

“The Just Shall Live By Faith” (An Exposition of Habakkuk 2:4)¹

Introduction

Today is *Reformation Sunday*, which is traditionally observed the Sunday on or before October 31st. It is a very important date, not just in *church* history, but in *world* history as well. That is because it was on October 31st, 1517 that an Augustinian monk named Martin Luther nailed a document to the door of the castle church at Wittenberg, Germany.

This was *not* an act of vandalism; it was the 16th century of making a public notice. That document has come to be known as Luther's “95 Theses” because it contains 95 points of argument or disputation. Martin Luther may have just wanted to start a debate, but the Lord used it to do so much more.

His nailing of the 95 theses on that church door is widely considered to be the start of the Protestant Reformation. And so in light of that we will be looking at what is in many ways *the central doctrine* of the Reformation - *justification by faith*.

Our text today in itself might be considered an obscure passage. But this little verse from one of the so-called “minor prophets” is actually quoted no less than three (3) times in the New Testament, so this *minor* prophet played a *major* role in the Apostolic teaching. James Montgomery Boice writes:

“This is a great text. It could even be called *the* great text of the Bible. To understand it is to understand the Christian gospel and the Christian life. It is so important that it is picked up by the New Testament writers, twice by Paul (Rom. 1:17; Gal. 3:11) and once by the author of the book of Hebrews (Heb. 10:38).²

It was actually Paul's quotation of this verse in Romans 1:17 that the Lord used in the conversion of Martin Luther! Speaking of this verse quoted by Paul, Luther wrote:

““Here I felt that I was altogether *born again* and had *entered paradise* itself through open gates . . . And I extolled my sweetest words with a love as great as the hatred with which I had before hated the words “righteousness of God.” Thus that place in Paul [v.17] was for me the very gate to paradise.”³

This little verse not only changed Martin Luther's life, but much of world history in the last 500 years or so as well! Some have called this verse *the battle cry of the Reformation!*

Habakkuk's Complaints

Before we just jump right into what the *New Testament* tells us about Habakkuk 2:4, we should spend some time looking at what this Old Testament passage itself has to say. By way of introduction and to give some context to this verse, we will give something of *an overview* of the book itself.

1 All Scripture quotations are from the English Standard Version (ESV) unless otherwise noted.

2 *The Minor Prophets*, Vol.2, p.408

3 Stephen J. Nichols, *The Reformation: How a Monk and a Mallet Changed the World*, p.31

Habakkuk is a short book, only three chapters long. And it basically consists of *the prophet's complaints* to the Lord, and *the Lord's answers*. Habakkuk was a **“prophet”** (1:1) who served the Lord in Judah around 600 B.C., not too long before the Babylonians (i.e. the **“Chaldeans”** - 1:6) came and conquered Jerusalem, carrying the people off into captivity in 586 B.C..

The *first* thing that Habakkuk cries out to the Lord about was *the rampant ungodliness and wickedness among the people of Judah*. In Habakkuk 1:2-4 he says,

**“O LORD, how long shall I cry for help,
and you will not hear?
Or cry to you “Violence!”
and you will not save?
Why do you make me see iniquity,
and why do you idly look at wrong?
Destruction and violence are before me;
strife and contention arise.
So the law is paralyzed,
and justice never goes forth.
For the wicked surround the righteous;
so justice goes forth perverted.”**

He had been crying out to the Lord for **“help”** (v.1), but the wickedness just kept *increasing*, so that justice could not be found. He was made to **“see iniquity”** and even **“violence”** (v.3), but no help seemed to be forthcoming. And so He asks how a holy and just God could **“idly look at wrong”** (v.3).

And so what does the Lord tell His prophet? He tells him that He was *in no way* idly looking at wrong. In fact, *He was going to do something about it* – something that Habakkuk *would not believe* (v.5)! In v.5-6 the Lord answers Habakkuk and says,

**“Look among the nations, and see;
wonder and be astounded.
For I am doing a work in your days
that you would not believe if told.
For behold, I am raising up the Chaldeans,
that bitter and hasty nation,
who march through the breadth of the earth,
to seize dwellings not their own.”**

God's answer was to raise up the *Chaldeans*! In other words, the *Babylonians*! It is safe to say that this was the *last* thing that the prophet expected (or hoped) to hear! The Babylonians were a ruthless and powerful nation, a people of **“violence”** (1:9). They were a people bent on world conquest and domination. They were a pagan, godless people whose own might was their god (v.11).

Well that brought up a whole *new* set of questions for Habakkuk, didn't it? In Habakkuk 1:12-2:1 He then complains to the Lord a *second* time. He recognizes that the Lord had **“ordained”** the Chaldeans **“as a judgment”** (v.12) against Judah, and had **“established them for reproof”** (v.12) against them. *But how could that be?*

For, as Habakkuk goes on to say in v.13, surely God was **“of purer eyes than to see evil and cannot look at wrong,”** so how could He **“remain silent when the wicked swallows up the man more righteous than he?”** In other words, how could God *possibly* ordain to use the wicked Chaldeans to punish the more righteous (although certainly *not* righteous!) Israelites? He could not begin to fathom how God could do such a thing, and it troubled him greatly.

And so in Habakkuk 2:1 he says that he was going to *take his stand* at his **“watchpost”** and **“station”** himself on the tower to *wait and watch for God's answer* to his complaint. *Sometimes the answer to these things comes only after much persistence in prayer and waiting upon the Lord.* Faith is willing to *pray*. Faith is willing to *wait* and persevere in prayer.

Have you ever had to *pray and wait* like that? Has God's providence ever proved so perplexing to you, that you had to pray often and wait long and hard for His answer? That is what Habakkuk did, and that is what we should do as well. *If your troubles and troubling questions get you praying, they ultimately do you no harm, but rather much good.*

The Lord's Answer

So Habakkuk waited and watched for the Lord's answer. In v.2-4 we see that answer. There we read:

**“And the LORD answered me:
“Write the vision;
 make it plain on tablets,
 so he may run who reads it.
For still the vision awaits its appointed time;
 it hastens to the end—it will not lie.
If it seems slow, wait for it;
 it will surely come; it will not delay.
“Behold, his soul is puffed up; it is not upright within him,
 but the righteous shall live by his faith.”**

The Lord *didn't* just give Habakkuk a **“vision”** to answer his questions, but rather told him to **“write the vision”** (v.2). This answer *wasn't* just for *Habakkuk's* benefit, but for the that of *the people of Judah* in his day - and for *us* as well!

In fact, not only was he to *write* it down, but he was to **“make it plain on tablets, so he may run who reads it”** (v.2). In other words, this was a message to be spread far and wide. The imagery here is similar to *Paul Revere's midnight ride*, when he sounded the alarm, saying, “The British are coming!” *The message had to be plain or clear enough that the messenger could read it out loud while running.*

Just like the vision given to Habakkuk had to be made plain, even so the preaching of God's Word *today* must be clear as well. Matthew Henry writes of this verse:

“Note, those who are employed in preaching the word of God should study plainness as much as may be, so as to make themselves intelligible to the meanest [i.e. simplest] capacities.”⁴

4 Matthew Henry's *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, Vol. IV, p.1359

The need for the *clear* and *simple* preaching and teaching of God's Word is because of the urgency of the message of the gospel. Sinners are dying outside of Christ and must be warned of the just judgment of a holy God. That judgment is even more fearful than any Babylonian army!

In 2 Corinthians 5:10-11 Paul writes,

“For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive what is due for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil. *Therefore, knowing the fear of the Lord, we persuade others. But what we are is known to God, and I hope it is known also to your conscience.*”

In v.3 the LORD tells Habakkuk of the certainty of this judgment coming to pass. It would come to pass at its appointed time; and even if it **'seemed slow'** he was to **“wait for it,”** because it would not **“delay.”** God's just judgment often seems slow to scoffers, but it *will* come at His appointed time.

So now we come to the heart of the matter, and to *one of the most important verses in all of Scripture* – Habakkuk 2:4. After telling the prophet of the judgment that was to come through the Chaldeans, God tells Habakkuk:

**“Behold, his soul is puffed up; it is not upright within him,
but the righteous shall live by his faith.”**

Here we see *two ways contrasted* – the way of the proud or wicked, and the way of the just or righteous. Walter Chantry writes, “There are only two kinds of men who have ever lived on the earth: *men of pride* and *men of faith.*”⁵

The proud or **“puffed up”** person here in Habakkuk's day includes both the wicked in Judah (the ones he *originally* complained about in 1:2-4) as well as the wicked Chaldeans or Babylonians whom God was raising up to chastise His people.

The arrogant also then represents *all* of those who are not upright in *every* age – those who reject God and His Word, those who think they have no need of God, and despise His just judgments.

But what of the other way? What characterizes the way of the **“righteous”**? You *might* expect God to say that the primary difference between the wicked and the righteous is that the righteous person is *more righteous* than others. But that is *not* what He says, is it? *The opposite of unbelieving pride is faith.* The **“just”** (KJV) or **“righteous”** person **“shall live by his faith.”**

In Habakkuk's situation, that meant *trusting God* even in the face of present or impending evil. It meant trusting that God *knows what He is doing*; that He **“works all things according to the counsel of his will”** (Ephesians 1:11); that He makes **“all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose”** (Romans 8:28); and that **“the Judge of all the earth”** *shall* do what is right (Genesis 18:25).

In fact, in the rest of chapter 2 the Lord assures His prophet that the Chaldeans *would* get what was coming to them. His just judgment was sure, and even though He was raising them up to accomplish His own purposes in the world, that did *not* excuse their evil deeds or mean that God winks at sin.

5 *Habakkuk: A Wrestler with God*, p.36

And so in the third and final chapter of Habakkuk, he once again prays to the LORD, this time *praising* the Lord for His **“splendor”** (v.3), his almighty *power* (v.4), and His acts of great judgment and deliverance in the past (v.5-15), so that he was now willing to **“quietly wait for the day of trouble to come upon people who invade us.”** (v.16) He was *living by faith*, trusting in his God.

How great was Habakkuk's faith? The final verses of the book paint a beautiful picture of childlike trust and faith. In Habakkuk 3:17-19, he prays and confesses his faith in God:

**“Though the fig tree should not blossom,
nor fruit be on the vines,
the produce of the olive fail
and the fields yield no food,
the flock be cut off from the fold
and there be no herd in the stalls,
yet I will rejoice in the LORD;
I will take joy in the God of my salvation.
GOD, the Lord, is my strength;
he makes my feet like the deer's;
he makes me tread on my high places.”**

Faith is able to **“rejoice in the LORD”** and **‘take joy in the God of our salvation’** (v.18) *even in times of trouble*. For even then, as he says, **“God the Lord is my strength”** (v.19).

The Gospel According to Habakkuk

Is it any wonder that the Apostle Paul sees in this one verse (Habakkuk 2:4) a proof of the *gospel of Christ*, and of *justification by faith*,⁶ and that he quotes it *twice* in his epistles in order to teach those very things? In Romans 1:16-17 he writes,

“For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, “The righteous shall live by faith.”

When he says, **“as it is written”** (v.17), he is saying that this quotation from Habakkuk proves the very point that he is making about the gospel – that the gospel of Christ is **“the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes”** (v.16) *because* in it **“the righteousness of God”** (i.e. that *comes from God*) is revealed **“from faith to faith”** or (as the NIV puts it) **“by faith from first to last.”**

Concerning Paul's use of Habakkuk 2:4 in Romans 1:17, John Calvin writes,

“He proves the righteousness of [i.e. that comes by] faith by the authority of the prophet Habakkuk, who, in predicting the destruction of the proud, adds at the same time that the just shall live by his faith.”⁷

6 “Paul's reference to this passage from Habakkuk would have been irrelevant, unless the prophet meant that we stand firm only when we rest on God by faith. . . . Habakkuk does not, it is true, explicitly deal with this question, and hence he makes no mention of free righteousness, but it is sufficiently evident from the nature of faith that this passage is rightly applied to our present subject.” (*Calvin's New Testament Commentaries*, Vol. 8, p.29)

7 *Calvin's New Testament Commentaries*, Vol. 8, p.28

How can a *sinner* be counted *just or righteous* in the sight of a holy God? Not by works, but only by faith in Christ. As Paul writes in Galatians 3:10–11, where he also quotes Habakkuk 2:4,

“For all who rely on works of the law are under a curse; for it is written, “Cursed be everyone who does not abide by all things written in the Book of the Law, and do them.” Now it is evident that *no one is justified before God by the law*, for “The righteous shall live by faith.””

The just (or *justified*) person does not rely on his own works – *no one* is justified before God that way!

No, the justified person is the person who lives *by faith*, trusting in Christ in the promise of the gospel, where the righteousness from God is revealed unto our salvation. Christ's perfect righteousness put to our account and *received by faith alone*!

And the just person *lives* by his faith. Faith in Christ is *not* just something at the very beginning of the Christian life - the *entirety* of the Christian life is *lived by faith* in Christ, *from beginning to end*! As Paul tells us in 2 Corinthians 5:7, **“we walk [or live] by faith, not by sight.”**

No wonder this great doctrine of justification by faith alone was at the heart of the Reformation, and is considered the doctrine by which the church stands or falls! - Amen