Let All the Earth Keep Silence

Habakkuk 2:20 and contemplative prayer.

“But the Lord is in his holy temple: let all the earth keep silence before him.” Habakkuk 2:20, KJV

“Without a doubt” writes one prayer trainer, “the most difficult step in intercessory prayer is this one—keep silence, be still.” [1] Along with nine other biblical passages, the online adviser cites Habakkuk 2:20 to teach:

It is the mandate of God that we still ourselves before him in order to find his peace and hear his voice. So thus we have as the first and most important step in the believer’s prayer life to still ourselves before the Lord. [2]

The BE STILL DVD also employs the Habakkuk verse to invite viewers to practice contemplative, centering, or listening prayer. [3] But as cited by contemplatives along with Psalm 46:10 (“Be still, and know that I am God”), is this prophetic verse a superficial use of scripture that ignores the verse’s real meaning?

“Let all the earth be silent before Him” (Habakkuk 2:20b). Contemplative Christians assert that cultivating silence in prayer is the first and most important step in a believer’s prayer life, the implication being that if believers do not take this first step of silence, their prayer lives will be barren, hindered or ineffective. However, the context suggests that such an understanding and application of the verse is not the case.

As a man zealous for God’s righteousness, Habakkuk lamented
the sinful condition of his nation where “the law is ignored . . . justice is never upheld . . . the wicked surround the righteous . . . [and] justice comes out perverted” (1:4).

Because of her covenant breaking ways and ungodly behavior, Habakkuk did not doubt that Judah deserved divine judgment. But his problem arose when the Lord announced in chapter one that the instrument He would use to administer His wrath upon His chosen nation and Habakkuk’s people was going to be the wicked Babylonians/Chaldeans (1:5-11). How could a just God, the patriotic prophet questioned, use a more-wicked nation like Babylon to punish a less-wicked nation like Judah? In the administration of divine wrath, was God being fair?

As set forth in the second chapter (2:4-20), the Lord dealt with Habakkuk’s concern. In due process, God promised the prophet He also was going to administer His wrath upon the Chaldeans. The Lord announced the coming judgment upon the Babylonians in a series of five woes (2:6, 9, 12, 15, and 19). The Lord-denounces Babylon’s sins and announces judgment upon that nation for rapacity and looting (2:6-8); for employing violence to build for themselves a safe haven (2:9-11); for building homes by bloodshed (2:12-14); for drunkenness and sexual immorality (2:15-17); and finally, for idolatry (2:18-19). Though God would use the Chaldeans to punish Judah, His use of them did not thereby exempt that nation from also being the object of His wrath. He would pursue that business with Babylon later.

Understanding the flow of this prophetic dialog between the Lord and Habakkuk is important for reason that the prophet’s call for silence comes as part of the “fifth woe” pronounced upon Babylon for idolatry (Habakkuk 2:18-20). In contrast to that nation’s deaf, dumb and dead idols that could not hear, talk or act, the living God of Israel has spoken and will act in judgment. And in light of this awesome prospect, the prophet commanded silence. It is better to give homage to the living One who inhabits the heavens than to trust in gods
which are no gods.

Literally, “be silent” (Hebrew, has) mimics the sound of the command. To the earth the prophet said, Hush! Judgment is never pretty, and in light of Babylon’s decreed devastation, the prophet called for ominous silence on earth. Habakkuk literally ordered calm before the storm!

The prospect of God’s judgment should strike reverence in the heart of every person who might contemplate it. With the opening of The 7th Seal of Revelation, which like Habakkuk chapter two contains “woes,” it is recorded that “there was silence in heaven for about half an hour” (Revelation 8:1). As in the aftermath of a major hurricane or tsunami when the victims, survivors, rescuers and visitors are left speechless when they observe firsthand the devastation nature can wreak, likewise the threat of coming divine wrath becomes too awesome for words. Therefore the prophet orders, “Let all the earth keep silence before Him” (NKJV). Contemplation of God’s wrath against sin and consequent judgment should not be ignored and must not be sugarcoated.

At the prospect of God visiting wrath and judgment upon all the wicked, both Judah and Babylon, any debate over the propriety and prerogative of its execution was closed. The instrument of divine judgment is irrelevant to God’s administration of it. God can use whomever He pleases to accomplish His will for His glory. As one commentator remarks, “The Lord is a just and holy God who deals righteously with all people and is actively present in the flow of earth’s history; therefore, He is to be acknowledged as God by all.” [4]

“Let all the earth keep silence . . .” is the closing word of God’s announcement of divine wrath coming upon Babylon (Habakkuk 2:4-20). The statement is not an invitation to the silence of contemplative prayer. Rather, with the prospect of divine judgment on the horizon of history, it calls earth’s
people to a *holy hush*. Like Habakkuk and in the face of God’s wrath on account of sin, other prophets also ordered: “Be silent before the Lord God! For the day of the Lord is near” (Zephaniah 1:7); “Be silent, all flesh, before the LORD; for He is aroused from His holy habitation” (Zechariah 2:13).

ENDNOTES
[2] Ibid.