

The Compass

Week 51

OT Readings: Nahum 1:1 – Zechariah 5:11

NT Readings: Revelation 8:1-14:20

Things to Watch for in Your Readings this Week

Old Testament

- **Nahum** is a prophetic word of judgment directed toward Assyria.
- **Habakkuk** is a dialogue between the prophet and God concerning injustice.¹ Why does God let people get away with evil? God's answer is shocking – He will use the wicked Babylonians to deal with His own people, Judah.
- **Zephaniah** speaks to Judah and Jerusalem during the reign of Josiah (640-609 BC).
- **Haggai** is one of the “post-exilic” prophets.² The book consists of words given to those who returned to the land after the exile, encouraging them to rebuild the temple.
- Like Haggai, **Zechariah** speaks to the post-exilic community. This book is not an easy read.³

New Testament

- Revelation must be read against its immediate historical situation of the Roman Empire. There are numerous OT allusions.

Highlight of the Week: Who is God?

Revelation 1:20. 5:6-14. 7:9-17. 11:15-17. The book of Revelation is an appropriate close to the NT canon as it becomes the “last word” of Biblical revelation. Not because it contains some “end times” secret or schema, but because it presents an awesome, confident picture of a Jesus who **wins in history**. How reassuring it must have been for those soon to suffer 1st century believers to know that their difficulties would conclude not only in their being comforted (7:16-17), but in their vindication.

The Biblical story ends (Revel. 21-22) with the understanding that God will at the end of all things make all things *right*. We need not despair or lose hope in the present, because God will not only extend His power to transform us personally (Phil. 3:17-21) but will remake the world as well, there will be a renewed creation. Our present efforts for Jesus and His kingdom matter and will be accounted for finally and fully (1 Cor. 15:58). Our lives, our choices in the present are significant because God does not leave things undone and we will see how He has worked along with us to bring about His purposes.⁴

Application: “What about me? How does this apply?”

Habakkuk 3:16-19. In Hab. 1-2, the prophet dialogues with God about God's seeming lack of concern for the sin and injustice of Judah; why doesn't God act? (1:1-4) God responds: He is not inactive and will deal with Judah's sin by means of the Babylonians. (1:5-11). The prophet is stunned; how can a righteous God use such wicked people? (1:12-2:1) God answers Habakkuk's complaint. God will hold the Babylonians accountable, He will deal with their pride and arrogance. (2:2-20) Chapter 3 begins with the prophet's appeal for God to remember mercy (3:1-2) followed by an awesome picture of God's past intervention in the world, His deeds as a warrior.

Habakkuk's concluding words (3:16-19) are an application of God's previous injunction to Habakkuk (Hab. 2:4). Habakkuk has in his own mind a clear picture of what a Babylonian invasion will mean and it terrifies him. (3:16-17) Regardless, his decision to live by faith means expressing his faithfulness to God. It means “rejoicing” and being “joyful” in the Lord, regardless of circumstances! (3:18-19) How can we “live by faith,” “be faithful” to God in the midst of difficult and uncertain times?

For Habakkuk the decision to trust God, come what may, is set and for him it brings not simply peace, but joy. If this seems a bit simplistic or naïve, then so be it. However, this truth runs deep. His considerable thought and reflection about the coming reality of a brutal and difficult future situation has ended with a deep confidence that God will somehow sustain him, no matter what. While he has not *yet* faced the terrible reality of the Babylonian

invasion,⁵ he lives with the anxiety of it in confident conviction because he knows who God is and what God has done in the past. He readies himself – he puts his life and his trust fully in God. While we cannot know what we will face in the future, we can prepare ourselves by expressing our confidence in God in the present – fully, radically; and in doing so learn the lessons of faith and faithfulness that will sustain us.⁶

Difficult Question of the Week

Revel. 13:1-18. Q. Who are these “beasts” and what is the “mark of the beast”?

Only when we are willing to take Revelation seriously for what it is, the “revelation of Jesus Christ” (1:1), and then to recognize its original audience (1:4) can we begin to unravel its meaning. I have chosen this passage as an example of why this approach is the only possible one *if we are to be faithful to the Bible*.⁷

What sense would John’s readers make of this vision of “beasts” and would have been the implications *for them*? They certainly would have looked for the most obvious and clear meaning, a meaning relevant to them, their situation and their historical timeframe. The “beasts” would have been understood as the Roman Empire and its emperors and those lesser authorities that sought to cull the emperor’s favor. The emperor Nero fits quite well into this interpretive scheme. Rumors of his “return from the dead” lasted for decades past his actual demise (13:3). The use of the number “666” for the beast’s name (13:18) would have been clear to the original readers; numeric speculation in these years was not uncommon and Nero could be one to which the number referred.⁸ What about the “mark”? John’s readers would have known historical examples of just this kind of “marking.”⁹ Revelation chapter 13 can be seen as parody. The devil (dragon), who stands behind all the evil empires of world, presents to the 1st century world of John an alternative “king and kingdom” (the Roman Empire and its emperors) set forth in contrast with the true King Jesus and His kingdom.¹⁰ Those who are part of Jesus’ kingdom need to see the truth and stand firm.

The power of these words ring true today in ways that no attempt to find some future literal fulfillment can – we are called to live in faithful loyalty to Jesus as we face a world system that will challenge us, perhaps even threatening our lives or livelihood.¹¹

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¹ Fee and Stuart, *How to Read the Bible Book by Book*, 244-247.

² The Exile marks the period of time when God’s people, Judah, were uprooted from the Promised Land and lived in “exile” in the land of Babylon. “Post-exilic” then is about the time period *after* the Exile when God’s people returned to the land.

³ See Fee and Stuart, *How to Read the Bible Book by Book*, 256-261.

⁴ In *Surprised by Hope* N. T. Wright uses the illustration of an ancient stone cathedral to show how our lives and efforts, our “stone,” is incorporated into the whole of God’s historical work; He being the “master mason.” While the analogy has limits, it is helpful. We will have closure, our questions satisfied, our tears wiped away.

⁵ Reread Lamentations to see how terrible this invasion actually was.

⁶ Habakkuk lives radically in the present because he knows God and thus prepares himself for real difficulty in the future. Living radically in the present is the only way to prepare and the American church needs to learn these lessons. These are not theoretical questions. Many Christians in the past have faced them and many do today. For an insightful look at how one person lived with conviction in difficult times (Nazi Germany), see Eric Metaxas biography, *Bonhoeffer*.

⁷ A fundamental principle of Biblical interpretation is this: *a passage cannot mean to us what it never meant to them*. In other words, if our interpretation would make absolutely no sense to the original hearers, it cannot be correct. This is a basic rule in all communication. When I communicate to another person, I speak things in such a way so that they will understand because being understood *by them* is my clear aim. When John (God) writes to the seven churches, he intends to be understood! He is not writing to us, though there is relevance for us.

⁸ See Craig Keener, *Revelation*, The NIV Application Commentary, 354-356 for options and an interesting discussion.

⁹ “The use of a mark to enforce national or empire-wide unity already had a long history known to John’s audience.” (Keener, *Revelation*, 352.) The 20th century saw a negative use of marking when the Nazis required Jews to wear a star of David.

¹⁰ “A parody is what you get when somebody produces a fake which looks real but isn’t.” (N. T. Wright, *Revelation for Everyone*, 119.) Another resource for Revelation is Gordon D. Fee, *Revelation*, New Covenant Commentary Series.

¹¹ While this seems remote to us as American Christians, it is a reality to many of our brothers and sisters throughout the world. One to the great dangers of the “end times mania” that many believers in America indulge themselves in is that it produces an escapist mentality which neither prepares us for the possibility of real persecution nor enable us to effectively bear witness to the Lordship of Jesus to the whole of life in the present.