

Series: Living Godly When the Godless Bear Rule

Study 1

The Message of Habakkuk and Peter

Introduction

Two Jewish believers who lived 400 years apart had a calling to preach to the remnant Jews in Judea. Although Habakkuk's and Peter's messages were to Jewish believers in Judea and Jerusalem, they both reveal the key ingredient for the edification of all that struggle to live godly when the godless are in control. "When the righteous are in authority, the people rejoice: but when the wicked beareth rule, the people mourn (Proverbs 29:2).

If ever we needed this message from Habakkuk and Peter in America it is now. "A stunning 88% of Americans now believe the U.S. is on the wrong track and just 10% believe it is on the right track, according to a new poll from the Monmouth University Polling Institute, marking an all-time low for the question."ⁱ A Pugh Research pole shows a dramatic decline of Christianity from 90% - 65% in the last 30 years in the U.S. "Only half of Millennials (49%) describe themselves as Christians; four-in-ten are religious "nones". Only about one-in-three Millennials say they attend religious services at least once or twice a month. Today, 62% of Christians say they attend religious services at least once or twice a month, which is identical to the share who said the same in 2009. In other words, the nation's overall rate of religious attendance is declining not because Christians are attending church less often, but rather because there are now fewer Christians as a share of the population. Meanwhile, the number of religiously unaffiliated adults in the U.S. grew by almost 30 million over this period."ⁱⁱ

Habakkuk the Jewish prophet appeared on the scene with little known to us about his background and became known as one of the twelve "minor" prophets. Charles L. Feinberg believes that he was a contemporary of Jeremiah before the Babylonian invasion in 605 BC. "This is arrived at from the nature of the sins prevalent in Israel pictured in this book, and from the manner in which Habakkuk speaks of the Chaldeans. At this time sin was rife in Israel and the hour of the Babylonian invasion was not far off."ⁱⁱⁱ Charles Ryrie summarized, "The reigning King in Judah, Jehoiakim, is described by the prophet Jeremiah this way: "thine eyes and thy heart are not but for thy covetousness, and for to shed innocent blood, and for oppression, and for violence, to do it" (Jeremiah 22:17; Habakkuk 1:2-4; 2 Kings 23:34-24:5).^{iv}

Habakkuk unlike most prophets who spoke of God to men about coming judgments, disagrees with God about how He is judging men. He questions why God is allowing the wickedness of society to go unchecked. He is lamenting the degradation of sin all around him while it seems that the Lord is doing nothing about it. When he learns that the coming tsunami of the Babylonian invasion was God's idea, he was incensed. He could not grasp why God would allow the godless to destroy His own Temple, His own city and His chosen people. Although Habakkuk's ministry seemed fruitless, it was the testing of his faith that laid the foundation for some of the great faith passages and later righted the trajectory of Christianity. Habakkuk 2:4 is the golden nugget produced through his fiery trials. "The just shall live by his faith."

Habakkuk 1

1. The flawed perception of the godly.

1:1 Obsession with current events "burden" "did see"

1:2 Frustration that prayer isn't working "how long shall I cry"

1:2 Perceived refusal of God to intervene "Thou wilt not" – hear or save

- 1:3 violence
- 1:4 injustice
- 2:5,16 indulgence
- 2:18,19 idolatry

Faith focus - "The just shall live by his faith."

Takeaway - When we find ourselves frustrated with God like Habakkuk, our focus needs to be on what He wants to do in us instead of what we think He should do about the wicked around us.

Epistles of Peter

On the other hand, Peter the Apostle to the Jews was extremely well known and became one of another twelve spokesmen, even one of the three "major" Apostles. He like Habakkuk, preached just prior to yet another destruction of Jerusalem in 70 A.D., this time by the Romans who had already crucified Jesus. After serving Jesus as the Apostle to the Jews in the mother church, he found himself in a Roman prison again, but this time, no angel would release him. Religious persecution though temporarily eased after the conversion of Saul of Tarsus, had now reached its peak under Nero who would eventually have Peter crucified. Peter's message much like that of Habakkuk, was not just about surviving the fire but about increasing the value of faith itself, "That the trial of **your faith, being much more precious than of gold** that perisheth, though it be tried with fire, might be found unto praise and honour and glory at the appearing of Jesus Christ" (I Peter 1:7). Both of these Jewish preachers to the remnant in Jerusalem are living sermons of living godly when the inaction of God at the actions of the godless are overwhelming our souls.

In contrast to Habakkuk's audience, who were trapped in the net of Jerusalem's walls, Peter's audience had been scattered from Jerusalem, by forces within the walls. It began with the persecution by Saul. "Now they which were scattered abroad upon the persecution that arose about Stephen travelled as far as Phenice, and Cyprus, and Antioch, preaching the word..." (Acts 11:19). After his conversion, persecution continued at the bidding of the religious hierarchy of Rabbinic Judaism (1 Peter 1:1). Some scholars believe that Peter spent most of the last decade of his life awaiting trial until he was crucified there because he indicates that he is writing from "Babylon," (5:13) a code name for Rome in case his letter were to be intercepted.

Commentator Kenneth Wuest defines the intended readers whom Peter addresses as strangers, being "from the Greek word *parepidemois*, made up of *para*, "alongside of," *epi*, "upon," and *demos*, used in Biblical Greek of people in a heathen city. The word here describes Christians who have settled down alongside of the unsaved. Peter uses the same word in 2:11. He will not let us forget that we are living among the unsaved who are always carefully observing us."v The word *diaspora* is the noun form of *diaspeiro*, which verb is made up of *dia*, "through" and *speiro*, "to sow, to scatter seed," This scattering of these Jews took place previous to the worldwide dispersion, A.D. 70".vi "Scattered" - "*diasporus*" – is found in the Septuagint "thou shalt be a dispersion in all the kingdoms of the earth"vii (LXX, Deut. 28:25).

The great majority of Jews living outside of Israel were there of their own choosing for business opportunities among the Gentiles or having voluntarily remained there generations after displacement by the Seleucid and Greek domination of Israel. As is noted in Acts 2, Jews from fifteen nations could make pilgrimage to Jerusalem freely for the Levitical feasts (Acts 2:5,9-11). In Paul's missionary journeys he found synagogues in every major city, indicating significant Jewish populations abroad. Wuest says, "There they had been providentially sown by the great Sower, to become themselves disseminators of the gospel story. The application can be made to all Christians. We who are saved, are providentially

placed by God amid the unsaved, living in Satan's territory...to win those among whom we have been placed, to the Lord Jesus."^{viii}

They were literally Jewish disciples of Christ scattered along side of unsaved Jews and Gentiles. With this close association in a foreign culture these Jews even before their salvation had become known as "Hellenized Jews". Hellenism is the adoption of Greek culture, religion, language and identity by non-Greeks. There is evidence that many who came from abroad were so Hellenized that they could not even read Hebrew. For that very reason, the Hebrew Scriptures had been translated into Greek known as the Septuagint almost 200 years prior. Even their Bible was Hellenized. Those of the diaspora were greatly frowned upon by the Pharisees in Judea, but no problem to the corrupt Sadducee priesthood who ran the Temple, and welcomed their tithes and offerings. Due to the peaceful time called the "Pax Romana" and the Roman road network, they were free travel with a universal trade language and culture. But they were looked at askance when they returned to their native Jerusalem.

John 12:20,21 "And there were **certain Greeks among them that came up to worship at the feast**: The same came therefore to Philip, which was of Bethsaida of Galilee, and desired him, saying, Sir, we would see Jesus." Daniel Stern in his Jewish New Testament Commentary says, "Since the text explicitly refers to the Greek Diaspora ("dispersion"), which has meaning with respect to Jews and not with respect to Gentiles, the Judeans have in mind either Greeks or Greek-speaking Jews."^{ix} The context here is of worshipers in the Temple. So these "Greeks" that came to Phillip were either Gentile converts to Judaism which was very rare or most likely Hellenized Jews disparagingly called "Greeks".

Another example of Hellenized or "Greek" Jews is seen in John 7:35. "Then said the Jews among themselves, Whither will he go, that we shall not find him? will he go unto the **dispersed among the Gentiles**, and teach the Gentiles?" The Rabbis reasoned that Jesus meant that He would go to the Jewish Diaspora or *Greek Jews*.

In the infant church, there were Hellenized Jewish believing widows, "And in those days, when the number of the disciples was multiplied, there arose a murmuring of the Grecians against the Hebrews, because their widows were neglected in the daily ministrations." (Act 6:1). These were most certainly Hellenistic Jewish widows because as late as Acts 11 the Jerusalem disciples were still exclusively "preaching the word to none but unto the Jews only."

In Act 9:28,29 Paul "was with them coming in and going out at Jerusalem. And he spake boldly in the name of the Lord Jesus, and disputed against the Grecians." Again, these are Hellenized Jews in the Temple not pagan Greeks in the Temple. Depending on what part of the Temple, that causing the same uproar later recorded in chapter 21.

Acts 21:29 "This is the man, that teacheth all *men* everywhere against the people, and the law, and this place: and **further brought Greeks also into the temple**, and hath polluted this holy place. (For they had seen before with him in the city Trophimus an Ephesian, whom they supposed that Paul had brought into the temple.)" For this false accusation, Paul could have been beaten to death. If "Greeks" means Gentiles in John 12:20,21 "Greeks among them that came up to worship at the feast," why was there no such uproar then? From these cross references we can safely interpret "Greeks" here as Hellenized Jews. This begs yet another question. If there was a court for the Gentiles in the Temple why was there such an uproar when it was rumored that Paul had brought a Gentile there?" Matthew Poole in his commentary says, "Into the temple"; that is, into the court of the Jews, which is so far unlawful, that they might have killed a Roman if he had come in there; and everyone was warned by an inscription upon the pillars, *Mh dein allofulon entov tou agiou parienai*, that 'no stranger or foreigner might come into that holy place'.^x The inner court and its porch that gave access into the Temple proper was fiercely guarded to prevent defilement. Peter tells his readers that they "as lively stones, are built up a spiritual house, an holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices, acceptable to God by Jesus Christ." (1 Peter 2:5). Christians should be more cautious that our lives are not defiled by the world than the Priests were that the Temple was not defiled.

Takeaway – If non-believing Jews had become totally assimilated into Greek culture, how difficult it must have been for those who now believed in Jesus to separate themselves from that engrained worldliness. We are no different today.

We are so tainted by our culture that worldliness seems normal. An old saying illustrates the lack of objectivity about

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our condition. "A fish doesn't know he is wet." Going against the stream of wickedness around us had consequences then and it still does today. "All that will live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution." 2 Timothy 3:12

Diaspora Jews were being saved by the tens of thousands in the months and years following Pentecost. They were first rejected by the Pharisees in their native country for being Hellenized and once they returned home they were being doubly rejected for following Jesus. They really were alone in the world, but divinely placed among the pagans to be salt and light. They were not to become polluted or watered down to resemble the mission field they now called their home. Peter reminded that them they were strangers and pilgrims not just geographically but spiritually. It seems the other extreme danger is for us to become isolated in a Christian sub-culture and to become so tactful that we no longer have any contact. **If we were saved to be different, why do we try so hard to blend in?**

But even if these diaspora Jews were economically established in the Greek isles and beyond, they were now beginning to feel the heat from the old flames of anti-Semitism and the new fires of anti-Christianism.

Faith focus 1 Peter 1:7 "That the trial of your **faith, being much more precious than of gold** that perisheth, though it be tried with fire, might be found unto praise and honour and glory at the appearing of Jesus Christ" 1 Peter 4:12 "Beloved, think it not strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened unto you"

Takeaway – It's more important what God wants to do in us than what He can do around us.

It has been told that a silver smith remarked that he knew that the silver had been heated long enough to be rid of the impurities, when he could see his reflection in it.

May it be said of us what was said of Peter, "Now when they saw the boldness of Peter and John, and perceived that they were unlearned and ignorant men, they marveled; and they took knowledge of them, that they had been with Jesus.(Acts 4:13)" May this be said of us in godless times. May we not become a statistic of the decline of the Faith.

ⁱ <https://www.forbes.com/sites/darreonnadavis/2022/...>

ⁱⁱ In U.S., Decline of Christianity Continues at Rapid Pace | Pew Research Center

ⁱⁱⁱ The Major Message of The Minor Prophets, Charles L. Feinberg, American Board of Missions to The Jews, N.Y., N.Y., 1951,P.12

^{iv} Ryrie Study Bible, King James Version, Charles Caldwell Ryrie, Moody Bible Institute, Chicago Illinois, 1994,P.1348

^v Word Studies First Peter, Kenneth S. Wuest, WM. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1942, P. 14

^{vi} Ibid P.14

^{vii} The Researchers Library of Ancient Texts, Volume III, The Septuagint, Defense Publishers, Crane , MO, 2012, P.156

^{viii} Word Studies First Peter, Kenneth S. Wuest, WM. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1942,P.15

^{ix} Jewish New Testament Commentary, Daniel Stern, Jewish New Testament Publications, Clarksville, MD, 1992, P.178

^x Acts 21:28 Commentaries: crying out, "Men of Israel, come to our aid! This is the man who preaches to all men everywhere against our people and the Law and this place; and besides he has even brought Greeks into the temple and has defiled this holy place." (biblehub.com)