

“I Will Punish Iniquity with Iniquity”
(Habakkuk 1)

I'm sure that everyone here this morning is aware of what happened over this past week, how on Tuesday morning, four airliners were hijacked. Two of them were purposely flown into the twin World Trade Center towers in New York, one into the Pentagon and the last one into an area outside of Pittsburgh. Undoubtedly, you are also aware that there is evidence that the hijackers also intended to attack the White House or Air Force One with the plane that eventually hit the Pentagon. It's also believed that the plane that went down in near Pittsburgh was intended for the Washington D.C. area, only there were some on board who knew what the hijackers were planning and were able to stop them, even though it was at the cost of their own lives. 266 people were killed on those hijacked planes, approximately 200 at the Pentagon, and the estimate of how many may have died at the World Trade Center, including the police officers, firemen and ambulance drivers, has climbed to around five thousand. In a matter of about one hour, thousands of souls were swept into eternity. The total loss in property and business damage is estimated to be around 40 billion dollars.

Now in the wake of this wicked attack by these terrorists, we have probably been asking ourselves the question, Why? Why did this happen? Why were these terrorists so successful in hijacking these planes, hitting their targets, and killing so many people? Was this what God wanted to happen? Most professing Christians probably think that God didn't have anything to do with this, that He was just as surprised and horrified as we were over the whole thing. The problem was really one of national security. These people should never have been allowed into our country. They never should have been able to get the training they needed to fly those airliners and to gain the access they needed to hijack them. But we know from the Bible that this didn't surprise God. He knew that those planes were going to be hijacked. He knew where they would hit. He knew who was going to be killed. He knew it from all eternity. It was a part of His plan. We know it is, because we know that everything that comes to pass in this world is a part of that plan. The only question we should be asking is, What was God's purpose in ordaining this? What I would like for us to consider this morning is that God meant this as an act of judgment on our nation for our sins. One of the ways God judges a nation is by bringing other nations against it. This is what we see in the first chapter of Habakkuk. First, we will see why God brought judgment on His people, and then we see how He did it.

Very little is known about Habakkuk, except that he prophesied to the southern kingdom of Judah during a time of great apostasy. From his prophecy we can tell that it was written around 610 B.C, because the Chaldeans were about to march against Judah and sweep it away into captivity. This means that it was also written during the reign of king Jehoiakim, the same king who burned Jeremiah's message, because he didn't like what it had to say. During his reign, he led God's covenant people back into the idolatry and corruption that was characteristic of Manasseh's reign. All this is to say that Habakkuk prophesied during a very dark time for the southern kingdom.

We can tell something of the situation from what Habakkuk writes. He begins his prophecy by asking God why He isn't listening to his cries for help. He writes, “How long, O Lord, will I call for help, and Thou wilt not hear?” Why was Habakkuk crying out to Him? He

writes that God's people had broken His covenant. There were no longer faithful. The wickedness of the king had spread to the people. They were no longer keeping God's commands. Instead of building up, they were destroying. Instead of trying to make peace, they were committing acts of violence. Instead of unity, there was strife and contention. God's Law was being ignored. His justice was no longer upheld. And there were so many who were involved in this wickedness that the righteous couldn't do anything about it. Habakkuk was looking to the Lord for His help, but He didn't seem to hear, or if He heard, He seemed to be ignoring the evil that was going on all around. Things weren't changing, and the prophet was wondering how long the Lord would allow this to continue.

How many times have we asked the same question about our nation? We have been praying and seeking the Lord to turn this nation around. We have asked for the outpouring of His Spirit, but we don't see anything happening? God doesn't seem to be listening. Sometimes He appears to be ignoring our sins. Truthfully, as a nation, we're not that much different than Judah was. In many ways, we're worse. We share many of the same sins: strife and contention, destruction and violence, injustice and lawlessness. God's Laws, for the most part, are ignored. Our people worship false gods. If they worship the true God at all, they usually pervert His worship, or they worship together with Muslims, Roman Catholics and Jews. We use God's name in vain, profane His Sabbaths, and dishonor our parents. We murder our own children through abortion. We commit fornication and adultery. We defend the rights of homosexuals and lesbians to practice their perversion and even to promote their evil in our schools. We steal, lie and covet what each other has. Justice is also ignored. If a man kills someone else, rarely is he ever punished justly. Sometimes when a man steals from his neighbor, he has to pay it back. As for the rest of these crimes, they are either punished slightly or neglected altogether. Sometimes we ask, Does God see? And if He does see, does He care? The answer is that God does see, and, yes, He does care. God sees everything that is happening and promises that He will bring it all into judgment. Habakkuk was wondering why the Lord was silent, why He wasn't doing anything about Israel's sin. But He wasn't going to remain silent for much longer.

The answer that Habakkuk wanted finally came. God said, "Look among the nations! Observe! Be astonished! Wonder! Because *I* am doing something in your days -- you would not believe if you were told. For behold, I am raising up the Chaldeans, that fierce and impetuous people who march throughout the earth to seize dwelling places which are not theirs" (vv. 5-6). God said that He was about to act. He was about to raise up a powerful nation to chastise His people for their sins.

Now this wasn't unusual. The Lord often used other nations to bring judgment on others. In the book of Judges, when the Jews rejected the Lord and went after other gods, He raised up Mesopotamia, Moab, the Canaanites, Midian, the Amorites, the Ammonites, the Sidonians, the Amalekites and the Philistines to judge them. Towards the end of the divided kingdom, He also raised up the Medes and the Persians. After Malachi's prophecy, during what is called the intertestamental period, He raised up Greece. After Greece, it was Rome. The Lord even used Rome to destroy Jerusalem and to put an end to the Temple worship once and for all, since it had already served its purpose. That God would use a foreign nation to chasten His people was not unusual. He often used them in this way. Habakkuk says in verse 12, "You, O Lord, have appointed them to judge; and You, O Rock, have established them to correct."

I think we need to see that the Lord still does the same thing today. He can and does use

one nation to chasten another. This is what the Lord just did to us. It may be that this is the answer to our prayers. We have been praying that the Lord would do something about the evil in our nation. He just did something. So often we think that when we pray and ask the Lord to turn us from our sins -- whether our own private sins or our sins as a nation --, the way He will do it is by simply taking away our desire for that sin. But this is usually not true. To teach us how evil sin is and how much we should rely on Him and His strength in our fight against it, the Lord will often give us over to fight with those sins for a time and then discipline us for them. Then after we have learned how really dangerous they are, He will free us from them. It may be that the Lord has given us as a nation over to sin and has brought this judgment on us, ultimately that He might turn us from away from our sin to righteousness. This was often what He did in Israel. We can only pray and hope that is the case today. If this is His purpose, we need to pray that the Lord would open the eyes of our nation to see it. Obviously it won't have any good affect, unless we see it as judgment for our sins. But of course, it's also possible that this wasn't why the Lord allowed this terrorist act. He may be intending to destroy this nation for its sins. Let's hope and pray that this is not the case, for the sake of the Lord's people who are here.

Now Habakkuk didn't question God's plan. He realized that Israel deserved what the Lord was about to bring upon them. But there was one thing he didn't understand, and that was how God could do this to them through a nation which was even more wicked than they were. He said in verse 13, "*Thine eyes are too pure to approve evil, and Thou canst not look on wickedness with favor. Why dost Thou look with favor on those who deal treacherously? Why art Thou silent when the wicked swallow up those more righteous than they?*" We might be asking ourselves the same question this morning. How could God use a terrorist group -- who appear to be much more wicked than the United States -- to punish the United States? Where is the justice in that? You know the interesting thing is that God doesn't answer this question here. But it's not that hard to figure out. God can do as He pleases. He can punish us however He pleases. Now if we weren't guilty and hadn't sinned against Him, it wouldn't have been just. But can we honestly say that we didn't deserve this? No. We deserved it. You and I know we did. When some Jews told Jesus that Pilate had killed some of the Galileans while they were sacrificing, He said, Do you suppose that these Galileans were greater sinners than all other Galileans, because they suffered this fate? I tell you, no, but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish. Or do you suppose that those eighteen on whom the tower in Siloam fell and killed them, were *worse* culprits than all the men who live in Jerusalem? I tell you, no, but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish" (Luke 13:1-5). These people didn't die because they were more wicked than others. All of them were wicked. All of them deserved to die. Therefore, all of them needed to repent. The same is true of our nation: we deserve to be punished for our sins. All the innocent blood of our aborted children cries out to the Lord everyday from the ground for vengeance. And won't the Lord hear? Yes, He will, and He does. And He is free to punish us anyway that He sees fit. May the Lord grant that we, as a nation, may repent.

Now granted that the Lord has the right to do this -- to punish us through a wicked nation -- does that nation have the right to do this? Will these terrorists be held blameless for what they did? No. They will be punished, even as the Lord said that He would punish the Chaldeans of Habakkuk's day. He says in verse 11, "Then they will sweep through like the wind and pass on. But they will be held guilty, they whose strength is their god." God said He would hold them

guilty, He would punish them for this attack on His people. He actually did this through the Greeks, when they later conquered the world. The same thing is true in the case of these terrorists who have attacked us. Even though the Lord has used them to punish us, He will punish them. God has the right to bring judgment on us, but they don't. They killed about 5000 men, women and children, and did about 40 billion dollars worth of damage, and God is going to hold them responsible for this. He will raise up another nation to destroy them, if they don't repent, and that nation may very well be ours. We should pray that the Lord would exact justice, either through the blood of His cross, through their repentance, or through their own blood, if they don't repent.

In conclusion, let me just summarize what we've seen, and what the Lord would have us to do. What I am suggesting this morning is that this attack by the terrorists on our nation was no accident: It was an act of God's judgment. As a nation we have turned away from God, and God is punishing us for it. We need to pray that the Lord would turn our leaders, the people of this nation, and us, from our sins, so that the Lord won't bring something even worse upon us. But we also need to realize that even though we deserved this attack, that doesn't mean that those who attacked us are guiltless. We should pray that the Lord would give our leaders the information they need to find these men and the courage to punish them justly. It may be that the Lord had them attack us, because He intends to destroy them once and for all. And finally, even though many of those who were killed in this attack were not believers, and their families who survive are not believers, and even though the men who helped plan and carry out this attack who are still alive are not only not believers but our enemies, we should still pray for them and do what we can to help them. The Lord would have us to love all men even as we love ourselves, whether they are Christians or not, whether they deserve God's wrath or not, whether they are our enemies or not. We need to remember that we were just like them at one time. We were lost and under God's judgment. But the Lord in His great love had mercy on us. He freed us from our sins through faith in Christ. And now He tells us that He wants us to show others the same kind of mercy that He has shown us. We need to pray and give to help those who survived, so that they too might come to know God's mercy in the wake of this terrible judgment. The Lord often used events like this to begin a revival among His people. Let's pray that the Lord will use this event to bring revival to this nation, and to draw us closer to Him. Let's also pray that as we come to the Lord's Table this morning, that He would examine our hearts, show us our sins, and give us the grace and strength we need to turn from our sins, and renew our commitment to Him and to His kingdom. Let us pray.