March 15
Lesson 3 (KJV)

Consequences for Injustice

Devotional Reading: Psalm 130
Background Scripture: Habakkuk 2
Habakkuk 2:6–14

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

7. Shall they not rise up suddenly that shall bite thee, and awake that shall vex thee, and thou shalt be for booties unto them?

8. Because thou hast spoiled many nations, all the remnant of the people shall spoil thee; because of men’s blood, and for the violence of the land, of the city, and of all that dwell therein.

9. Woe to him that coveteth an evil covetousness to his house, that he may set his nest on high, that he may be delivered from the power of evil!

10. Thou hast consulted shame to thy house by cutting off many people, and hast sinned against thy soul.

11. For the stone shall cry out of the wall, and the beam out of the timber shall answer it.

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

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

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

Lesson Aims

After participating in this lesson, each learner will be able to:

1. List some characteristics and consequences of injustice.

2. Contrast “the knowledge of the glory of the Lord” with human knowledge and its consequences.

3. Make a plan to exchange unholy human thought for “the knowledge of the glory of the Lord” in one regard in the week ahead.
Introduction

A. Gone with the Fire

One of the most riveting scenes in the classic movie Gone with the Wind is the burning of Atlanta. The scene is incredible to watch—the intensity of the flames, the collapse of all the buildings. As the city burns, Rhett Butler says to Scarlett O’Hara, “There goes the last of the Old South.” Everything they had amassed was gone with the fire.

The destruction of all that Judah had amassed took several years to accomplish. However, when God had finished with His discipline of the people, the old Judah was just as surely gone.

B. Lesson Context

Today’s lesson is taken once again from the writings of the prophet Habakkuk (see lesson 2). The Lesson Context from last week’s study therefore applies, and so that material need not be repeated here. Even so, more can be said. Habakkuk 2 begins with Habakkuk’s description of himself standing watch on a tower to wait for the Lord’s response to his objections (Habakkuk 2:1). The Lord tells Habakkuk to record on tablets the “vision” he is about to receive so that a messenger can deliver it (2:2). Though the prophecy could be read and understood easily, it was ambiguous regarding its timing. But when the time came, events unfolded quickly (2:3).

The Lord also described the lawless, arrogant attitude and lifestyle of the typical Chaldean leader (Habakkuk 2:4, 5). In this way, God emphasized that He was not unaware of their faults; nevertheless, He had work for them to do.

I. First Woe
(Habakkuk 2:6–8)

A. Unbridled Greed (v. 6)

6a. Shall not all these take up a parable against him, and a taunting proverb against him, and say.

Him refers to the Babylonian Empire, personified as a single representative person. The Babylonians are the same as the Chaldeans (Ezekiel 23:15). The word these refers to nations and people who are the victims of the Chaldeans’ aggression and brutality (Habakkuk 2:5). The Chaldeans will experience an unpleasant role reversal: the people they victimize will be in a position to ridicule them (see also Isaiah 23:13).

The Hebrew word translated parable can also be rendered “proverb” (examples: 1 Kings 4:32; Proverbs 1:1; Ezekiel 12:22). In certain contexts, the word can take on negative overtones, such as “byword” (example: Psalm 44:14). In context, Habakkuk describes a mocking kind of speech, perhaps similar to what is referred to today as trash talk. It is only fitting that such language be directed toward the Chaldeans, a people who have become renowned for ravaging other peoples and their lands and possessions.

6b. Woe to him that increaseth that which is not his!

Woe introduces judgment (Amos 5:18; see lesson 1). This particular woe is the first of five within Habakkuk 2 (see also Habakkuk 2:9, 12, 15, and 19). The judgment introduced is directed against the one who takes what is not his, a clear violation of Israel’s eighth commandment (Exodus 20:15).

What Do You Think?

Which problem should take priority in being addressed: greed that leads to injustice, or the injustice itself?
Digging Deeper
Does the answer change depending on local context? Why, or why not?

We do well to note that the Chaldeans never pledged faithfulness to a covenant with God. Though they have their own laws that prohibit stealing and other offenses, they are not bound by the Ten Commandments in the same way that the Israelites are. Even so, the Chaldeans still violate what they know to be right (compare Romans 2:14, 15). The Chaldeans simply do not care about theft when conquered people are concerned. The wealth of weaker nations is theirs for the taking.

6c. How long? and to him that ladeth himself with thick clay!

The prophet himself has already asked the question how long? (Habakkuk 1:2; see lesson 2). Here the question is a part of the taunt that the people of the earth direct against the seemingly invincible Chaldeans. The phrase him that ladeth himself with thick clay probably is an idiom that implies involvement in extortion. Such a person is part of a group whose members are as "thick as thieves." The Hebrew word rendered clay is difficult to translate because there is no other occurrence of it in the Old Testament. It appears to be a word related to trade. The Babylonians’ trade practices burden their trade partners and take no concern for the needs of others. Habakkuk points out that even the Babylonians’ normal legal practices are unethical and immoral.

B. Unexpected Punishment (vv. 7, 8)

7a. Shall they not rise up suddenly that shall bite thee, and awake that shall vex thee.

The word they refers to those in the previous verse whose possessions have been unjustly seized by the Chaldeans. The vagueness of this pronoun could refer to many different groups of people since Babylon oppresses many different nations. This prophecy therefore expresses God’s concern not only for Judah but for all who suffer because of Babylon. Eventually, however, the Chaldeans will be on the receiving end of hostile treatment as a result of God’s judgment on their wickedness. Although this verse is addressed to thee—the Chaldeans—this text may never be read by any of them. Even if they do read it, they are not the intended audience. Judah remains Habakkuk’s focus. The prophecy’s intent is to reassure Judah that the people’s oppressors will not always have the upper hand. The role reversal pictured will be sudden and unexpected. This agrees with the Lord’s earlier word that when the fulfillment of the prophet’s “vision” occurs, it will come without delay (Habakkuk 2:3). God says that the problem will not continue indefinitely. The Chaldeans will receive their just deserts. The tables will be turned when the abuser becomes the abused. The language anticipates the description of the suddenness of Jesus’ return. People will be feeling quite comfortable and at ease when sudden destruction comes—destruction they cannot escape (1 Thessalonians 5:1–3).

What Do You Think?
What are some practical ways to exercise a faith that says “God is still in charge” during periods of societal unrest?

Digging Deeper
How would you explain to someone that such faith isn’t a blind faith, but is faith based on the evidence of history?

7b. And thou shalt be for booties unto them?

This idea builds on the previous one. The word translated booties refers to the spoils of victory (compare the translation of the same word in Isaiah 42:24).
The Chaldeans take an abundance of booty from those they conquer. But soon it will be their turn to experience the trauma of powerlessness in the face of a stronger foe (compare Proverbs 29:1; Ezekiel 39:10; Zechariah 2:8, 9). Indeed, Babylon will fall to the Persians in 539 BC (see 2 Chronicles 36:20).

8. Because thou hast spoiled many nations, all the remnant of the people shall spoil thee; because of men’s blood, and for the violence of the land, of the city, and of all that dwell therein.

This verse again emphasizes the reversal of fortunes that the Chaldeans will suffer. Those who have suffered because of the Chaldeans’ cruelty will no doubt take pleasure in gaining the upper hand on their tormenter. Obadiah’s rebuke of Edom also applies to Babylon: “as thou hast done, it shall be done unto thee” (Obadiah 15; compare Isaiah 33:1; Habakkuk 2:17; Galatians 6:7). Condemning the Chaldeans for violence in both the land and the city is a way of holding them accountable for the mistreatment that happens throughout every nation where they hold power (compare Jeremiah 50:17, 18). The note of violence against all that dwell therein further emphasizes the totality of Chaldean guilt. They have not harmed just one city or one group of people; everyone who deals with Babylon suffers.

To Rob a Thief

A popular genre of movies is the heist flick, in which characters assemble to commit a bold robbery. The victim of the theft is usually a person who gained wealth by dishonest means. Such a movie has an appeal across cultures, as the existence of such movies originally produced in many of the world’s languages demonstrates.

In the comedic Spanish-language heist movie To Rob a Thief, two former thieves plot to rob the biggest thief they know: a TV infomercial producer. That shyster had made a fortune by selling worthless products to poor Latino immigrants. The two would-be thieves assemble a team of ordinary refugees to pull off a bold crime of revenge. The plot involves gaining entry into a well-guarded mansion, accessing a vault, and then getting the money off the property.

To Rob a Thief has joined the ranks of many other Hollywood “caper” movies. But the basic plot is centuries old. Though the Chaldeans had long stolen from others, they would be stolen from by the very people they had wronged. There’s more than a ring of truth to the axiom “What goes around, comes around.” How do we keep from getting caught in that vicious loop?

—J. E.

II. Second Woe
(Habakkuk 2:9–11)

A. Built to Escape Evil (vv. 9, 10)

9. Woe to him that coveteth an evil covetousness to his house, that he may set his nest on high, that he may be delivered from the power of evil!

This is the second of the woes uttered by Habakkuk in our lesson text. It calls attention to the Chaldeans’ breaking of the tenth commandment by their covetousness (Exodus 20:17; see on Habakkuk 2:6b, above). Such a person constructs his house with self-centered pride (compare Jeremiah 22:13). Habakkuk compares him to a bird that sets its nest on high in order to escape potential threats. The higher the structure, the more secure is the resident from evil or harm—or so he thinks (contrast Isaiah 10:12–14). This person seeks to remove himself or herself from the problems of society by residing above it all. This person wants to live in the fortress of an enclave of wealth, which is untouched by the poor and needy.

What Do You Think?
How can you recognize when your desire for something crosses the line into greed or covetousness?
Digging Deeper
What blind spots do you see in others in this regard? How will you keep those blind spots from becoming your own?

Once again the prophet’s language may be compared to what the prophet Obadiah says of the arrogance of the people of Edom. They have built their dwellings in “the clefts of the rock,” and they feel safe from any danger (Obadiah 3). But the Lord says, “Though thou exalt thyself as the eagle, and though thou set thy nest among the stars, thence will I bring thee down” (v. 4).

Living High
Since the eighteenth century, the phrase high life has been an English expression describing a lifestyle of luxury. In the 1920s, however, the term developed a very literal application.

The economic growth of the roaring twenties brought a construction boom to New York City. The wealthiest business people in the city sought to live above it all—literally. The idea of a penthouse apartment was born. Those who could afford them built luxury apartments on the top floors of buildings, apartments with views of the city above the crowds.

Habakkuk’s description of the proud Chaldeans sounds eerily like the financial high rollers of the 1920s. But just as the financial boom raised them up high, the stock market crash of 1929 brought them down. What “penthouses” might God be preparing to bring low in our lives?

—J. E.

10. Thou hast consulted shame to thy house by cutting off many people, and hast sinned against thy soul.

The Lord highlights the violence wrought by the Chaldeans against many people. The Chaldeans view what they do as a legitimate expression of their power and dominance. The cutting off described here may refer to the way in which the Chaldeans abuse helpless people and take their goods in the process of constructing their own lavish homes.

What Do You Think?
In what contexts of modern injustice will declarations of shame be either effective or ineffective? Why?

Digging Deeper
In what ways do 1 Corinthians 4:14; 6:5; and 15:34 influence your response?

According to the Chaldeans’ worldview, “might makes right.” But God sees their actions for what they really are: a sin against Him and against themselves (compare Jeremiah 26:19; Habakkuk 2:16, not in our text). From the safety of a fortress-home, the covetous person continues to oppress the poor. The sin is so serious that God says this person has sinned against his or her own soul. Therefore, that person’s life is now forfeit; the God of justice will respond with wrath.

B. Buildings Protest Evil (v. 11)

11. For the stone shall cry out of the wall, and the beam out of the timber shall answer it.

We sometimes say, “If these walls could talk.” Oh, the stories an old house could tell! The aforementioned house has been constructed with suspect motives and methods. Habakkuk pictures each stone and every wooden beam crying out against their selfish builders (compare Joshua 24:27; Luke 19:40). The house may be solid structurally and made of the highest quality materials, but it will not be able to withstand the Lord’s judgment.

Visual for Lesson 3. Ask the class to focus on verse 14, imagining what the earth will be like when it is filled with this knowledge, before closing in prayer. Sadly, the Chaldeans are not alone in their repulsive building practices.
The prophet Jeremiah, a contemporary of Habakkuk, speaks of how King Coniah of Judah has constructed his house unrighteously. He has done so by withholding fair wages from those who did the work (Jeremiah 22:13). A king who rules the Lord’s covenant people should possess an understanding of what He requires (Deuteronomy 17:18–20). But this king has acted no better than the Chaldeans. For this reason, Coniah and his people will find themselves in Babylonian captivity (Jeremiah 22:25–27). This will happen even though the Chaldeans overall are arguably more wicked than the people of Judah.

III. Third Woe
(Habakkuk 2:12–14)

A. Fiendish Cities (v. 12)

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

Habakkuk now presents his third woe against the Chaldeans. This woe builds on the previous two. The prophet pronounces judgment on the Chaldeans for the heartless way in which they have built entire towns and cities. Accusing them of building a town with blood does not mean that blood is literally a building material. Instead, the accusation focuses on the means by which the people came to build. In this case, violence and iniquity account for the prosperity that built the cities (compare Ezekiel 22:2). Spilled blood will cry out like the stones and beams in Habakkuk 2:11 (above), and it will cry out for the Lord’s vengeance, even as Abel’s blood cried out from the ground to indict his brother Cain (Genesis 4:10). Once more the Chaldeans are not alone in their guilt for such deplorable actions. The leaders in Jerusalem, the site of Solomon’s great temple, built that city using the same resources highlighted by Habakkuk: blood and iniquity (Micah 3:9, 10; see lesson 4).

B. Futile Human Efforts (v. 13)

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

Thus far in this series of charges directed against the Chaldeans, the Lord’s name has not been mentioned. Now it becomes explicit that He is the one who will hold these people accountable for their actions. His intention is that all that the Chaldeans have constructed—the houses and towns of which they are so excessively proud—will be cast into the fire (compare Isaiah 50:11). The builders are willing to weary themselves as they pour themselves into their work, since they are certain that what they do will last far into the future. But God says that their work will come to nothing. Jeremiah uses language very similar to Habakkuk’s as part of an extensive message of judgment on Babylon (see Jeremiah 50; 51). The walls and gates of Babylon will be destroyed by fire (51:58). Centuries later, the apostle Peter will write of a similar conflagration to occur on the day of the Lord, the day when Jesus returns (2 Peter 3:10).

C. Future Divine Plan (v. 14)

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

Like many passages from the prophets, the predictions of doom and gloom are not the last word. Habakkuk ends this section with a word of hope, looking forward to a time when there will be universal acknowledgment of the Lord God. The prophet Isaiah, whose ministry began well before Habakkuk’s, also spoke of a global knowledge of the glory of the Lord, even using the same water comparison that Habakkuk does (Isaiah 11:9). All people will be engulfed by this spiritual deluge. There will be no holdouts who continue to deny the
People such as the Chaldeans, who view themselves as invincible, will find themselves brought to their knees before almighty God. They will learn what real glory is (compare Exodus 16:6, 7). It is not found in the accomplishments of empires such as Babylon, which are destined for the fire as Habakkuk has just declared. Rather, it is found in the worldwide recognition that the Lord reigns supreme as “all in all” (1 Corinthians 15:28).

It is true, as the seraphim proclaimed to Isaiah during his prophetic call, that even now “the whole earth is full of [God’s] glory” (Isaiah 6:3; see also Numbers 14:21). But the knowledge or recognition of that glory is something that proud, defiant individuals and nations refuse to acknowledge. Individuals see evidence of that glory every day, but will not humble themselves in worship to the source, the creator God. But a day is coming when “every knee should bow … and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father” (Philippians 2:10, 11; compare Isaiah 45:23). Habakkuk sees that day of global glory coming. The administration of final judgment at the end of time when Jesus returns may well be part of what Habakkuk meant when he declared that the whole earth will fully know the glory of the Lord. True justice carried out by an all-wise God will be something glorious indeed!

In the last chapter of his book, Habakkuk looks forward to a time when God’s glory will cover the heavens and the earth will be filled with His praise (Habakkuk 3:3). This promise comforted the suffering saints of Habakkuk’s day and gives hope to Christians today. Centuries after Habakkuk, the apostle Peter offered similar hope when he wrote that we “are partakers of Christ’s sufferings; that, when his glory shall be revealed, [we] may be glad also with exceeding joy” (1 Peter 4:13).

Conclusion

A. Justice for All

What Gone with the Wind so dramatically portrayed about the 1864 burning of Atlanta is what Habakkuk said awaited the Chaldeans. All their possessions would be fuel for the fire (Habakkuk 2:13). This is in fact the future that awaits the entire world (again, 2 Peter 3:10). Today’s lesson reminds us that the Lord will make certain that justice is carried out against evildoers.

“Justice for all” is very easy to say and desire. But putting hands and feet to this desire is quite another matter. Cries for justice echo throughout every society. Acts of violence against individuals or groups are followed by demands that justice be served and those responsible for the violence be punished. Systems that methodically keep people in positions to be mistreated are protested because they perpetuate injustice—sometimes on a massive scale. The whole world longs for justice.

Today’s study from Habakkuk, along with the testimony of Scripture as a whole, assures us that God will right all wrongs committed by human beings. Sinners may escape the punishment required by human law, but they cannot dodge Heaven’s law so cleverly.

B. Prayer

Father, may the works of our hands anticipate the day when the earth will know Your glory. We pray in Jesus’ name. Amen.
C. Thought to Remember

The Lord, the righteous judge, makes certain that justice prevails.[1]