

The Just Shall Live by His Faith

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Habakkuk 2:1–4

We live in a time of war and turmoil, economic difficulty and moral laxity. Some might even call it God's judgment on our society. It seems that faith in Christ has been thrown out the window. So much immorality is taking place in our society and we fear God's judgment against us. Do you struggle with the question, "How do I live by faith in our day and in our society?" Perhaps you live by faith, trusting in God for His provision. Perhaps you trust in God for His protection. Or you trust in God for salvation. These are all elements of faith—a trust in God and an assured confidence in Christ. But have you ever trusted God in the face of impending judgment? That is what the prophet Habakkuk demonstrates for us. We want to look at the prophet Habakkuk and how faith operated in his life by considering Habakkuk 2:1–4:

I will stand upon my watch, and set me upon the tower, and will watch to see what he will say unto me, and what I shall answer when I am reprov'd. And the LORD answered me, and said, Write the vision, and make it plain upon tables, that he may run that readeth it. For the vision is yet for an appointed time, but at the end it shall speak, and not lie: though it tarry, wait for it: because it will surely come, it will not tarry. Behold, his soul which is lifted up is not upright in him: but the just shall live by his faith.

The theme for this message is “The Just Shall Live by His Faith,” with these points: 1. the context of faith; 2. the character of faith; 3. the contrast of faith.

This verse has been both controversial and comforting throughout the ages of the church. The Apostle Paul made it a center point of his theology as he explained the nature of faith and justification in his epistles to the Romans and Galatians. Martin Luther rediscovered this truth in the time of the Reformation and found it a most liberating verse that delivered him from the bondage of works religion to trust in Christ alone, by faith alone.

Recently, the doctrines of justification and faith have come under attack by some in the church. They argue for a works religion by which a person is justified or made right before God. However, the Old Testament prophet Habakkuk proves that a person is justified by faith in Christ alone, hence in God alone. He demonstrates how a justified person lives by faith. A just or righteous person does not live by his own works; he lives by faith in God. This is the lifeline of the believer. We wish to consider this justifying faith and see how it operates in the context of impending judgment by the Lord. As it operates within this context, we will begin to see the characteristics of faith as it operated in the life of Habakkuk, and then, finally, we will contrast that faith in this chapter with the lives of the wicked Judeans and the wicked Chaldeans.

The Context of Faith

The prophet Habakkuk lived in a time of social injustice. If we read Habakkuk 1:1–4, we notice the prophet questioning God and His seeming silence toward Judah. The situation there was one of persecution, violence, fighting, and lawlessness. It seemed the wicked were prospering over the righteous. It seemed that God’s faithful people were being snuffed out by the

wicked and His law was being trampled in the dust. In response to his troubles, Habakkuk begins to question God with challenging questions. “Why, God, wilt Thou not hear? Why dost Thou show me these things and not intervene? Why do the wicked increase and lord it over the righteous?”

God answers Habakkuk in 1:5: “Behold ye among the heathen, and regard, and wonder marvelously: for I will work a work in your days, which ye will not believe, though it be told you.” The Lord is going to work through the Chaldeans. They would be sent by God to bring justice. God says, “Behold My marvelous work and my marching judgment in the form of the Chaldean army.” God is going to bring in a foreign army to invade Judah and mete out His justice upon the wicked.

Perhaps you find yourself in a similar situation like Habakkuk. Our day is certainly no different. The wicked seem to prosper on every hand; violence abounds in the progression of the same-sex rights agenda and the silent holocaust of abortion. God’s law is downgraded as it was in the prophet’s day. We question God and ask Him why He allows such things. “Why, O Lord, dost Thou show us and make us party to these atrocities?” We see the effects of uninhibited spending and loaning of money. Many lose jobs and homes, and lose hope in their situation. The questions that so easily rise up are, “Where is God in all this?” We say like the prophet, “How long, Lord, shall we cry and Thou wilt not hear?” God responds to us and calls us to behold His coming judgment upon the wicked. Even if you don’t see justice meted out upon the wicked, God is holding their rightful punishment in abeyance until the final judgment. There will come a time when we will behold the marvelous work of God and His judgment upon the wicked.

This is the context in which Habakkuk is living. He responds specifically to the coming judgment by the

Chaldeans with more questions in Habakkuk 1:12–17. He pleads upon God’s character and revelation of Himself. He addresses God as the Holy One, the Just One, and the Creator of all things. It’s as if he’s saying, “God, how canst Thou do these things? How canst Thou permit the Chaldeans to come up and destroy the people of Judah? Why dost Thou permit them to persecute the nations?” Habakkuk is not trusting God for His purpose with Judah; rather he daringly questions God’s providence and justice when the people of Judah were responsible for their own sin. Habakkuk speaks much like the psalmist in Psalm 73 who considers the lot of the wicked and how they prospered without God intervening at all. But God says that He will intervene, though it was not the way that Habakkuk wanted. God’s ways are higher than our ways; His judgments are inscrutable; His ways are past finding out.

Perhaps you have come with audacious questions like the prophet. You question God’s ways in our country, in our church, or in your own life. Perhaps you do not understand why God allows injustice in the world and so you question Him as the Creator of the world. We so often would prescribe for God how He should act. We want our agenda furthered, having invested much in it, but we so often ignore God’s agenda. God’s silence does not mean that He is not interested in our situation. The opposite is true; God is working His purpose so that His agenda is furthered and His glory manifested in the world. That is the main point behind His response to Habakkuk’s first questions. He is going to do a marvelous work like Habakkuk had never seen. A massive and fearful army is going to destroy Judah and take the people captive.

How would you respond to such news? We probably would do something like Habakkuk and ask why this wicked nation be allowed to plunder the nation when they themselves deserve judgment. God uses the

Chaldeans to discipline Judah and to bring His own justice to the world. Look around us: is God not doing the same in our day? Terrorist attacks around the world and in our nations are indications that God is coming in judgment against sinful people and nations. He uses terrorists to fulfill His purpose of judgment even though they deserve God's judgment themselves for their wicked deeds. Our day is not really much different from the prophet's day. This is the context in which faith operates.

The Character of Faith

In chapter 2, we sense a different mood on the part of the prophet. It's as if his questioning is put to rest. He stops trying to promote his own agenda and we see faith beginning to operate. What is faith? The Heidelberg Catechism in Lord's Day 7, Question and Answer 21, defines faith this way:

True faith is not only a certain [sure] knowledge, whereby I hold for truth all that God has revealed to us in His Word, but also an assured confidence, which the Holy Spirit works by the gospel in my heart, that not only to others, but to me also, remission of sin, everlasting righteousness and salvation are freely given by God, merely of grace, only for the sake of Christ's merits.

True faith is based on Scripture and centered on Christ, trusting in Him and His merits. Someone put it this way, "True faith takes its character and quality from its object and not from itself. Faith gets a man out of himself and into Christ. Its strength therefore depends on the character of Christ. Even those of us who have weak faith have the same strong Christ as others!"¹ Faith is like an empty hand that discovers

1. Sinclair Ferguson, *Know Your Christian Life: A Theological Introduction* (Downer's Grove, Ill: IVP, 1981), 66-67.

righteousness and life in Christ. It destroys its enemies through the victory of Christ.²

We see the characteristics of this faith operating in the prophet's life, and we can use these characteristics to test how we are living by faith, if indeed we are living by faith at all. True, living faith watches expectantly for the Lord to answer. This is what we read in Habakkuk 2:1, "I will stand upon my watch, and set me upon the tower, and will watch to see what he will say unto me, and what I shall answer when I am reproved." Though Habakkuk's questions challenge God, the tenor of his words changes in verse one. He is waiting and watching for a word from the Lord. Even though he doesn't understand exactly what is going on in the world around him, he nevertheless has learned to wait on the Lord for His word. One commentator writes, "The prophet is right in the position he takes with respect to his own role in the resolution of this perplexing issue. He will not attempt to reconcile in his own mind the apparent contradiction between the election of Israel by God as the object of His special love and the devastation of Israel at the hands of the rapacious Chaldeans as ordered by the Lord. He will not resort to the resources of human wisdom. Instead, he will watch for an answer that can come only from the Lord. Habakkuk knows that, in accordance with the nature of the prophetic office in Israel, revelation from God alone can answer his perplexity."³

Is this not what we are to do when we don't understand situations in life? Though the world around us unravels, yet our faith must look out to God and His Word. We are to watch expectantly, letting the Word of

2. Some of these thoughts are from the ordination sermon given by Dr. Gerald Bilkes on September 26, 2009.

3. O. Palmer Robertson, *Habakkuk*, New International Commentary of the Old Testament (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1990), 165.

God speak to us. Habakkuk was waiting for revelation from God concerning Judah and the judgment upon their sins, and we now have that revelation written in the Word of God. We are able to read and understand by faith what God revealed to us concerning His judgment upon sin. The revelation of God in His Word is the only answer that faith will find to life's perplexing problems. It doesn't mean that you wait for God to mystically apply a certain text to your life, though He may do that at times. For us it means that by faith we take God's Word, read it, pray over it, and plead upon it before God as we face difficult problems. We face national and global economic and security problems. Are you turning to the Word and waiting expectantly for God's answer? You might face marital trouble, and so faith turns to the Word for an answer. Your child may have left the faith and embarked on a life of sin, but faith turns to the Word to sort it all out. You just received news of terminal cancer; faith turns to the Word of God for comfort and understanding of God's seemingly cross-providences. A loved one passes away suddenly and you are trying to come to grips with God's purpose in it all. Are you turning to the Word by faith? This is what it means to live by faith in every circumstance of life.

Not only does true and living faith watch for the Lord to answer, but faith also works when the Word is received and applied with the power of the Holy Spirit to our souls and lives. We read of that in Habakkuk 2:2: "And the LORD answered me, and said, Write the vision, and make it plain upon tables, that he may run that readeth it." This text is difficult to interpret and there are several levels of interpretation that can be used to helpfully explain it. It first of all reminds us of Moses receiving the tables of stone with the Ten Commandments at Mount Sinai. Most commentators draw this connection as God reveals Himself and His

plan to Habakkuk. The Lord tells the prophet to write the vision on two tablets so that it will be visible and permanent. It was to remind succeeding generations of the portrait of a righteous man. Furthermore, this vision was to be made plain, giving a sense of proclamation. It was to be published in the public arena: “*The just shall live by his faith.*” It was to keep the person who read it in the way of righteousness as he lived by faith and looked to God and His Word. Walter Kaiser, in his commentary on Habakkuk, captures these three levels of interpretation well when he says that it refers to “(1) a permanent record of the vision that was to come, (2) a proclamation of the vision to all, and (3) a life that was marked by the obedience of faith.”⁴

Dear readers, we have this vision recorded for us, “The just shall live by his faith.” It is recorded not only in the Old Testament, but also in the New Testament in Romans 1:17, Galatians 2:20 and 3:11, and Hebrews 10:38. This shows the importance of living by faith, of living lives marked by obedience of faith. This verse speaks of our proclamation to the world. How are you living by faith? Are you demonstrating that you are living by faith in the righteousness of Christ? Or are you still attempting to establish your own righteousness by your works of the law?

True faith waits for the fulfillment of the Word of God. This is evident in verse 3 where we read God’s instructions to Habakkuk, “For the vision is yet for an appointed time, but at the end it shall speak, and not lie: though it tarry, wait for it; because it will surely come, it will not tarry.” Although Habakkuk cannot see the fulfillment of the judgment of God yet, he is still supposed to wait for the vision. God will work in His time, according to His own plan and not to anything

4. Walter Kaiser, *The Preacher’s Commentary: Habakkuk*, vol. 23 (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1992), 166.

else. This is what faith recognizes and submits to; the fulfillment of God's Word, yet unseen, is nevertheless believed. This is confirmed in Hebrews 11:1, "Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen." God's judgment, though as yet not clearly understood, must be submitted to. Habakkuk loses all rights to speak against God's sovereignty in judgment. The prophet acknowledges this in chapter 3:17–19 as he confesses his faith in God no matter what will happen to him or to Judah. His hope and his salvation are in the Lord. Faith waits for God to work even when it seems to our human perception that nothing is being done. God will always work and nothing will hinder it.

Does your faith operate in this way, even when it seems as if judgment is not being meted out in your situation? We live in what theologians call the "now/not-yet" tension. We have the promise of God's justice and though it might not be fulfilled in our lifetime, we can be assured that the Lord's cause will be vindicated at the final judgment and the wicked will receive their due. Is your faith resting in Christ, no matter what your life's circumstances? Consider the psalmist's words, "Until I went into the sanctuary of God, then understood I their end"—the end of the wicked (Ps. 73:17). We have the promise that we will be fully restored in true knowledge, righteousness, and holiness. Sin seems so active in our lives, yet faith trusts God that He will bring to pass what He has promised.

The Contrast of Faith

We've seen the context of how the righteous live by faith, and we've seen the characteristics of faith in the midst of a message of judgment and a situation of lawlessness. Now the vision that Habakkuk sees sets before us a contrast of the just who lives by faith and the proud who lives by his works. Verse 4 states, "Behold,

his soul which is lifted up is not upright in him: but the just shall live by his faith.” The contrast is given to us in the word “but.” The contrast is ultimately between the man who is proud and rests in his strength and prowess—in this case, the Chaldeans who rested in brutal and ruthless military might and strategy—and the one who lived by faith in the promises of God and rested in God as His Savior.

This contrast can be broken down into three separate contrasts. The first is the unjust versus the just. Our text says “Behold, his soul which is lifted up is not upright in him.” Here we see a picture of the unjust and unrighteous man. His soul is lifted up against God and he trusts in himself. He does not wait for the word of the Lord as the prophet does, but he tries to do his own thing. His soul is unjust. He stands before God on his own account, in his own righteousness, and, in the following verses, we read the woes that God pronounces on people like him. This unjust man is contrasted with the just man or the righteous man, a man who is trusting in God. He does not rest in what he has accomplished, but he rests in the finished work of Christ for his righteousness before God. In the following verses, we see how this just man lives by faith, trusting in God, submitting to Him, knowing that God will achieve His purpose.

Young people and older ones, which are you? Is your life a picture of the unjust man who trusts in his own righteousness? Are you a picture of the Chaldeans who ruthlessly go about to destroy, whose hearts are lifted up at their success? Or are your life and your heart pictures of Habakkuk, who trusted in God in the most severe circumstances? Are you a righteous person, not in yourself but in Jesus Christ?

The second contrast is between that of faithfulness and faithlessness. We see that the man whose heart is unjust is faithless. His focus is internal. He is proud

because he thinks he has what it takes to live life to the fullest and doesn't need anything else. The just man, in contrast, lives by his faith, or "faithfulness," as the original Hebrew indicates. What does it mean to live by faithfulness? Does it mean that you are so faithful, or that your faith is self-produced? No, we see here that faith is a gift of God (Eph. 2:8). Faith is given as a gift through the grace of God in Christ. Christ has been faithful by dying on the cross and rising again from the dead. Christ was faithful in obedience to His Father in everything. This is the focus of the just man's faith. Is it yours? The faith of Christ is portrayed in Habakkuk. Christ had perfect faith and faithfulness. Even in the midst of judgment upon Himself for the sins of His people, He continued to trust in God. Are you prepared to live a life of faith like that, not only according to the Master's example, but living out of His faithfulness?

Beloved, where is your trust? Is it in yourself, thus exalting yourself? Or is it in Christ and His faithfulness, thus exalting Christ in the midst of life's circumstances? In the midst of judgment upon our nation, perhaps even on you personally in the way of afflictions, are you living by faith? Faith trusts God and casts all hope upon Him for salvation. Job confessed this: "Though he slay me, yet will I trust him" (Job 13:15).

The third and final contrast is between the dead and the living. This is a most solemn contrast and shows the real value of faith. The one who is proud and lifted up in himself is really spiritually dead because he has no faith. The one who has faith lives eternally. Picture it like two gardens. The one garden is planted and the plants soon spring up. There is a tap nearby, but there is no hose to bring water and fertilizer to the plants, and so they die and wither. This is the picture of a man without faith. The other garden is planted as well, but there a hose is connected to the tap and water

and fertilizer flow to the plants, nourishing them and making them strong. Storms come and flatten the first garden, but the plants in the second garden stand tall and strong in the wind because they have that garden hose that brings nutrients and life to them. That is a picture of faith. Faith is like the garden hose that brings the benefits and life that Christ offers us. If we live by faith like the prophet, we can stand tall and strong in the storms and battles of life, no matter what God does in our lives. Even if we get knocked down by a fierce storm, faith directs us to the source of our life again and we grow stronger than before because we need Christ more. If there is no faith that channels the saving benefits of Christ to our life, we will surely die. This presses home that you need to be living by faith. Without faith you will die! Do you not see the importance of this matter, that eternal life and death hang in the balances?

This is a picture of how faith works in the life of the people of God. Faith operates and gives life and hope in God in the midst of impending judgment. It is the hand that reaches out to God and says, "Guide me, O Thou great Jehovah." Faith brings life to dead hearts. It justifies us, bringing to us the righteousness of the Savior. God delights to give such faith for those who can no longer go on in their own strength and pride. Faith is the lifeline between unworthy sinners and a glorious Christ even in the midst of life-shattering change. Where is your faith placed today? Is it placed in Christ alone, or is it placed in something or someone other than Christ? The former brings spiritual life and perspective to our lives; the latter will only bring misery and death. Will you live by faith in Christ alone and be counted among the just who live by their faith?