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# The Righteous One

Habakkuk 2:1-5<sup>3</sup>

*Russ Kennedy*

Where do we find the prophet? On the wall in a watch tower waiting for the Lord to respond to his concerns, complaints and charges.

2 I will take my stand at my watchpost and station myself on the tower,  
and look out to see what he will say to me,  
and what I will answer concerning my complaint.

The core message in this chapter is in two simple sentences.

God's true people wait on God to do His delivering work.

God's true people believe in God through His declared Word.

But there is also a deep layer of Biblical complexity that is going to stretch you a bit. So, take it all in. Hold on to the simple truths and reach up for the more difficult ones.

## Receives God's Word

**(v. 1-3)**

Habakkuk is commanded to write the vision that God will give.

2And the Lord answered me:  
"Write the vision;  
make it plain on tablets,  
so he may run who reads it.  
3 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.

This is the Lord's answer to Habakkuk. He was waiting for God to speak. Now God has given him a task.

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## In its Careful Writing

Habakkuk is to write down what he receives. He is to write it on clay tablets that will be baked until they are stone. This creates an unchanging and enduring record of what God has shown and what God has said. This tablet form echoes the giving of the Law on tablets of stone written by the finger of God. But here, the fired clay tablets was a Babylonian way of writing and preserving important records. He is not to write on Egyptian papyrus or Jewish sheepskin which would have been easily altered or destroyed. But it would have been another element of surprise. God's Words through the prophet would be preserved by Babylonian technology.

He was to write it down so that it was clear to the reader. Habakkuk was seeing a vision that he was to write down as God's words. He is to write it in words that are true to the vision and clear to the reader. As we will see, it will be vital for God's people that the reader have access to it and be able to understand it. This is the prophet's responsibility. It is the preacher and teacher's responsibility today.

## With its Faithful Endurance

Here is the reason the recorded vision, the Word of God, was to be clear and preserved. It was so that those who read it were able to run. Now, from what I have read, this is very difficult phrase in the Hebrew. Is the tablet being read by those who pass by or is it being read by those who are running to carry it abroad? In one case, the tablet is being posted for all to see and read, for all to hear and heed. In the second understanding, the tablet is being carried by a runner and being dispersed to others. The ESV has taken something of a blend of the two. The Word of God on the tablet is written *so that* the one who runs may do so with endurance. There is a sense of the Word going forth the focus is on the runner being sustained by the Word. I agree with our translators because of the context and because of the way the New Testament makes use of this text.

So why is the Word important to those who carry it and those who receive it?

## Until its Final Fulfillment

Because the Word of God is explaining why the judgment is so long in coming and how it will come when it does. The vision is meant to sustain God's people until God moves on their behalf. It is also intended to sustain them when while the judgment is coming because they will endure its effects as well. Enduring judgment through to the end will require the Word of God.

The revelation God gave was for a future people and about a future time. Babylon was coming. Israel was going into captivity. The captivity would last 70 years. But the effects of the exile would continue far over the horizon of the future.

While the immediate application was to the end of the Babylonian Captivity, the writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews interpreted it to refer also to the eschatological day of the Lord's coming. So the one who is running sustained by the Word of God must endure not just until the end of Babylon but also until the Day of the Lord.

This vision included not just warnings and woes of Habakkuk 2, but also unfold display of God's glory recorded in 3:3-15. One write has said, "When you behold the glory of God and believe the Word of God, it gives you faith to accept the will of God." (Wiersbe, 117)

## Lives by Faith

(v. 4)

Why is the Word of God so essential for endurance while waiting for justice and judgment?

<sup>4</sup> "Behold, his soul is puffed up; it is not upright within him, but the righteous shall live by his faith.

### The Pride of the Wicked

"Pay attention to this", God says. "Behold" is meant both to get and to focus our attention. It has the effect of saying, "List up and look at..." The wicked one has a depraved and deformed soul. His soul is full of pride. His soul is not just or righteous. In the context, this is referring to Nebuchadnezzar. But it also speaks of the unjust and unrighteous wicked person. Behind the depraved and deformed souls of humanity is the prideful and perverse soul of the enemy of God, Satan. This is one side of a contrast. Here is the unrighteous one.

### The Principle for Righteous

But, here is the just, the righteous. These seven words are so important. In contrast to the unrighteous, the just shall live by faith. What is God saying to Habakkuk in this context?

**God is making a declarative statement.** This is a statement about the *way things are*. This is a descriptive statement. The righteous one actually lives by faith. The "shall" here is conveying a sense of being emphatic. This faith is both fidelity to truth (belief) and faithfulness in action (behavior). The just do live by faith.

God is *not* giving a command here. There is no imperative verb here. God is not saying, "You must live by faith" either to be justified or as a result of being justified. Yes, there are other texts in the Bible that command us to live by faith. But not this one.

God is *not* saying *here* that faith is how one is justified. While that is a truth taught in the Bible, the language here simply does not say that. It is not saying sinners are justified by faith; it is saying the just live by faith.

God is *not* saying here that through faith sinners come to life. This is not a statement of regeneration or new birth or spiritual quickening by faith. It is not saying anything about how salvation is being delivered to people. Many other texts tell us about the role of faith as the means of transmitting God's saving benefits to us; just not this text.

Why is this critical? Because God's Word is being given. It is promising and prophesying judgment. It is announcing that the wicked will be punished but that until they are judged God's people will suffer. They will be sinned against. And the judgment upon

the wicked will come through the means of those who are even more wicked. To endure through those times, the just will live their lives by believing God's Word in an obeying way. During those times, the righteous will be evident by their faith-driven lives.

So, the message to Habakkuk and to God's people is simply this: anyone who stands under judgment must believe by faith that God's deliverance will come. And the contrast is stark. Either one lives by faith or one is proud and not upright in soul. There are two classes of people here. There are two responses to God's Word, to the vision and the writing from God through the prophet.

Is there more than that here? Yes. The New Testament takes these words and illuminates their multi-faceted meaning. And we will look at that in a moment.

## Heeds God's Warning

(v. 5)

God's Word is filled with principles and promises. It is also filled with warnings. Living by faith also means believing God's warnings.

<sup>5</sup> "Moreover, wine is a traitor,  
an arrogant man who is never at rest.  
His greed is as wide as Sheol;  
like death he has never enough.  
He gathers for himself all nations  
and collects as his own all peoples."

### A Difficulty

There is a little difficulty here. Is wine (or possibly wealth) being represented as a person? This is called, "personification". Or is the coming wicked one, Nebuchadnezzar, being compared to the all-consuming addictive power of wealth or wine?

### No Difference

It seems to me that what has gone wrong in Israel has been a pursuit of wealth at all costs. No matter what the Law says, no matter what is just, all that wealth can bring is being pursued. But this is also the way Nebuchadnezzar and Babylon are. From earlier stanzas we know that Babylon and her ruler are greedy for power, pleasure and wealth. So what God is saying here is that *the people of Israel are not much different from the people of Babylon.*

Unlike the just one who lives by faith, they are prideful, depraved, and addicted to power, money and wine. Babylon has no law but their own. Israel has God's Law but it has made little difference in the way they live.

## Towards Christ and the New Covenant

We have seen that in Habakkuk “The just shall live by faith.” (v. 4) largely means that the righteous will wait through injustice and judgment believing by faith that God's deliverance will come. The New Testament quotes our sentence three times. I want to take us to each of those three instances and see how the New Testament writers understood our text. Each of them (1) understands the text in its context and original audience, (2) sees Christ as the ultimate righteous one who (3) along with God's people, believed that God is right and trustworthy to bring deliverance through judgment.

### The Righteousness of God in the Gospel

### Romans 1:16–17

<sup>16</sup> 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. <sup>17</sup> For in it [the gospel] the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, “The righteous shall live by faith.”

First, the gospel is at the center of this paragraph. The gospel is the historical facts of the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus Christ as interpreted by the Scriptures. At the center of the gospel is the death of the righteous one in the place of and for the deliverance of those who were sinners. Do not substitute “holiness” for righteousness in this text. It is right, it is just for God to deal with sin this way. So the gospel itself is about how judgment is used to deliver God's people. This is exactly what God tells Habakkuk to record. Habakkuk says that righteous people will live by believing God's Word *about the fact that it is absolutely right for God to judge sin through the wicked acts of wicked people.*

What is being revealed here in the gospel is not the holiness of God, but the rightness of God's judgment through wicked people as exhibited in the death and resurrection of Jesus. While keeping it in its context, Paul is focused on the part of the quote “by faith”.

Over and over again Jesus says that He accepts or believes this to be true. He came to die at the hands of wicked men. He willingly waits while believing and trusting His Father's Word. HE never questions whether it is right for the Father to do this. He is one of the righteous who lives by believing what God says. Jesus is the just one who lives by faith. He believes what His Father says. He patiently and willingly endures His Father's judgment for the sin of God's people. He lives His life here on earth just like every one of us – He lives it by faith, by believing God's Word. Why? In order to become righteous? No, because He is righteous. He is the justified One.

### No One Righteous through the Law

### Galatians 3:10–14

Paul quotes again from Habakkuk in his teaching on the centrality of faith in salvation.

<sup>10</sup> 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.” <sup>11</sup> Now it is evident that no **one** is justified before God by the law, for “The righteous shall live by faith.” <sup>12</sup> But the law is not of faith, rather “The one who does them shall live by them.” <sup>13</sup> Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, “Cursed is everyone who is

hanged on a tree” — <sup>14</sup> so that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promised Spirit through faith.

How is it evident or obvious from the quote from Habakkuk that no one is justified before God by Law? Here Paul is focused on the part of the quote “shall live by”. If you live by the Law, that is, you try to live as a justified person by the Law, you put yourself under the curse of the Law. You go back to what God has redeemed you from. You go back to being judged as a wicked person. But the justified person lives by faith and thus lives in the right standing before God. They believe what God has done in the gospel and declared in the Word.

So, once again, the quote from Habakkuk is (1) in relation to judgment for sin, (2) sees Christ at the center as the just One and (3) highlights that justified people live by faith. Paul’s quote here means that he understands Habakkuk 2:4 to God’s correction of Habakkuk’s evaluation of what has gone wrong. Israel has gone wrong because people will not live by the Law. Because of the wickedness of people, the Law is impotent. *Precisely*. The righteous then do not live by Law. The wicked try to live by Law and fail. The wicked cannot keep the Law. The wicked break the Law and are thus cursed. The righteous one believes what God says about the impotence and fulfillment of the Law and lives by faith. In Habakkuk and in Galatians, the righteous One and His people do not live by Law, they live by faith.

## The Righteous Endure by Faith

## Hebrews 10:32–39

Now, if there is any doubt that Habakkuk, Romans and Galatians are seeing the Righteous One in Habakkuk 2:4, Hebrews 10 settles the question.

<sup>32</sup> But recall the former days when, after you were enlightened, you endured a hard struggle with sufferings, <sup>33</sup> sometimes being publicly exposed to reproach and affliction, and sometimes being partners with those so treated. <sup>34</sup> For you had compassion on those in prison, and you joyfully accepted the plundering of your property, since you knew that you yourselves had a better possession and an abiding one. <sup>35</sup> Therefore do not throw away your confidence, which has a great reward. <sup>36</sup> For you have need of endurance, so that when you have done the will of God you may receive what is promised. <sup>37</sup> For, “Yet a little while, and the coming one will come and will not delay; <sup>38</sup> but my righteous one shall live by faith, and if he shrinks back, my soul has no pleasure in him.”

<sup>39</sup> But we are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who have faith and preserve their souls.

While there are some challenging things in this text, can you clearly see how the author has connected the present sufferings of the Christians with the situation of Habakkuk but through the past and future judgment by Christ that will deliver them?

God’s people were suffering at the hands of wicked people. Their faith was being challenged by the ongoing injustice of the government and the seeming indifference of God. They had begun well but were beginning to falter. So the author reminds them that

something and Someone larger is at stake. If they are truly justified then they will live in steadfast faith.

How can they? Because they have believed that my Righteous One, the Lord Jesus, has passed through the judgment at the cross and has brought their present and future deliverance. Now, through untold suffering, hardship, deprivation and even death, God's righteous people will not shrink back but believe in an obeying way that Jesus will come and judgment will fall, the wicked will be swept away into hell and God's people will be delivered. Hebrews 11 then is an Old Testament room full of testimonies. They give witness that in suffering righteous people will live by faith that God will keep His promises of deliverance. This deliverance will come through the eschatological judgments, first on Jesus at the cross and then on the wicked at end of days.

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## Thinking it through...

One of the challenges in this sermon is trying to hew a straight path through weeds and thickets of misunderstandings and misuses. We are to believe God's Word. But we are to believe what God's Word is actually saying in the text that is actually in front of us. Are we justified by faith alone through grace alone? Yes, absolutely. Totally. But that is not the point of Habakkuk 2:4.

God's response to Habakkuk describes the chief characteristic of the righteous: they live by faith, and not as the prophet Habakkuk complained and the Apostle Paul opposed, not by Law.

"The just shall live by (his) faith" is about how Jesus and God's people believe that God will deliver His people through judgment, at the cross and in the last day.

The Righteous One, our Lord Jesus Christ, lived by faith just as all the righteous do. We, together with Jesus, believe that God has delivered us from the Law curse and condemnation. We believe that Jesus' suffering on the cross by wicked hands and the holy God is the judgment through which our salvation comes. We believe that suffering and hardship and injustice are *normal* for Christians and so we will believe God's promises of justice and deliverance until He is pleased to come make all things right.

Till the day of our full and final deliverance, we will live by faith. We will not shrink back. We will hold fast. We will do so because Jesus did. We will do so because we are the justified ones who are in the Righteous One.

