

Nothing but Faith - Habakkuk 2:4

by Jon Courson

Jon Courson's sermon emphasizes the transformative power of faith as illustrated by Martin Luther's journey and the message of Habakkuk 2:4.

Scripture: Habakkuk 2:4, Romans 1:15, Romans 3:10, Galatians 1:6, Galatians 5:1, Galatians 5:14, Colossians 2:6

Topics: "Justification By Faith", "Living By Faith"

Description

Jon Courson delves into the life of Martin Luther, a man who struggled with his own depravity and sinfulness, seeking peace and favor with God through extreme acts of piety. Luther's journey led him to the realization that true peace and favor with God come through faith alone, not through works or rituals. This revelation, inspired by Habakkuk 2:4, sparked the Reformation and the revolutionary idea of 'Justification by Faith'. Paul, the Revelator, also emphasized the importance of living by faith in his epistles, highlighting that true righteousness comes through faith in Jesus Christ, not through adherence to the law.

Transcript

In the year 1483 in Eisleben, Saxony, a baby boy was born to a poor coal miner. As he grew up and observed the poverty of his father, this boy named Martin chose to pursue a different vocation. He decided to become a lawyer and, in 1501, entered the University of Erfurt, where he excelled in his studies.

As he came to the end of his schooling in 1504, an event took place which changed his life. While he was walking the campus grounds, a storm broke so forcefully that Martin fell on his face in fear. The thunder was deafening and lightning struck all around him. Instinctively, he cried out to the patron saint of coal miners, whose name he had heard invoked during his childhood, 'Saint Anne! Save me from this lightning. If you save me, I will become a monk.' Shortly thereafter, the storm stopped.

Being a man of his word, Martin withdrew from Law school and entered an Augustinian monastery where he applied himself so diligently that he obtained his Doctorate of Theology within a few years. But the more he studied, the more troubled his heart became; for although he was becoming an expert in theology, he lacked peace personally. The question he repeatedly wrote in his diary was: 'How can a man find favor with God?'

In search of such peace, Martin devoted himself to an exceedingly pious lifestyle. He would fast for 10 to 15 days at a time. When temperatures dropped below freezing, he slept outside without a blanket.

Between his studies, he beat his body until it was black and blue and bleeding -- hoping that somehow by punishing his flesh, he could rid himself of the thoughts and motives that he knew were not right. He went to confession so many times a day that finally the abbot said, 'Martin, either go out and commit a sin worth confessing, or stop coming here so often.'

Martin was introspective and continually plagued by what he knew of his own depravity and sinfulness. Once, while sitting at his desk writing theology, he felt the presence of Satan so tangibly that he grabbed a bottle of ink and hurled it across the room to where he thought the devil was standing. The bottle crashed against the wall and left a mark that can still be seen today. Whipping, fasting, praying, confessing -- Martin did everything possible to gain peace with this God Whom he knew to be righteous, holy, and awesome.

Finally, in 1509, Martin decided to make a pilgrimage to Rome in hope of finding the elusive peace for which he longed. He set out on foot and crossed the Alps. On his descent, he almost died of a high fever before making his way to a monastery at the foot of the mountains where the Brothers nursed him back to health. While there, a wise monk approached him and said, 'You need to read the Book of Habakkuk.' And so Martin did just that. He read Habakkuk. It was a good word from that insightful old monk, who perhaps had a sense of Martin's struggle.

You see, Habakkuk was a real struggler himself -- just like Martin; just like the people today who say, 'Well if God is good, why does He allow suffering?' Or -- 'If there really is a devil, why doesn't God just obliterate him?'

So often, people who wrestle with God throw out questions -- then grab their frisbees, run out to play, and wonder why they don't get answers. If we would be more like Habakkuk and say, 'I'm going to build a tower. I'm going to get away from the world and I'm going to seek the Lord and wait on the Lord until I get an answer from the Lord,' -- how many more questions would be answered. I like Habakkuk because he did just that. He was wrestling and wondering in Chapter One. Then he began to watch and wait in Chapter Two. Finally, we will see him worshipping and witnessing in Chapter Three. The book that starts with a sigh ends with a song.

So, it doesn't surprise me that this old monk turned to young Martin and said, 'Read Habakkuk.' We are told that one verse in Habakkuk captured Martin's imagination. It went round and round in his head. He didn't know what it meant, but he couldn't get it out of his mind. The verse? Habakkuk 2:4: The just shall live by faith.

Finally, Martin recovered sufficiently to continue his journey to Rome. When he got there, he went to the Church of St. John, a cathedral typical of the day, filled with holy relics and artifacts. The most important relic at the Church of St. John was the inside stairway. These stairs were believed to have been the same ones Jesus Christ climbed to stand before Pontius Pilate after He was scourged. Miraculously transported from Jerusalem, the stairs were adorned with glass mosaics marking the drops of blood which had supposedly fallen from the back of Jesus. Penitents who made the pilgrimage to St. John's would climb these stairs on their knees and beat themselves with whips as they stopped to kiss each of the mosaics.

Martin was doing just that -- whipping himself, climbing the stairs on his knees -- trying desperately to gain favor, trying to make an impression, trying to get the attention of God. He was halfway up when Habakkuk 2:4 hit him again: The just shall live by faith. At last he understood.

He put down his whip, stood up, walked down the stairs and back to the University of Wittenberg where he started a movement known today as the Reformation -- the single most important event in modern history. The man's name, of course, was Martin Luther. Luther went on to explore the revolutionary idea of 'Justification by Faith'. He wrote profusely about it, and, a few years later, nailed his famous 95 theses to the door of the Wittenberg Castle Church.

The leadership at Wittenberg wasn't real happy about what Luther was saying -- particularly the idea that people didn't have to pay indulgences to the Church in order to find absolution from their sin. After all, the money collected from indulgences was the money that financed the glorious cathedrals of that period. So, the Church leadership called together the Diet of Worms. Now, the Diet of Worms was not the latest fad to lose weight. Rather, the word, 'diet' meant 'council', and it was held in the city of Worms. They discussed Martin Luther's theory, and eventually excommunicated him as a heretic.

But the populace caught the vision of what Luther was saying, and they began to rejoice in the freedom they had in Christ Jesus. The Reformation was launched, and Martin Luther went on to write theological treatises and commentaries which are still classics to this day. He wrote hymns like, 'A Mighty Fortress Is Our God' and translated the entire Bible into German -- a classic which remains the literary masterpiece of the Germanic tongue.

History books declare Martin Luther to be the most influential German to have ever lived -- all because he saw the reality of Habakkuk 2:4 while kneeling on the steps at the Church of St. John. The just shall live -- not by beating, not by praying, not by fasting -- the just shall live by faith. He saw it, the world caught it, and the great Reformation was launched.

This verse impacted not only Habakkuk the Wrestler, and Luther the Reformer, but also Paul the Revelator. You see, after Paul was saved on the Road to Damascus, he spent three years in the desert where he was given personal revelation by the Lord Jesus Christ. Paul took Habakkuk 2:4 and upon this single statement -- the just shall live by faith -- penned his two most important epistles: The Book of Romans and the Book of Galatians. Habakkuk 2:4 is quoted, a third time in the New Testament in the book of Hebrews, and personally, I do believe that Paul wrote Hebrews. Suffice it to say, however, that Paul used the verse at least twice. Hear Paul's heart. He declares the just shall live.

What is life about? People want to know. Our neighbors, our kids, people we work with are wondering what living is all about. Who is going to live? The book of Habakkuk tells us the just shall live. Jesus said, 'I have come that you might have life and life abundantly,' (John 10:10). Yet people today are going through the motions, not knowing what real life is even about.

The average person who lives to be 70, will have spent 20 years of his life sleeping, 6 years eating, 5 years dressing, 2 years on the telephone, 3 years waiting, and 5 months tying shoes. After spending huge chunks of time waiting or tying shoes or talking on the phone, people can't help but wonder what life is really about.

What's life about? The just shall live by faith, declares Paul.

'So, as much as in me is, I am ready to preach the gospel to you that are at Rome also. For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ: for it is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth; to the Jew first, and also to the Greek. For therein is the righteousness of God revealed from faith to faith: as it is written, The just shall live by faith.' Romans 1:15-17

'I'm not ashamed to come and share the Gospel,' said Paul. 'It's good news. You're going to live, really live -- both in this life abundantly and on into heaven eternally. The just shall live by faith.'

The just shall live by faith.

'The just?' you say. 'There's the problem. I'm not just.' That's the whole premise of the Book of Romans. Who is just? Who is righteous? Is it the one who's keeping rules and regulations -- beating his body, laying outside when it's freezing, fasting, confessing, praying, studying? Is that who 'the just' is? Paul answers that question.

'As it is written, There is none righteous, no, not one: There is none that understandeth, there is none that seeketh after God. Where is boasting then? It is excluded. By what law? of works? Nay: but by the law of faith. Therefore we conclude that a man is justified by faith without the deeds of the law.' Romans 3:10-11, 27-28

Paul says, 'No one does good. None really seeks after God. People might try and impress you with their piety, they might flaunt their spirituality -- but it's not real. In ourselves, apart from Jesus living in us, there is none that doeth good. We're all corrupt. We're all polluted.' Then how can a man be made just? We are justified by faith.

The word, 'justified' is a judicial term meaning, 'just as if I never sinned'. When the judge hits the gavel and says, 'This man is guilty, but we'll put him on probation,' -- that is not justification. When the judge hits the gavel and says, 'This man is guilty, but I forgive him anyway,' -- that is not justification. When the judge hits the gavel and says, 'This man has never sinned. The charges are untrue. The accusation is unacceptable -- that's justification.

You see, in Christ Jesus we are more than just forgiven -- we're justified. It's not that God simply says, 'I forgive you and I'll put you on probation.' He says, 'I pronounce those of you who live by faith to be justified -- as if you never sinned at all.'

Listen gang, this is the incredible thing about our salvation. If you say, 'Thank you, Lord. I know I'm not good. My rules, regulations, and piety don't make it. But I see Jesus on the Cross at Calvary, paying the price for my sins -- every sin I've ever committed, am committing, or ever will commit -- and I allow His blood to cleanse me,' you are justified in God's sight. Why? Because a wonderful thing happens to those who simply by faith believe that Jesus is the propitiation, the satisfaction, the Lamb slain: The red blood of Jesus Christ strikes the blackness of our sin and makes it white as snow. How can that be? Well, how can a brown cow eat green grass and produce white milk?

Is God blind to sin? Reverently, I say, 'Yes. He is color blind.' You see, the red blood of Jesus Christ is a filter through which God looks and sees righteousness, whiteness. It is the mystery, the glory, the liberty of justification. No wonder Paul said, 'I'm not ashamed of the gospel. It is the power of God unto salvation!' The just shall live by faith -- not by morning devotions, not by tithes and offerings, not by whippings and beatings, not by trying to be spiritual -- but by faith.

Thus, in Romans, Paul makes this fantastic declaration. But he quotes Habakkuk 2:4 a second time. In Romans, the emphasis is on, 'the just'. In Galatians, the emphasis is on 'faith'.

I marvel that ye are so soon removed from him that called you into the grace of Christ unto another gospel: Which is not another; but there be some that trouble you, and would pervert the gospel of Christ. But

though we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel unto you than that which we have preached unto you, let him be accursed. As we said before, so say I now again, If any man preach any other gospel unto you than that ye have received, let him be accursed. Galatians 1:6-9

The just shall live by faith.

Here, Paul is addressing a group of believers in the city of Galatia, a town in modern-day Turkey. He's greatly concerned about them and tells them sternly, 'I marvel that you are so soon removed from the gospel, the good news, and have bought into another rap.' The word, 'angel' in verse 8 is, 'angelos' in Greek. It can either mean an angel like we think of in heavenly terms, or it can mean, 'messenger'.

Thus, Paul could be referring to demonic angels like Moroni, the Mormon angel who said, 'Here's another gospel,' -- or he could be referring to any pastor, messenger, or teacher or, he could be referring to any pastor, messenger, or teacher who says, 'Faith is good, but there's another aspect to consider. . .' That's what was happening in Galatia. Judaizers -- those who sought to mix Jewish Law with the Gospel of Jesus Christ -- were teaching new Gentile believers that in addition to faith in Jesus, they must also adhere to the rites and customs of the Jewish Law.

Basically, they said, 'It's great that you believe that Jesus Christ died for your sins, but if you really want to be spiritual, you need to become like us. You need to be circumcised. You see, if you mark your body and follow certain rules and regulations, then you will be truly spiritual.' Becoming a Christian in that atmosphere was not easy, because the Judaizers were constantly analyzing who had been circumcised and who hadn't. Paul says, 'I would that the circumcisers would castrate themselves,' (Galatians 5:12). That's strong language, because this is strong stuff.

'I do not frustrate the grace of God: for if righteousness come by the law, then Christ is dead in vain. O foolish Galatians, who hath bewitched you, that ye should not obey the truth, before whose eyes Jesus Christ hath been evidently set forth, crucified among you? This only would I learn of you, Received ye the Spirit by the works of the law, or by the hearing of faith? Are ye so foolish? having begun in the Spirit, are ye now made perfect by the flesh? But that no man is justified by the law in the sight of God, it is evident: for, The just shall live by faith. Ye observe days, and months, and times, and years. I am afraid of you, lest I have bestowed upon you labour in vain.' Galatians 2:21, 3:1-3, 11, 4:10-11

Paul says, 'I marvel that you have left the gospel of grace -- the unearned, undeserved, unmerited favor of God -- in order to become entangled in rules and regulations.'

'Stand fast therefore in the liberty wherewith Christ has made us free, and be not entangled again with the yoke of bondage. Behold, I Paul say unto you, that if ye be circumcised, Christ shall profit you nothing. For I testify again to every man that is circumcised, that he is a debtor to do the whole law.' Galatians 5:1-3

'If you give in to this idea of outwardly trying to prove you are spiritual by getting rid of certain things, then you are debtor to the whole law,' Paul says. 'It's all or nothing!'

'Christ is become of no effect unto you, whosoever of you are justified by the law; ye are fallen from grace. For we through the Spirit wait for the hope of righteousness by faith. For in Jesus Christ neither circumcision availeth any thing, nor uncircumcision; but faith which worketh by love.' Galatians 5:4-6

Here's the problem with the circumcision mentality: Because I go through pain saying, 'Well I don't do this, and I got rid of this, and I'm not involved in that. Look how righteous I am,' -- I want to inflict pain upon

others as well. Because misery loves company, I find myself saying, 'If I don't do that, they're not going to do that, either. I'm going to judge them, and I'm going to let them know just how sinful they are.'

And I become a Judaizer. I become an inspector of people, and of the private parts of their lives in order that I might mark them and hurt them -- not love and embrace and bless them. I become a self-righteous prude, who looks at everyone and says, 'Why aren't they fasting like I fast? Why aren't they praying as long as I pray? Why don't they attend as many meetings as I do? What's wrong with them?'

And I walk around in Pharisees' robes saying, 'I thank You, God, that I am not like other men.' But sooner or later (usually sooner!) I don't keep my own rules, and I fall. Then I say, 'I'm a wretch. God can never bless me. He will never use me. How can I even talk to Him? I've blown it.'

We put ourselves under such pressure that our whole Christian experience is either that of a self-righteous prude -- or one of living in the pits of despair. Up and down, up and down, and it's crazy. The just shall live by faith. 'Lord, the work is complete. My sins -- past, present, and future, are forgiven. I can approach You freely anytime I want to. I don't have to prove my spirituality. I don't have to cut this thing off, or rid myself of that. Lord, I can just love You and appreciate the Cross -- and I'm free!'

So Paul would write to the Colossians, 'As ye have therefore received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk ye in him.' Colossians 2:6

When you received Jesus, it was so simple. You just said, 'Lord, thank You for dying for me.' Paul says, 'Keep walking in that simplicity. Don't become a Judaizer. You're free to love others, not to analyze their fruit.'

'For all the law is fulfilled in one word, even in this; Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. But if ye bite and devour one another, take heed that ye be not consumed one of another.' Galatians 5:14-15

Who can love? Not he who bites, but he who blesses; not the one who is inspecting for circumcision, but the one who realizes the just live by faith.

That's what Habakkuk discovered. The Babylonian? He's proud, but the just live by faith.

That's what Paul learned. The just live by faith--not by rules and regulations, not do's and don'ts -- but Done!

That's what Martin Luther finally understood. He laid down his whip and said, 'Enough of this beating myself and inspecting others. The just shall live by faith!' Habakkuk the Wrestler, Paul the Revelator, and Luther the Reformer were set free when they grasped the significance of Habakkuk 2:4.

And so are you, who by faith, realize you are just. 'If I'm free, I can just go out and party and do all kinds of things,' you might say. Yes, you can -- if you want to ruin your health, your family, your business, and your witness.

You see, we are not free to sin. We are free not to sin.

There's a better way of living. And that's what the Christian adventure is about as we study the Word together. My relationship with God and my relationship with you is not based upon anything other than faith in Christ Jesus. Period. That's it.

Let us be those who say, 'The just live by faith and if you embrace the Cross, I embrace you as my brother.' When you have need, don't listen to the devil saying, 'You haven't been praying enough.' When you're hurting, don't listen to Satan saying, 'You haven't been reading your Bible enough.'

The just shall live by faith. Be free in the name of Jesus Christ!

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