

The Context Bible

Life Group Lesson 39

September 22-28, 2014

Acts 19:21-20:16

2 Corinthians 10:1-12:10

Have you ever wished the Bible was easier to read through like an ordinary book – cover to cover? Because the Bible is a collection of 66 books, reading it like an ordinary book is quite difficult. Compounding this difficulty is the fact that the later writers of the New Testament were often quoting or referencing passages in the Old Testament. In fact, much of the New Testament makes better sense only if one also considers the Old Testament passages that place the text into its scriptural context.

You are reading a running commentary to The Context Bible. This arrangement of Scripture seeks to overcome some of these difficulties. Using a core reading of John's gospel, the book of Acts, and the Revelation of John, the Context Bible arranges all the rest of Scripture into a contextual framework that supports the core reading. It is broken out into daily readings so that this program allows one to read the entire Bible in a year, but in a contextual format.

Here is the running commentary for week thirty-nine, along with the readings for week forty appended. Join in. It's never too late to read the Bible in context!

Week Thirty-Nine Readings

<p>9/22 Paul to Corinthians Again - Paul's Defense 2 Cor 10:1-11:15</p> <p>Ezek 13 Jer 23:19-23:40</p> <p>9/23 Paul to Corinthians Again - Paul's Defense 2 Cor 10:1-11:15</p> <p>1 Kgs 22 Pslm 49 Prov 15:2, 7 Prov 20:17 Prov 6:12-6:15</p>	<p>9/24 Paul to Corinthians Again - Paul's Defense 2 Cor 10:1-11:15</p> <p>Jer 40-42:6</p> <p>9/25 Paul to Corinthians Again - Paul's Defense 2 Cor 10:1-11:15</p> <p>Jer 42:7-44:30</p>	<p>9/26 Paul to Corinthians Again - Paul's Suffering 2 Cor 11:16-12:10</p> <p>Hab 1:1-2:2 Luk 14:25-14:33 Job 24-25</p> <p>9/27 Paul to Corinthians Again - Paul's Suffering 2 Cor 11:16-12:10</p> <p>Job 27-28 Prov 17:4</p> <p>9/28 Off</p>
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SETTING

Our reading through Acts has paused to read in context Paul's letter we call "2 Corinthians" during the time period of its composition (Acts 19:21-20:16). In the framework of the letter, we have added a number of other Scriptures to mix into Paul's thoughts, bringing some additional insights from Scripture.

Paul's Defense (2 Corinthians 10:1-11:15; Ezekiel 13; Jeremiah 23:19-23:40; 40:1-44:30; 1 Kings 22; Psalm 49; Proverbs 15:2, 7; Proverbs 20:17; Proverbs 6:12-6:15)

Have you ever been attacked? I don't mean physically, I mean by criticism and undeserved judgment. Usually that comes from an enemy or a busybody, but occasionally it might come from one you would have regarded as a friend. When it does, how do you handle it? It can be devastating. Its destructive effects may be only personal. In those events, it is often a time to turn the cheek. But, what about when the criticism and undeserved judgment affect the kingdom of God, bringing a wreck to others' faith and your ministry? What do you do then?

These issues rise as we consider this week's readings in 2 Corinthians, where Paul's work and personage were under attack by other "teachers" and "believers," that Paul termed, "super-apostles" and "false apostles." Paul's reactions are explored along with supplemental readings from the Old Testament. There we will see attacks by false prophets upon God's faithful prophets, Jeremiah and Micaiah. We will also consider the Old Testament prophets Ezekiel and Jeremiah's reactions to false prophets. Finally we include an affirmation of faith from the Psalms with practical instructions from Proverbs.

In 2 Corinthians 10:1-11:15, we read of Paul reacting to the arrival of false apostles who were corrupting Paul's message of God's gospel. Those false apostles evidently claimed to be "super-apostles," i.e., people with a greater teaching and authority than Paul. They pointed to Paul's physical slights, his meek manner, and his less than perfect oratory. Paul knew his message and knowledge were not inferior to that of the more physically impressive. Paul's message and knowledge were from God! The gospel was not "Paul's gospel"; it was the gospel of Jesus Christ. To be led from Paul's message to something different was to be led astray.

But I am afraid that as the serpent deceived Eve by his cunning, your thoughts will be led astray from a sincere and pure devotion to Christ. For if someone comes and proclaims another Jesus than the one we proclaimed, or if you receive a different spirit from the one you received, or if you accept a different gospel from the one you accepted, you put up with it readily enough. Indeed, I consider that I am not in the least inferior to these

super-apostles. Even if I am unskilled in speaking, I am not so in knowledge; indeed, in every way we have made this plain to you in all things (2 Cor 11:3-11:6).

Paul was ready to wage war against these folks. Now by this, Paul did not mean a physical war, with arms and earthly might. Paul seized upon military language to express his spiritual campaign. Paul's size and physical difficulties would have made it difficult to consider him a worldly warrior with any chance of success.¹ But Paul was waging a spiritual war with spiritual weapons that were absolute winners!

For though we walk in the flesh, we are not waging war according to the flesh. For the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh but have divine power to destroy strongholds. We destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive to obey Christ, being ready to punish every disobedience, when your obedience is complete (2 Cor 10:3-10:6).

These false apostles were nothing less than messengers and tools of Satan, the cunning one.

For such men are false apostles, deceitful workmen, disguising themselves as apostles of Christ. And no wonder, for even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light. So it is no surprise if his servants, also, disguise themselves as servants of righteousness. Their end will correspond to their deeds (2 Cor 11:13-11:15).

¹ We gather this from history as well as the inferences from the text. Our earliest non-Biblical writing on Paul comes from the later part of the first century (some scholars date it in the second century), a book entitled the *Acts of Paul and Thecla*. The book received wide circulation in the Eastern Church. While detailing the interactions of Paul with a virgin named Thecla, the book contains our oldest description of Paul. Paul is described in chapter 1, verse 7 as,

a man of middling size, and his hair was scanty, and his legs were a little crooked, and his knees were projecting, and he had large eyes and his eyebrows met, and his nose was somewhat long, and he was full of grace and mercy; at one time he seemed like a man, and at another time he seemed like an angel.

Scholars do not believe the account in the Acts of Paul and Thecla is historically valid, but rather an attempt to pass off a wonderful story about Paul as if true and written by Paul himself. Tertullian wrote around 190 A.D. that the work was falsely named as "Acts of Paul," and that "the presbyter who compiled that document, thinking to add of his own to Paul's reputation, was found out, and though he professed he had done it for love of Paul, was deposed from his position." *De Baptismo Liber 17* (Evans' translation 1964). That makes one question the narrative, but since the story was likely written at a time when people were still alive who had known Paul, one figures the physical description is fairly accurate. If you wish to sell a story, your chances are greatly diminished if you give the wrong physical data about the man you write up!

These even seemed to charge for their teaching, which they turned to their advantage, explaining Paul wasn't a big enough apostle to justify being paid by the church. We could think of it as them telling folks, "We are the pros. We get paid for this. Paul is an amateur. Think about that as you weigh what we say!"

Paul explained that he didn't charge the Corinthians for the gospel message. He was there teaching for *their good, not his own*.

Or did I commit a sin in humbling myself so that you might be exalted, because I preached God's message to you free of charge? I robbed other churches by accepting support from them in order to serve you. And when I was with you and was in need, I did not burden anyone, for the brothers who came from Macedonia supplied my need. So I refrained and will refrain from burdening you in any way. As the truth of Christ is in me, this boasting of mine will not be silenced in the regions of Achaia. And why? Because I do not love you? God knows I do! (2 Cor 11:7-11:11).

Paul comes down harshly and bluntly on this issue. Paul is not harsh with the Corinthians; he is harsh with those who have wrongly denigrated the gospel! Paul's umbrage is message and kingdom driven.

Lest any of the Corinthians think that Paul's motivation and aim were selfish, or were based on his own concerns for himself, Paul explained that he was only caring about the Lord and his message. Paul's boasting was not in his own power. It was in the Lord. It was God's approval Paul sought, no one else's.

But we will not boast beyond limits, but will boast only with regard to the area of influence God assigned to us, to reach even to you... "Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord." For it is not the one who commends himself who is approved, but the one whom the Lord commends (2 Cor 10:13, 10:17-10:18).

One support reading for Paul's correspondence is from Ezekiel 13. In this passage, the prophet Ezekiel is instructed by the Lord to speak out against false prophets. A number of people were *saying* and perhaps even *thinking* that they were speaking the will and thoughts of God. Yet they were deluded. These people were really simply speaking their own thoughts and expecting they would come true, that God would do *their* bidding.

The passage shows how seriously God takes his own message. His words to his people are important. They are holy. One is not to speak on behalf of the Lord lightly. One should never confuse what tickles itching ears with the word of God, simply because it is what people like to hear. God not only will not fulfill a plan different than his own,

but he assured Ezekiel that he was also bringing forth judgment on those who falsely profess to speak on his behalf. As Ezekiel said,

The word of the LORD came to me: “Son of man, prophesy against the prophets of Israel, who are prophesying, and say to those who prophesy from their own hearts: ‘Hear the word of the LORD!’ Thus says the Lord GOD, Woe to the foolish prophets who follow their own spirit, and have seen nothing! ... Therefore thus says the Lord GOD: “Because you have uttered falsehood and seen lying visions, therefore behold, I am against you, declares the Lord GOD (Ezek 13:1-13:3, 8).

1 Kings 22 gives the story in another narrative form. This time, it is more difficult for the true prophet, although he still delivers the word of God. The emphasis of 1 Kings 22 is on the importance of the hearer to be sure to *listen* to the one who truthfully proclaims God’s word.

In the passage, Judah’s King Jehoshaphat traveled north to see Ahab, the King of Israel. The story has some interesting implications. Both Jehoshaphat and Ahab agreed that Israel and Judah should join forces to retake a city from the King of Aram. Unlike the idolater Ahab, Jehoshaphat would not go to battle before getting the counsel of the LORD (“Yahweh”).

Jehoshaphat asked Ahab to get some prophets to ask for Yahweh’s counsel on the war. Unknown to Jehoshaphat, Ahab did not have any prophets of Yahweh because Ahab spent a lifetime killing them! He only had prophets of Baal. Ahab’s Baal prophets came and said the “Lord” (“Adonai,” not “Yahweh”) would give the city to Israel and Judah. Jehoshaphat then asked Ahab, “Don’t you have any prophets of the LORD (Yahweh)?” Ahab responded, “Yes, I have a prophet of Yahweh, but I hate him because he never says anything good.”

Jehoshaphat insisted that Ahab get counsel from the prophet of Yahweh. So Ahab sent some folks to retrieve the prophet. His name was Micaiah. The folks who went to Micaiah came with a warning. They told Micaiah to be sure and say that the battle results would be good. While Micaiah was being brought, the king’s regular prophets had begun prophesying their same message, but this time actually tried attributing it to Yahweh.

Micaiah then came to Ahab and Jehoshaphat, and when Ahab asked whether or not Yahweh would bless the battle, Micaiah sarcastically said, “Oh sure he will.” Ahab then said, “Cut the sarcasm. You’re supposed to be telling me the truth.” Micaiah was then truthful, and told Ahab that Ahab would die during the battle. Ahab looked to Jehoshaphat and said, “See, I told you he never says anything good!” Ahab then had Micaiah locked up.

Ultimately, Ahab ignored the counsel of Micaiah and joined Jehoshaphat in battle. During the battle King Ahab was killed and his blood drained onto his chariot. When the chariot was subsequently washed, an earlier prophecy was fulfilled as dogs licked up the blood of Ahab.

Unlike Ahab, Jehoshaphat did right before the Lord and reigned for 25 years in Judah. He sought the word of the Lord from a reliable source, and he listened to the word of the Lord. Many today, would like to have a prophet who functioned much like Madame Cleo, a fortune-teller to divulge secrets about minor details (or major ones) in life. Yet the interesting thing is that Scripture speaks clearly to about 90 percent of how we need to live life. Scripture is clearly the word of God, so there is no doubt about the source. Yet we are often poor at reading it to find the word of God, or studying it to figure out how to apply it correctly. It's not as easy as Madame Cleo, but it is a major way God trains us and teaches us.

A good example is Psalm 49. While that Psalm may not have been written at the time of Ahab and Jehoshaphat, reading it now shows clearly the distinctions between the kings and the results. Death is the destiny for those who boast, who are confident in their worldly resources, and who have a great following. Death is their lot, but not so for the man who relies upon the Lord. God rescues him from the grave's control.

The Jeremiah passages give insight into a pivotal time in Judah's history. A bit of background is in order. German philosopher Karl Jaspers termed the sixth century B.C. the "Axial Age."² This century saw the birth of Buddha and Confucius in the East. It saw the birth of Heraclitus in Greece. It saw the transition of Judah from independence into dispersion. Judah was exiled into Babylon, leaving some behind in a desolated and destroyed country. A number of other Judeans fled for safety into Egypt.

Over the history of Abraham and his offspring, the Israelites have had a love/hate relationship with Egypt. Egypt was a source of refuge for Abram and Sarai when famine hit Canaan, as related in Genesis 12. Even into the New Testament times, Israelites would flee to Egypt if it seemed the safest or best place to be. Matthew 2:13-2:15 relates the story about the infant Jesus:

Now when they had departed, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, "Rise, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you, for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him." And he rose and took the child and his mother by night and departed to Egypt and remained there until the death of Herod.

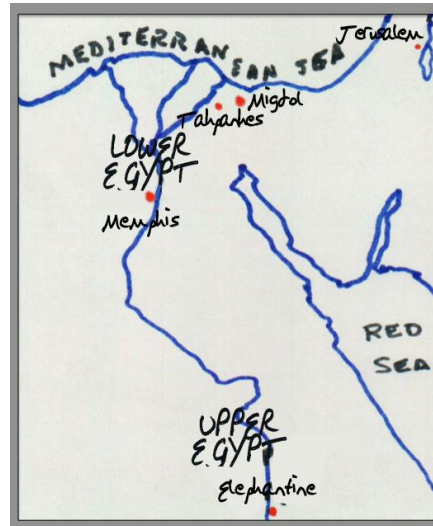
² Actually, Jaspers labeled the time period between the ninth and third centuries BC as the "axial age." His term gained acceptance among historians of religion because formative thinkers in Greece, the Middle East, India, and China emerged with thoughts and philosophies still relevant today. See, Jaspers, Karl, *The Origin and Goal of History* (Routledge 1953).

This was to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet, “Out of Egypt I called my son.”

During the Babylonian onslaught, undoubtedly some fled to Egypt. Afterwards, upon the murder of the Babylonian appointed governor Gedaliah, 2 Kings 25:26 explains that a massive group of Judeans,

Both great and small, and the captains of the forces arose and went to Egypt, for they were afraid of the Chaldeans [Babylonians].”

The prophet Jeremiah was forced to go with this group of Judeans. Jeremiah 43 gives the fuller story explaining that this group settled in Tahpanhes, which is in the Eastern portion of the Nile Delta. Jeremiah 44 then discusses that other Judeans were settled at Migdol, Memphis and “Pathros,” which is “Upper Egypt.” When referencing Egypt, “Upper Egypt” is further South, which to many would ordinarily be called “lower” but the reference is to the source of the Nile. Upper Egypt is further “up” the Nile from Lower Egypt. Of special interest is an island on the Nile in Upper Egypt known as



“Elephantine.” Archaeology has indicated this area held a military colony of Jews that evidently played a role in defending Upper Egypt from Ethiopian invaders. Famed Biblical archaeologist William F. Albright was convinced that the evidence established this colony of Jewish mercenaries in or about 586 B.C. This places the settlement in conjunction with the flights out of Judah during the early stages of the Babylonian exile. A great number of papyri have been unearthed from Elephantine, most of them in Aramaic. From these papyri, the worship reveals an interesting syncretism, typical of the Biblical habits of pre-exile Judah and Samaria. The worship of the Jewish colony adored YHWH, but other deities as well. The colony inhabitants called themselves “Jews,” and their practice included the construction of a temple, complete with sacrifices and priests.

Scholars can construct a good bit of the life of one priest named *Ananiah*. There are eight papyrus roles that are an archive of Ananiah’s family, detailing information about his wife, children, and work.³ Another papyrus letter on file in the Egyptian Museum of Berlin gave instructions for celebrating the Passover.

³ This set of papyri is on display in an exhibition entitled “Jewish Life in Ancient Egypt: A Family Archive from the Nile Valley” in the Brooklyn Museum of Art. A book by the same name was published by the Museum in 2002.

The Jewish community at Elephantine continued through the restoration period of Jews returning from Babylon. While undoubtedly some Jews returned to Judah when resettlement occurred, Jewish life in Egypt continued to thrive even into the New Testament times. It was in Alexandria, Egypt (further “down” the Nile in Lower Egypt) that the Jewish Scriptures were translated into Greek, likely starting in the third century B.C.⁴

With that background, we now look a bit more closely at the way this reading fits into the theme of the other texts. Some will seek out the word of God, and readily follow it, as long as it is what they already want to do!

After the final fall of Jerusalem, with the town smoldering in ruins and dust, Nebuchadnezzar appointed the governor Gedaliah who was then assassinated. A posse formed of those who sought the deaths of all responsible. After dealing with the murderers, the posse came to Jeremiah with a major concern. The people feared that once Nebuchadnezzar heard about the death of the governor, he would come in swift judgment and everyone would suffer. The question they brought to Jeremiah was simple:

Then all the commanders of the forces... came near and said to Jeremiah the prophet, “Let our plea for mercy come before you, and pray to the LORD your God for us, for all this remnant—because we are left with but a few, as your eyes see us— that the LORD your God may show us the way we should go, and the thing that we should do” (Jer 42:1-42:3).

Jeremiah agreed to seek the word of the Lord and tell it to the people, holding nothing back. The people emphasized their apparent sincerity and willingness to follow the word of the Lord:

Then they said to Jeremiah, “May the LORD be a true and faithful witness against us if we do not act according to all the word with which the LORD your God sends you to us. Whether it is good or bad, we will obey the voice of the LORD our God to whom we are sending you, that it may be well with us when we obey the voice of the LORD our God” (Jer 42:5-42:6).

It took ten days, but the word of the Lord then came to Jeremiah and clearly gave instructions what to do. The people were to stay in Judah and not fear the king of Babylon. God would be with them, would deliver them, and would show them mercy. The word went further and told the people that if they violated God’s word and went to Egypt, then they would suffer there and die:

⁴ Jobs, Karen and Silva, Moises, *Invitation to the Septuagint*, (Paternoster 2000), at 31ff.

For thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel: As my anger and my wrath were poured out on the inhabitants of Jerusalem, so my wrath will be poured out on you when you go to Egypt. You shall become an execration, a horror, a curse, and a taunt. You shall see this place no more. The LORD has said to you, O remnant of Judah, 'Do not go to Egypt.' Know for a certainty that I have warned you this day (Jer 42:18-42:19).

It truly is hard to get more direct and specific than that! The problem was this message was not what the people wanted to hear. They thought the thing to do was to go to Egypt, so when the word came, they responded in anger and disobedience:

Azariah the son of Hoshaiiah and Johanan the son of Kareah and all the insolent men said to Jeremiah, "You are telling a lie. The LORD our God did not send you to say, 'Do not go to Egypt to live there,' but Baruch the son of Neriah has set you against us, to deliver us into the hand of the Chaldeans, that they may kill us or take us into exile in Babylon" (Jer 43:2-43:3).

The people then left for Egypt, kidnapping Jeremiah and forcing him to go with them.

Built into these passages are a number of Proverbs that speak of how the wise talk, what words they say, and when they choose to say them:

- Wise people speak true knowledge; fools speak foolishness (Prov 15:2, 7).
- People can get immediate gain from deceiving others, but it never works out in the long run (Prov 20:17).
- Those who speak and deliver perverted or wrong messages will, in the end, reap what they have sown (Prov 6:12-6:15).

Paul's Suffering (2 Corinthians 11:16-12:10; Habakkuk 1:1-2:2; Luke 14:25-14:33; Job 24-25; 27-28; Proverbs 17:4)

Paul was a Hebrew and Israelite.⁵ In service to Christ, Paul had suffered numerous imprisonments, repeated floggings and beatings, multiple exposures to death, and three shipwrecks. Paul was in constant danger from bandits, from Jews, from Greeks, in the cities, in the country, at sea, and even in the church from false brothers. Paul went without sleep, hungry and thirsty, cold and relatively unclothed. More than all that;

⁵ By using both terms, Paul was likely referring not only to his heritage as a Jew (the term "Israelite"), but also the fact that his family records were secured throughout the captivities so the heritage could be traced (a "Hebrew").

however, Paul carried the burden of caring for churches like Corinth (2 Cor 11:21-11:29).

Those events seem pried from Paul's pen. He was clearly uncomfortable lest the words seem like bragging. To Paul, it seemed foolish to even write it. Accordingly, scholars often label this Paul's "Fool Speech." Yet, Paul felt compelled to write to demonstrate the foolishness of the Corinthians following some fake, boastful self-proclaimed apostles.

It is also quite interesting that when Paul wrote in a way that seems to boast about his accomplishments, Paul did not write what the world might put on a resume to impress folks. Rather than list prominent worldly achievements, Paul listed sufferings and personal weaknesses (2 Cor 11:30). Why? We can understand that the weaknesses show the very work and sustaining power of God in Paul's life. No one continues or lives in such weaknesses, much less boasting in them, unless something greater is at work.

Paul's Defense and Thorn in the Flesh

Paul continued his defense in Chapter 12. Paul continued his "boasting," in spite of its evident repulsion to him, as Paul furthers his resume to the Corinthians.

Evidently, the super apostles credentialed themselves with claims of supernatural visions and revelations. Paul then moved to this same subject for himself. In doing so, however, Paul shifted his form of writing to a form termed "arm's length" narrative. This form of writing has Paul talking from his own personal experience as though he was a third person. So, we see Paul writing,

I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven (2 Cor 12:2).

Paul then went on to describe the experience. Yet, Paul did not give us the content of the revelation itself. In fact, Paul said that the inexpressible things he heard he was "not permitted to tell" (2 Cor 12:4). In other words, the super apostles may claim some wonderful divine vision/revelation but such were not the basis for someone's claims of superiority. Paul reverted back to his earlier comments, that the weaknesses he endured and worked through were the best testimony of God in his life (2 Cor 12:5-12:6).

Paul then discussed his infirmity, his "thorn in the flesh," about which scholars make suggestions, but really have no definitive answers. The most popular seems to be that Paul had vision issue (based on a number of passages in Acts, Galatians,⁶ as well as Corinthians). It makes sense in an almost ironic manner that if Paul's thorn in the flesh

⁶ See the lesson on Acts and Galatians for a discussion of those texts.

was a vision issue that Paul should segue to his thorn after speaking of the most incredible “supernatural” vision Paul experienced. The thorn was one that Paul had prayed for God to remove three times. The thorn remained to keep Paul from becoming conceited because of his “surpassingly great revelations” (2 Cor 12:7). So, Paul kept his perspective about him as one who had great visions from God, yet earthly vision issues that would not leave.

Whether the thorn was vision related or not, Paul sought its removal multiple times to no avail. We should remember that Paul is writing this after a three-year stint in Ephesus where Paul was so famous as a healing vessel of God that the Ephesians even used Paul’s handkerchief and aprons for healing (Acts 19:11-19:12). Yet, Paul was never to see the healing of his own infirmity. From this, Paul derived a great lesson which he recorded for the Corinthians and which the Holy Spirit has seen fit to secure for us:

He [God] said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” (2 Cor 12:9)

No wonder Paul delighted and spoke so clearly about his own weakness. It was to God’s glory that Paul worked in the midst of weakness. In the weakness, the power of Christ could work! (2 Cor 12:9-12:10).

The Habakkuk reading places another perspective on the issues of suffering, beyond that which Paul gives. Habakkuk starts right out of the box with a complaint that God is allowing the wicked to flourish to the detriment of his people, 1:2-4:

O LORD, how long shall I cry for help,
and you will not hear?
Or cry to you “Violence!”
and you will not save?
Why do you make me see iniquity,
and why do you idly look at wrong?
Destruction and violence are before me;
strife and contention arise.
So the law is paralyzed,
and justice never goes forth.
For the wicked surround the righteous;
so justice goes forth perverted (Hab 1:2-1:4).

Scholars debate whether this time of oppression referred to the oppression of Judah’s Assyrian overlords, of the power structure within Judah or of both. Most scholars see it as the power structure within Judah, recognizing that Assyria’s interference in Judah

waned and finally evaporated in the latter 7th century as Babylon destroyed the Assyrian Empire.

This historical time of Habakkuk is found in the passages on the Fall of Judah, but a brief recap is helpful at this point. Although Assyria had dominated Judah for two hundred years, a weak king acceded to the Assyrian throne after the death of Ashurbanipal around 627 B.C. This king lost the Empire to the Babylonians, in spite of aid from the Egyptian Pharaoh Neco II. The Egyptian Pharaoh came to the aid of the Assyrians who were battling the Babylonians, killing Judah's good king Josiah in the process (2 Chron 35:20-35:27). After the death of Josiah, the people made his twenty-three-year-old son Jehoahaz king (2 Kings 23:31). Jehoahaz was an evil king whose rule lasted only three months on the throne in Jerusalem. Pharaoh Neco likely deemed him as antagonistically as his father and after three months reign, Pharaoh Neco pulled him from the throne and chained him up, placing a heavy tribute on Judah and setting up another son of Josiah as king (2 Kings 23:33-23:34). (The Pharaoh likely did this as he was returning to Egypt after futile attempts to help the Assyrians). This second son of Josiah was named Eliakim, but Neco changed his name to Jehoiakim.

It is likely that Habakkuk was complaining during this reign of Jehoiakim. The tribute Pharaoh had set on the land was significant, and Jehoiakim was an "evil" king in the sight of the LORD (2 Kings 23:35-23:37). These factors combined to make both sons of Josiah unjust and dishonest in their treatment of the people. 2 Kings 24:4 notes that Jehoiakim even shed innocent blood (see also the narrative in Jeremiah 26:20-26:24). It was an oppressive time as Habakkuk's contemporary Jeremiah recorded:

Woe to him who builds his house by unrighteousness, and his upper rooms by injustice, who makes his neighbor serve him for nothing and does not give him his wages, who says, 'I will build myself a great house with spacious upper rooms,' who cuts out windows for it, paneling it with cedar and painting it with vermilion. Do you think you are a king because you compete in cedar? Did not your father eat and drink and do justice and righteousness? Then it was well with him. He judged the cause of the poor and needy; then it was well. Is not this to know me? declares the LORD. But you have eyes and heart only for your dishonest gain, for shedding innocent blood, and for practicing oppression and violence (Jer 22:13-22:17).

This time finds Habakkuk complaining to God about the law as "paralyzed," prohibiting justice from going forth, instead allowing its perversion as the wicked surrounded the righteous (Hab 1:4). Habakkuk accuses God of standing idly by while Habakkuk and others contend with rampant iniquity, destruction of all that is right, and violence (Hab 1:2-1:3).

After some unknown time period, God answers Habakkuk. The answer was, in some ways, more astonishing than the facts that gave rise to Habakkuk's first complaint.

God's Answer (Hab 1:5-1:11)

God's answer to Habakkuk evidenced even more stunning behavior on God's part than God's allowing wickedness to flourish in Judah. God told Habakkuk that God was bringing punishment upon Judah, but the punishment would be from an even more wicked people!

Look among the nations, and see;
wonder and be astounded.
For I am doing a work in your days
that you would not believe if told.
For behold, I am raising up the Chaldeans,
that bitter and hasty nation,
who march through the breadth of the earth,
to seize dwellings not their own.
They are dreaded and fearsome;
their justice and dignity go forth from themselves.
Their horses are swifter than leopards,
more fierce than the evening wolves;
their horsemen press proudly on.
Their horsemen come from afar;
they fly like an eagle swift to devour.
They all come for violence,
all their faces forward.
They gather captives like sand.
At kings they scoff,
and at rulers they laugh.
They laugh at every fortress,
for they pile up earth and take it.
Then they sweep by like the wind and go on,
guilty men, whose own might is their god! (Hab 1:5-1:11).

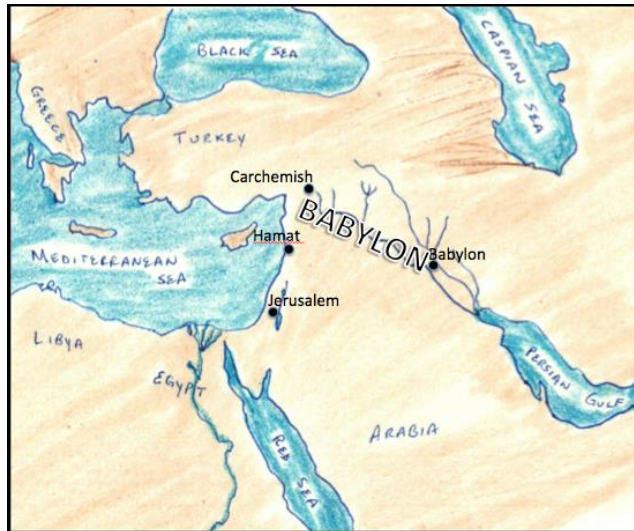
God knew his answer would astonish Habakkuk. God was not simply judging Judah, but God was specifically raising up the Chaldeans to accomplish his purpose. (The Chaldeans are synonymous with the Babylonians.⁷) As history records, and as Habakkuk knew, the Babylonians were a "bitter" nation intent on taking whatever they

⁷ Chaldea was a marshy area in the southern part of Babylon.

could find. They had no justice or dignity. They were a violent people with no regard for any other culture or civilization.

A number of scholars use the language describing the oncoming Babylonian onslaught to help date this section of Habakkuk.

In the Hebrew, a clear shift in the grammar shows that, while Habakkuk's original complaint was a first person complaint ("I"), God's reply addressed a plural audience. God was telling all of Judah what was coming. This work God was doing "in your day" suggests an imminent invasion of the Babylonians. That the people would not believe this invasion "if they were told" indicates to many scholars that this is a time frame of around 605 B.C. This is seen to precede the Babylonian invasion into the



Philistine territories that occurred in 604 B.C., because once Babylon invaded Philistia, Judah was the next domino to fall.⁸ This message was similar to that of Jeremiah who had seen the Babylonians not only defeat the Assyrians, but also defeat the Egyptian army in the battle of Carchemish in 605. In Jeremiah 25, the prophet received a word from the Lord in the "fourth year" of Jehoiakim's reign, which would date to roughly 605/604 B.C., that Nebuchadnezzar would come against the land bringing destruction.

The language Habakkuk uses illustrates the military work of the Babylonians. They were "swift" in battle, using chariots and horses. After defeating the Egyptians at Carchemish, the Babylonian chronicles relate that the Babylonians chased the Egyptians 150 miles to Hamat where they again engaged them in battle defeating them. When the Babylonians came upon towns fortified with walls, they would "laugh" and "pile up dirt," enabling them to use siege engines or simply use the dirt as a ramp to conquer the city.

The Babylonians were an arrogant, evil, dangerous people who worshipped their own might as god, yet these were the people that God chose to judge his own. This left Habakkuk stunned, as he related in his next complaint.

Habakkuk's Second Complaint (Hab 1:12-2:1)

⁸ See, e.g., Roberts, J.J.M., *Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah: A Commentary*, (Westminster 1991), at 95.

Habakkuk can hardly believe his ears! Was God truly going to take a more wicked nation and prop them up, using them to destroy God's chosen people who, although wicked, were certainly less so than the Babylonians!

Are you not from everlasting,
O LORD my God, my Holy One?
We shall not die.
O LORD, you have ordained them as a judgment,
and you, O Rock, have established them for reproof.
You who are of purer eyes than to see evil
and cannot look at wrong,
why do you idly look at traitors
and remain silent when the wicked swallows up
the man more righteous than he?
You make mankind like the fish of the sea,
like crawling things that have no ruler.
He brings all of them up with a hook;
he drags them out with his net;
he gathers them in his dragnet;
so he rejoices and is glad.
Therefore he sacrifices to his net
and makes offerings to his dragnet;
for by them he lives in luxury,
and his food is rich.
Is he then to keep on emptying his net
and mercilessly killing nations forever?
I will take my stand at my watchpost
and station myself on the tower,
and look out to see what he will say to me,
and what I will answer concerning my complaint.

This complaint begins with challenging language that effectively says, "Aren't you still God? Aren't you there? Aren't you alive? Aren't you supposed to be holy?" The complaint then notes that God is everlasting, and not supposed to die!⁹ How then, Habakkuk wants to know, can God ordain the Babylonians as judges? When God is too

⁹ The English Standard Version translates the end of verse 12 as "We shall not die," but others translate it as referring to God, "You will not die, will you?" See, e.g., Roberts at 100ff as well as the New International Version. The issue for the scholars is whether later Jewish editors changed the original passage. There are 18 of these passages in the Old Testament where statements are made about God that are seen to have been "corrected" by scribes who thought the statements as violating true doctrine. For a discussion of this see the formative no real different message: "God is from everlasting, not dead, right?" Or "God is from everlasting, and we are not dead, right?"

pure to look upon evil, how can God allow the greater in wickedness to swallow up the lesser in wickedness?

Habakkuk then uses illustrations that reverse the creation story of Genesis. Instead of God making the teeming fish of the sea and the creeping things on land on one day, reserving for the last act on the sixth day the creation of man¹⁰, God has turned man into no more than the fish or creeping things made earlier. These were the things man was to have dominion over, not become like! Judah would be left leaderless like the fish, while the Babylonians live in luxury, thinking that they have might that enables them to do anything they please!

After voicing this complaint, Habakkuk pledges to wait and see what God will reply! We switch from God's reply to a reading from Luke 14:25-14:33.¹¹ There Jesus warned his followers that it could turn out to be very difficult for those who followed him, and they should consider that in making their decisions. They should "count the cost," knowing discipleship might cost them everything.

One cannot fully consider the reactions of God's people to suffering without turning to the pages of Job. One of Job's central themes is a struggled response to the ages-old question: Why do bad things happen to good people?

In Job 24, Job explains his thoughts that bad things should be happening only to bad people, while good people should experience God's bounty. Yet that is not the way God seems to be working, at least to Job. The evil people are not facing God's judgment, and Job, a good man, is suffering unfairly. Job's friend Bildad answers in Job 25. Bildad believes that people are simply "maggots" before God, and God has no reason to regard anyone in a positive light.

In Job 27-28, Job returns to his own discourse adding that God is just, and must behave justly at least in the end. Job also justifies himself, though as he works through his own dialogue, he admittedly comes up short in understanding how God is doing things, specifically in light of Job's unfair suffering. Job leaves this dialogue assured that fearing God is wisdom's first step, and it is found in one's behavior, specifically turning away from evil (Job 28:28). Behavior is repeatedly linked to moral character and wisdom in the Old Testament (Prov 17:4).

¹⁰ Some scholars see here Habakkuk using language from Babylonian myth. For more on this consider, Cross, Frank Moore, *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic*, (Harvard 1997).

¹¹ We still note the reply at least in a footnote. God's eventual reply (we are not told how long Habakkuk had to wait for it) was an assurance that God would ultimately judge all evil in its time.

Questions for Discussion

Consider building questions around these passages:

1. Do you have some life stories of people attacking you behind your back? To your face? How did you react?
2. Does it make a difference in how we *should* react when the unfair judgment serves to undermine God's kingdom? How?
3. How do you hear the word of the Lord? Are you good at following it, especially when it is *not* what you want?
4. How do you handle the suffering you experience? Can you find yourself in any of the passages this week?

Week Forty Readings

<p style="text-align: center;">9/29 Paul to Corinthians Again – Paul's Concerns 2 Cor 12:11-13:14</p> <p>Prov 18:7-18:8 Prov 10:18 Prov 11:12-11:13, 11:16-11:17 2 Chron 35 Ezek 25</p> <p style="text-align: center;">9/30 Paul to the Ephesian Elders: Church Polity Acts 20:17-38</p> <p>Titus 1 Prov 20:29 Prov 25:16-25:17 1 Tim 3:1-3:7 Prov 31:1-31:-9</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">10/1 Paul to the Ephesian Elders: Church Polity Acts 20:17-20:38</p> <p>1Tim 3:8-6:5</p> <p style="text-align: center;">10/2 Paul to the Ephesian Elders: Difficult Goodbyes Acts 20:17-20:38</p> <p>Eccles 3-4 Phil 1:21-1:26 Mrk 6:14-6:29 Heb 13:17-13:19, 13:22-13:24</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">10/3 Paul goes to Jerusalem Acts 21:1-21:26</p> <p>Amos 3:7-3:8 Jer 25</p> <p style="text-align: center;">10/4 Paul goes to Jerusalem Acts 21:1-21:26</p> <p>Jer 29 Dan 9 Dan 11:1-11:35, 11:40-11:45</p> <p style="text-align: center;">10/5 Off</p>
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