

The Just Shall Live by Faith

by John Piper

The sermon emphasizes the importance of faith in God's mercy as the means of gaining life before a holy God in the judgment.

Scripture: Habakkuk 2:4

Topics: "Justification By Faith", "Salvation Through Christ"

Description

John Piper preaches on the book of Habakkuk, focusing on the imminent invasion of Judah by the Chaldeans as a result of the nation's sin. Despite the impending destruction, Habakkuk emphasizes the importance of faith in God for individuals to find hope and preservation through the judgment. The prophet's message highlights the principle that 'the just shall live by his faith,' pointing towards the New Testament truth of justification by faith through Christ's sacrifice. Habakkuk's call to trust in God's mercy and surrender to Him echoes the gospel message of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ, who justifies sinners and offers undeserved redemption.

Transcript

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Habakkuk

The situation which Habakkuk faces is the imminent invasion of the southern kingdom of Judah by the Chaldeans (who are the same as the Babylonians). This invasion eventually happened at the end of the sixth century B.C. and Jerusalem fell to Nebuchadnezzar in 586 B.C. The Lord revealed to Habakkuk beforehand that Judah was going to be punished for her sin by the Chaldeans. Unlike Joel and Zephaniah and Amos, Habakkuk does not even mention the possibility that destruction could be averted. He does not call for national repentance. It is too late. Instead, he predicts the destruction of Judah and beyond that the doom of the Chaldeans themselves. And he promises that the only way to preserve your life through the judgment is by faith. So even though destruction is decreed for the nation, there is hope for individuals who hold fast their confidence in God. The full-blown doctrine of justification by faith as Paul taught it in Romans and Galatians, is not yet here. But the seed is here. So what I would like to do today is survey the content of this prophetic book, then focus on its main point and how it unfolds in the New Testament as the great gospel truth of justification by faith.

After introducing the book as a "burden" which he received from God, Habakkuk cries out in 1:2-4 that Judah is full of violence and perverted justice. For example, verse 4: "So the law is slacked and justice never goes forth. For the wicked surround the righteous, so justice goes forth perverted." Amos had warned the northern kingdom that injustice would bring judgment, and in 722 B.C. Assyria swept the northern kingdom away. Now here is the southern kingdom of Judah, 130 years later, guilty of the same offenses. They had not learned anything.

So in 1:5-11 God foretells what he intends to do. Verse 6: "For lo, I am rousing the Chaldeans, that bitter and hasty nation, who march through the breadth of the earth, to seize habitations not their own." God is in control of the nations. He swings them like a sword to chastise his people. The Chaldeans will come against Judah as God's rod of correction. But verse 12 expresses the confidence Habakkuk has that God will not utterly destroy his people. "Art thou not from everlasting, O Lord my God, my Holy One? We shall not die. O Lord, thou hast ordained them as a judgment; and thou, O Rock, hast established them for chastisement." God is rousing the Chaldeans against his people, but it is not for annihilation but for correction and chastisement.

Then in 2:13-17 Habakkuk shows that he is not satisfied that the proud (1:11) and violent (1:14,15) and idolatrous (1:16) Chaldeans should themselves escape the judgment of God. They certainly are no more righteous than Judah (1:13), even if God is using them to do his righteous work of judgment. So he protests in verse 17: "Is he (i.e., the Chaldean nation), then, to keep on emptying his net, and mercilessly slaying nations forever?"

In chapter one, then, Habakkuk protests first against the violence and injustice of his countrymen in Judah (1:1-4), and then against the violence and injustice of the Chaldeans whom God is sending to punish Judah. Now, in chapter two, Habakkuk takes his stand to await the divine response to his protests. In 2:2,3, the Lord answers him in a vision. We are not told what he saw. But I assume that the rest of what Habakkuk says about the future of Judah and the Chaldeans is based on the assurance received in that vision. The word regarding Judah in verse 4 is this (following NASB instead of the RSV's unnecessary conjecture): "Behold, as for the proud one, his soul is not right within him; but the righteous will live by his faith." There is hope for those who will hold firm their trust in God as the calamity comes.

But the word regarding the Chaldeans in 2:6-19 is a five-fold woe. Verse 6: "Woe to him who heaps up what is not his own." Verse 9: "Woe to him who gets evil gain for his house, to set his nest on high." Verse 12: "Woe to him who builds a town with blood." Verse 15: "Woe to him who makes his neighbors drink up the cup of his wrath." Verse 19: "Woe to him who says to a wooden thing, Awake; and to a dumb stone, Arise." In other words, the great power of the Chaldeans will, in the end, come to nought. The nations weary themselves in vain to fill the earth with their fame and power. Why? Because (as 2:14 says), "The earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord as the water covers the sea." Habakkuk need not fear that a rebellious nation will have the last say. The earth is the Lord's and he will fill it with his glory. The chapter closes with these awesome words in verse 20: "The Lord is in his holy temple; let all the earth keep silence before him." Let all the nations be still and know that he is God. His glory will fill the earth, not the glory of the Chaldeans.

So in answer to Habakkuk's protests, God assures him that the pride of the Chaldeans will come to a woeful end (2:6-20) and that any in Judah who humbly trusts God will gain his life. "The just shall live by his faith." (2:4).

The last chapter of the book is Habakkuk's response to what he has heard. But it is more than his own personal prayer. It is intended as a psalm to be used in worship. When it says in verse 1, "A prayer of Habakkuk the prophet according to Shigionoth," it means that the prayer is to be used to musical accompaniment with a spirit of excitement and triumph. This is confirmed by two things: 1) the very last phrase of the book: "To the choirmaster: with stringed instruments," and 2) the use of "Selah" at the end of verses 3,9 and 13. The reason this is important to see is that Habakkuk wants us to be able to sing this prayer with him. It is not here to merely inform us about Habakkuk's piety. It's here to show us how we should face the judgment of God. The Chaldeans are coming against Judah for sure. How should the godly prepare for this tribulation and calamity? We should ask the same question. Tribulation is coming upon the world, as Jesus said (Matt. 24:21). How should we prepare for it? How shall we endure it?

First of all, in 3:2 Habakkuk prays, "O Lord, I have heard the report of thee, and thy work, O Lord, do I fear. In the midst of the years renew it; in the midst of the years make it known; in wrath remember mercy." Habakkuk has a sober and healthy fear of the judgment of God. So he prays that in the midst of wrath God will have mercy on him. Then in 3:3-15 he sings the greatness of God's power, and especially his power to save. For example, verse 13: "Thou wentest forth for the salvation of thy people, for the salvation of thy anointed. Thou didst crush the head of the wicked, laying him bare from thigh to neck." The prophet knew God's power from his work in the past and so he counted on his ultimate victory in the future. So verse 16 says that even though his body trembles at the thought of the invasion, he "waits quietly" for what must be.

And finally, in 3:17-19, Habakkuk breaks out into a wonderful song of faith:

Though the fig tree do 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 joy in the God of my salvation. God, the Lord, is my strength; he makes my feet like hinds' feet, he makes me tread upon my high places.

In other words, no matter how severe the tribulation when the Chaldeans invade the land, Habakkuk will never stop trusting God. Even though God himself has roused this "bitter and hasty nation" (1:6), Habakkuk is confident that in wrath God will show mercy to those who trust him and rejoice in him alone when all else fails.

When a man and a woman marry they pledge their love and faithfulness to each other "for better or for worse, whether rich or poor, in sickness and in health, 'til death do us part." And if that's true between husband and wife, how much more between us and God! That consecration is so important to Noel and me that we used Habakkuk 3:17-19 as a wedding text fourteen years ago. We are each other's and we are God's, no matter how severe the tribulation. We trust each other and we trust him absolutely.

Now as we step back from our survey it shouldn't be too hard to see what the main point of this little book is. Negatively it is this: Proud people, whose strength or ingenuity is their god (1:11,16; 2:4,19) will come to a woeful end, even though they may enjoy prosperity for a season either as God's chosen ones in Judah, or as the victors over Judah. All the proud, whether Jew or Gentile will perish in the judgment. But Habakkuk stresses the positive side of his main point, namely, "the just shall live by his faith." He states it as a principle in 2:4 and then he celebrates it as his own song in 3:16-19. When Habakkuk says, "Even when all the fruit and produce and flocks and herds are destroyed and my very life is threatened, yet will I rejoice in God,"--when Habakkuk says that he shows us what he means by faith in 2:4: "The just shall live by his faith." He means banking your hope on God no matter what.

Remember that Habakkuk's prophecy began with his attack on Judah's violence and strife and perverted justice in 1:3,4. You might expect that when he comes to tell the people how to be saved in the judgment he would say: "Cease being violent! Do justice! Put away strife!" (That's what Amos said.) But he doesn't. When the judgment is certain and the question is, "How can I gain my life before the wrath of a holy God?" Habakkuk's answer is trust him. "The just shall live by his faith" (2:4).

Amos had said to Israel, "Seek good and not evil that you may live... Remember justice in the gate and it may be that the Lord of hosts will be gracious" (5:14,15). So Habakkuk could have said to Judah: The just shall live by his goodness! The just shall live by executing justice in the gate! And he would not have been wrong. For it is a thoroughly Biblical teaching that people whose everyday lives are not changed by the Holy Spirit will not inherit eternal life (Gal. 5:21). So in a real sense we do gain our lives by becoming better people in God's power and by doing justice and loving mercy.

But that is not the heart of the gospel. And unless we have the heart, that part of God's message will become a dreadful legalism and a horrid burden to the conscience. Habakkuk's message comes close to the heart of the gospel. When he says, "The just (or the righteous) shall live by his faith," he implies two things. One is that all those who are righteous are also ones who have faith in God. Having a right standing before man and God always includes faith in God. The other thing Habakkuk 2:4 implies is that faith is what saves from God's wrath. "The just shall live by his faith" means: Just people are people of faith and that faith is what secures their life and keeps them safe for eternity.

The reason Habakkuk's message comes close to the heart of the gospel (but doesn't reveal the heart) is that he does not tell us explicitly how righteousness and faith are related. He simply says, Righteous people have faith and this faith saves them. The heart of the gospel is that the righteousness which God requires comes by faith and it is possible for us sinners to have because Christ died for our sins. Genesis 15:6 says, "Abraham believed the Lord; and he reckoned it to him as righteousness." The relationship between trusting God and standing righteous before him is that God looks at our faith and counts us righteous. The reason God can do that for us sinners is that Christ took the punishment for our iniquities on himself. Already in Isaiah 53:11 this is plain: "By his knowledge shall the righteous one, my servant, make many to be accounted righteous; and he shall bear their iniquities." When God reckons a person righteous because Christ died for him and because he puts his trust in Christ, that is what we call justification by faith and that is the heart of the gospel, the best news in the world to people who know they are sinners and God is holy.

But let's not move beyond Habakkuk too quickly. There may be more here than we think for the encouragement of our faith. The judgment of God is coming, most immediately in the Chaldean invasion of Judah, but finally at the end of the age. What is it that will bring life instead of death in the judgment? Before I give Habakkuk's answer, let me make clear that if this is not your question you are in a dream world. You are living in a fool's paradise of unreality if you do not ask with all your heart, How can I stand in the judgment which is coming? "It is appointed for me to die once and after that comes judgment" (Heb. 9:27). Those who resist God are "storing up wrath for themselves on the day of wrath when God's righteous judgment will be revealed" (Romans 2:5). On that day it will appear clearly to all how utterly naive it was for millions of people to live their lives as though the God who made this world for his glory would never call them to account for how little he has meant to them. It squares with Scripture and it squares with reason: "He has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness" (Acts 17:31). Therefore, I urge you to ask yourself: Would I gain my life before a holy God if I died tonight? Am I ready to take my stand in the divine courtroom and hear the Judge pass an eternal sentence on me? There will

only be two verdicts in that day, and one or the other of them will be passed on every person: either "condemned" or "justified," hell or heaven, eternal death or eternal life.

If you want to know how to be ready to gain your life on that day, listen to Habakkuk 2:4. "The just shall live by his faith." Habakkuk knew that everybody in Judah was a sinner. And he knew that the holiness of God prevents him from ignoring our sins: "Thou art of purer eyes than to behold evil and canst not look on wrong" (1:13). So Habakkuk taught that the only thing that could save us is faith. Faith in what? In God's mercy. In 3:2 he prays, "In wrath remember mercy."

Habakkuk couldn't see ahead to how God would preserve both his holy hatred for sin and his merciful forgiveness of sinners who trust him. But God had revealed it and so he proclaimed it: the just shall gain their lives in the judgment by faith. He knew that when he called them "just" they weren't sinless. He meant that those who are right with God in spite of their sin are those who trust God for his mercy. But how can a holy God, who hates sin, show eternal mercy on sinners who simply trust him for mercy? God did not reveal that much to Habakkuk.

But he did to the apostle Paul, and the answer is the death of Christ. Paul said it like this:

They are justified by his grace as a gift through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus whom God put forward as an expiation by his blood to be received by faith. This was to show God's righteousness because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins; it was to prove at the present time that he himself is righteous and that he justifies him who has faith in Jesus (Rom. 3:24-26).

Let me try to translate that into your situation. When you put your trust in Jesus Christ as your Savior and Lord, when you give up trying to lead your own life and establish your own worth, and instead surrender your heart to him and bank on him for your future, three things happen. 1) Your sin receives its deserved condemnation. 2) God's righteousness receives its deserved glorification. 3) And you receive your undeserved justification.

1) Your sin receives its deserved condemnation. You may be drunk with self-confidence now before the awesome holiness of God. But, I promise you, on your deathbed (if God gives you a chance) you will sober up in a hurry, and be scared to death that in a day or two you will stand with all your sin before God. Sin must be punished. But God, who is rich in mercy, sent his Son to take our sin on himself and suffer for it. "What the law could not do, weak as it was through the flesh, God did. Sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin he condemned sin in the flesh" (Rom. 8:3). "He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree" (1 Peter 2:24; 3:18; 2 Cor. 5:21; Is. 53:6; Mk. 10:45). If you close with Christ in faith, the death he died becomes your death. Your sins become his and you bear them no more. They have received their deserved condemnation.

2) But it is not as though God's righteousness were easily satisfied. It took the death of Christ for God's righteousness to receive its deserved glorification. If his righteousness had not been at stake he might have swept your sin under the rug. But he glorified his righteousness by requiring an infinitely valuable sacrifice--the death of his own Son. It is unthinkable in a moral universe that God could simply let bygones be bygones. The sins you committed ten years ago are as vivid and horrible and condemning as though you did them last night. The righteous God cannot forget and ignore sin--unless there is an atonement, a sacrificial substitute. Therefore, he sent the Son so that our sin might receive its deserved condemnation and his righteousness might receive its deserved glorification.

3) Finally, when you trust in Christ you receive your undeserved justification. "There is therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus" (Rom. 8:1). "Having been justified by faith we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ" (Rom. 5:1). "To the one who does not work but trusts him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is reckoned as righteousness" (Rom. 4:5).

Habakkuk taught us that when judgment comes the just shall live by his faith. And when that seed comes to full flower in the New Testament we see that the reason the just live by faith is that the just are justified by faith. As Paul puts it, (and with this invitation I close) "they are justified by his grace as a gift through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as an expiation by his blood to be received by faith" (Rom. 3:24f).

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