it's all over there. It's all over there, it's no big thing.

Can you imagine somebody saying 50, 60, 70, 80 years ago that your first and foremost concern in the United States of America is gonna be Islamic extremists killing you and yours. That's gonna be your biggest concern. We'd say, what? How can they even get here? Do they have boats or how will that, it's just so remote.

Well, that's how remote in Habakkuk's day, the prospect of the Babylonians becoming a mighty crushing power and being used by God to obliterate this wonderfully reinforced and rebuilt Southern kingdom. Remember Hezekiah did the fortifications and his son rebuilds fortifications and Josiah is gonna rebuild and expand. Everybody's building up, building up.

You say, oh, we're mighty, we're invincible, we're impregnable. And God says, I'm gonna do a work in your day. I'm gonna raise up the Chaldeans, a bitter and hasty nation, which marches through, He used to talk about the bitter and hasty Assyria, now it's gonna be the bitter and hasty Chaldeans.

March through the breadth of the earth and people say, the Chaldeans, breadth of the earth, no way, what are you, it's so incredible and they will possess the dwelling places that are not theirs. They are terrible and dreadful, their judgment and their dignity proceed from themselves. Their horses swifter than leopards and more fierce than evening wolves.

Now think about this. It seems just like poetic imagery and it is, but the poetry has a point. This is what really intelligently written material does.

It's beautiful in its own right, but it speaks, it communicates truth. Think about this for a minute. Their horses are swifter than leopards and more fierce than evening wolves.

In the ancient Near East and even down, into our relatively modern day, what do you lose your horses to? What are the predators on horses? Leopards and wolves. A pack of wolves can bring down a horse, particularly one that's a little slow, one that's a little young, one that's a little unwary, one that's injured. A good strong horse can probably kick his way mostly out of a pack

of wolves, but if you get enough wolves, they can take down a horse.

They take down cattle, they take down large animals. But these horses are so swift and so strong, they outrun. So what is the poetry, what is the imagery here saying? The normal things that you think would keep these people in check aren't going to work.

Your scientific expectation isn't going to hold. Your assumptions will be proven wrong. You think, oh, well, the horses will never get through.

Look at it, there's so many leopards, there's so many wolves, they'll never get here. They're faster than the leopards and they're more powerful than the wolves and they will get here, God says. You will be astounded.

Your comforting, conventional, human rationalizations will fail. You think you're smart, you think you know, you think you've got it all figured out, you don't. You will be surprised.

And what was the downfall of the Pharisees? That was their attitude. They thought they had it all figured out. They thought they knew where the Messiah would be from and what he would be like and that Jesus didn't fit.

And they utterly and totally missed the Messiah. They stood there and looked right at him and missed him from this same kind of attitude. Their cavalry comes from afar.

They fly as the eagle that hastens to eat. Not just flies like an eagle, it's not just the Steve Miller band. This is, what is this eagle doing? What does it say the eagle is doing? He's flying to do what? Do eagles have a different way of flying when they're traveling than they do when they're eating? How does an eagle fly when it's going to eat? When it's hovering and riding the updrafts and so on, the thermals, you know, they circle and they float and then, you know, it's beautiful and spacious skies, amber waves are great.

You know, you get the whole thing up there, right? It's just a wonderful little wallpaper moment there. What do they do when they're about to eat? You know, people that have these happy thoughts about the eagles and stuff, they dive bomb, right? Claws extended and the little helpless furry prey is brutally clutched, pierced and its bloody little dripping carcass is swept off the ground. It's a completely different kind of flight, right? And they say, these horses aren't gonna travel like you expect and like you assume.

You're gonna be the rabbit watching all of the talons heading your way and in a moment, you will be the bloody mutilated corpse. That's, and you just, you can't even believe it. And it's beautiful.

I wish we could all learn Hebrew and look at this. The Hebrew here is so just ravishingly great. Just take my word for it.

It's beautiful Hebrew poetry. The lines, the alliterations and things, it's stunning. Look at the

rest of this.

Are you, they come for violence, verse nine. Their faces are set like the east wind. What do you know about the east wind? That's the blighting, hot, destructive wind.

They gather captives like sand. Think sandstorm from the east. And they're picking up captives and just carrying them along.

That's how massively powerful they are. They scoff at kings and princes are scorned by them. They deride every stronghold for they heap up earthen mounds and seize it.

Who is trusting in strongholds at this point? Who has just had a massive fortification and rebuilding campaign? The southern kingdom, Ahaz, Hezekiah and later Josiah. All of these guys have been building and fortifying. He says, these people laugh at your fortifications.

They're going to pile enough dirt on it that you can't even see it. Then you have this real strange little thing in verse 11. Then his mind changes.

And literally there, it's his spirit changes, his ruach changes. And when they say his mind changes, you kind of lose the bubble here. When they say his mind changes, it's not talking about repentance.

Go back to the previous imagery. Their faces are set like the east wind. They gather captives like sand and they heap up dirt over fortifications.

You ever read the Percy Bysshe Shelley had his Ozymandias poem. Do you remember that? The two vast and trunkless legs in a sea of sand. It's a once great statue.

I'm the mighty Ozymandias, fear me, but it's a broken half buried statue. Well, that's what this is talking about. The wind image carries all the way through here.

The wind is sweeping people, captives and everything else before it. And all your fortifications are basically going to be buried under the sand. Then the wind will shift direction.

And they take no more thought or interest in your destruction that the wind is blowing this way. And then it will shift. It will change.

The wind will change. It'll blow this way. And just like the uncontrollable wind, even Jesus used this imagery with Nicodemus.

Remember the wind blows where it wants to. First this way and then that way. The ruach, the spirit.

Well, same thing here. Then the wind changes and it says he transgresses. It means he crosses.

It's an east wind and then it's a cross wind. It'll blow and then it'll blow a different way. He commits offense and ascribes the power to his God.

It's, who knows why it happened? Well, God is telling Habakkuk, it happens because I'm sending it. He doesn't even know that he is an implement in my hand. We reviewed the plagues in Egypt where Pharaoh and the Egyptians were the foil that God used to reveal his glory first to them and then to his own people.

You will know that I am the Lord. They will know that I am the Lord. Well, God's doing it here.

And he says the Babylonians aren't gonna figure this out. And there's also a bit of an anticipation that some see here in the king of Babylon. Remember, he has a change and doesn't know why he's doing what he's doing.

And there's some who see sort of an anticipation of Nebuchadnezzar and his growing out his fingernails and hair like feathers and whatnot. All right, and so that's God's answer. So tonight we have covered in Habakkuk, the first question and God's first answer.

Oh Lord, why do you allow this unchecked evil to overwhelm and surround the righteous? What is God's answer? Keep an eye on the wicked. You keep an eye on the transgressors. I've got an unexpected judgment that is going to surprise, confound and eliminate them.

Make sense? What is our comfort? What is our hope? When we look around and think, well, we're just powerless to stop the onrush of decline and debauchery and disintegration and all of the evils that are just permeating every part of our culture and our society. The desecration and destruction of all things Christian, the very things that this nation was founded on that made it great, that defined the greatest generation. A repudiated, redefined, twisted, spun out of existence, denied and twisted in history books that are given to our kids and everything else.

What about that? The book of Habakkuk, this message from God is as real to us as God's message to Habakkuk himself. You just keep an eye out. You just watch.

God's got it all under control. He has allowed it for a space. He's going to resolve it in his time and in his way and for his own purposes.

And that's why the central theme of the book of Habakkuk, the money quote out of the book of Habakkuk quoted three times in the New Testament, the just shall live by his faith. The just shall live by his faith. Look at chapter two, verse four.

Behold the proud, his soul is not upright in him. Same thing God said in chapter one. You watch those transgressors.

You behold the proud. His soul is not going to stand. It's not going to remain upright, but the just will live by his faith.

Trust that God knows what he's doing. Trust that God has the situation in hand. Continue to be the righteous.

Continue to be the just and continue to live by faith. Well, we'll have more to say about this next

time, but the book of Habakkuk is a tremendous and beautiful encouragement. It gives us a view of the hills.

I lift mine eyes to the hills from whence cometh my strength. It is the eyes of faith that look beyond the immediate and beyond the moment, beyond human cause and effect. God says, human cause and effect don't apply here.

God himself is at work and everyone's expectations are going to be surprised. You're going to have to see it to believe it, God says. How do we see it? Remember Hebrews? Faith is the substance of things hoped for and the evidence of things not seen.

So just stand by, God says. There's a purpose. There's a point.

And we will live as we exercise faith. Well, we'll continue our study next time. Let's close here in a word of prayer.

Father, thank you for the encouragement of your word, the presence and power of your Holy Spirit to sustain us when by human measure and by rational expectation, there isn't much good news. We thank you for your grace. We thank you for the bright hope we have in the Lord Jesus Christ.

We pray that through the provision that you have made for us in your word, through your spirit and in our standing in the Lord Jesus Christ, that we can shine as lights in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, that others will see Christ in us and will ask us a reason for our hope so that we can share the good news of forgiveness of sins and a new life in Christ. We pray these things in Jesus' name, amen.