

# THE PERSPECTIVE OF FAITH

## *SERIES: THE JUST SHALL LIVE BY FAITH*

By Danny Hall

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In 1984, Ginger and I and our ten-month-old Christopher took off for Europe, where we lived for more than 13 years. The first five and a half years I worked with an organization called BEE International that ministered behind the Iron Curtain in six communist countries. The last 8 years I pastored an international church in Vienna.

During those years in Europe, I had the privilege of observing up close Christians in the churches of Eastern Europe who had not only survived but thrived under the oppression of the communist regimes. I had the privilege of looking at churches in Western Europe that dealt with many of the same kinds of issues as we do in America, such as affluence and apathy. I would dip in and out of the American Christian culture while on furlough, speaking to supporting churches and then communicating with friends, family, and supporters during those years. I saw Christianity practiced differently in different venues.

One of the things that I was very troubled to notice in the American church scene was that the concept of living by faith was becoming more and more closely wedded to the American concept of success. The mark of faith was whether God made you prosperous, happy, and healthy, personally blessed you with more and more comfort.

In the latter years we were in Europe, the first Christian television network on the European continent was launched. It was filled almost exclusively with programming that propagated these kinds of ideas. The new definition of living by faith meant personal blessings, usually in the realm of comfort, wealth, success, and health. Over the years I've thought more and more about that whole troubling concept.

A few months ago, in anticipation of this series of messages, I sensed God laying on my heart a short statement that appears four times in Scripture: "The just shall live by faith." Martin Luther said that statement changed the world. Once he latched on to it and God began to change him through it, it became the basis for the whole Protestant Reformation that flowed out of his teaching.

What does it mean that the just shall live by faith? In this series I want to go back and examine the context of each instance of this statement. The original appearance of the statement is in the book of Habakkuk, a small prophetic work in the Old Testament, chapter 2 verse 4. Paul quotes the verse twice in his writings in Romans 1 and Galatians 3, and we will look at those in the next message. Paul uses the statement "The just shall live by faith" in a pointed and specific way that will help us discern what it means to live by faith. Then, finally, it is quoted in Hebrews 10, and we will look at that in the third message. Each context gives us a slightly different emphasis and application, and together they will help us picture what it is to be men and women of faith.

In order to understand the importance of the statement in Habakkuk 2:4, we really need to get an overview of the whole book. The book falls loosely into two major parts. The first part, chapters 1-2, is a series of interchanges between Habakkuk and God. The second part, chapter 3, is Habakkuk's response.

The interchanges between God and Habakkuk in chapters 1-2 are instructive.

## **A frustrating problem and a drastic solution**

Chapter 1, verses 1-4 set the stage:

**The oracle which Habakkuk the prophet saw.  
How long, O LORD, will I call for help,  
And Thou wilt not hear?  
I cry out to Thee, "Violence!"**

**Yet Thou dost not save.  
 Why dost Thou make me see iniquity,  
 And cause me to look on wickedness?  
 Yes, destruction and violence are before me;  
 Strife exists and contention arises.  
 Therefore, the law is ignored [ineffective]  
 And justice is never upheld.  
 For the wicked surround the righteous;  
 Therefore, justice comes out perverted.**

Habakkuk is basically frustrated and angry that the nation of Israel has descended into a regular pattern of sinful rejection of God's law. He is mystified at the ineffectiveness of the law to restrain sin and promote holiness. (That's also the theme we're going to examine in the next message in Paul's usage of this statement.) Habakkuk is asking God why he seems to be ignoring the fact that sin is abounding among his people.

Imagine the situation, if you will. It wasn't that the nation of Israel had abandoned the idea of spirituality and religion. In fact, they thought spirituality was a great idea. They had branched out beyond the revelation of God in the Old Testament and had begun to borrow some of the spiritual ideas and philosophies of the countries around them, and to add them to the word God had given them in the Old Testament law. The pagan practices became more and more ingrained. There was increasing emphasis on sensuality, personal accomplishment, and blessing. Even the priesthood became a profession whereby an individual might gain personal wealth and power. Under the mask of religion, people were more concerned about their own personal gain than any sort of societal or communal responsibilities.

Consider how it was working out. With ever-increasing emphasis on the personal gains of religious experience, some of the basic calls to righteousness were being ignored. Beyond the increasing sensuality in both worship and life, there was a complete lack of attention to the plight of the poor. The issues of justice in society at large were laid aside. The way the foreigner in the land was treated became more and more suspect; if the Israelites weren't intermarrying with foreign peoples and adopting their pagan religions, they were making foreigners outcasts because they didn't conform to their community culture.

The prevailing philosophies of Habakkuk's day weren't that far removed from those of our own day. Think about what's going on in Silicon Valley. Are you frustrated that there is so much emphasis on success in this valley, even among Christians? In your evaluation, is spirituality more and more about what's good for me rather than what's good for the community? Have you noticed that there is ever-broadening interest in spiritual things, but it's more and more shallow in terms of commitment to God and honestly seeking after truth? That's where Habakkuk was. "What in the world are you going to do?" he asks God.

Beginning in verse 5, God answers. We won't read the whole discourse, but he basically says, "Habakkuk, you are absolutely right, and I am going to do something about it. You know the powerful, evil empire of the Chaldeans [known more commonly to us as the Babylonians]? I am going to raise them up to become the dominant world power in this area, and they are going to come in and wipe out Israel."

In 1:12-2:1 Habakkuk now responds to God. He is dumbfounded! This isn't at all what he was hoping for. I'm not exactly sure what he wanted, but he never anticipated that God's answer to his lament would be to raise up this heathen nation to come as an arm of discipline. In fact, he argues in verse 13, "Lord, your eyes are too pure to behold evil! How in the world can you take these people who are even more evil than we are and allow them to ascend and dominate us?" Habakkuk is totally befuddled now. The Chaldeans were bloodthirsty conquerors of everything around them. They were sensually driven, profit-driven, power-hungry people who militarily crushed everything in their path and brutally dismantled the peoples they conquered. They slaughtered the people of other cultures, taking as their own prize the best of all that was there. They were totally pagan, ungodly, wicked killers. Habakkuk says, "God, how could you? I know we weren't getting it all right, but we certainly weren't like that!" Finally in 2:1 he concludes,

**I will stand on my guard post,**

**And station myself on the rampart;  
I will keep watch to see what He will speak to me,  
And how I may reply when I am reproved.**

He is certain that God is going to blast him for his attitude at this point. “Okay, God, let me have it. What are you going to say?”

## **Judgment and mercy**

Now we come to the key passage on which the whole book hinges, 2:2-20, in which God replies in full to the cry of Habakkuk’s heart. Several things jump out in verses 2-4, the core of the passage:

**Then the LORD answered me and said,  
“Record the vision  
And inscribe it on tablets,  
That the one who reads it may run.  
For the vision is yet for the appointed time;  
It hastens toward the goal, and it will not fail.  
Though it tarries, wait for it;  
For it will certainly come, it will not delay.**

**“Behold, as for the proud one,  
His soul is not right within him;  
But the righteous will live by his faith.”**

First of all, note the importance given to what God says. Whenever the phrase “inscribe on tablets” is used in the Old Testament, it is because whatever is being said is so important and serious, it must be preserved and passed on. Interestingly enough, the word “tablet” is normally singular. Here it is plural. The only other time the plural is used is when it is directly related to the inscription of the Old Testament law. The implication is that there is much gravity in what God is about to say. This is of absolute importance. It is essential that not only Habakkuk but people at large be aware of what God wants them to know and recognize the severity of what is about to transpire.

Second, in verse 3 God wants Habakkuk and the people to know that he will keep his word, that he is absolutely faithful and can be trusted. “The vision...will not fail.” The things that God promised Israel of old and the things that he is saying currently are going to come to pass. Habakkuk can absolutely trust that God will work out his purposes, that what he says he will do, he will do. But God says, “Don’t expect it to happen tomorrow. In fact, the fulfillment of what I am about to say to you may take a while.” Habakkuk lived around the time when the war referred to here began to take place and the nation of Judah was taken into captivity. But God pronounces judgment upon the Chaldeans themselves in 2:4-20 in a word about what will happen ultimately. This will not take place until after Habakkuk’s lifetime. What God is saying to Habakkuk is, “You have one tiny slice of perspective of what is going on. You’ve been frustrated by the impotence of your own people spiritually and morally, and now you’re confused by my explanation of how I’m going to deal with that. But I’m asking you to trust that my perspective on what is happening, my purposes, and my sovereignty are larger than you can comprehend.”

Notice Habakkuk is not questioning as a skeptic. He is not arrogantly shaking his fist in the face of God. He is questioning God as one who is confused, disillusioned, and genuinely agonized over the inconsistencies of life that he cannot explain. And what God tells him is that his perspective is too small, and that the covenant God of Israel will accomplish his purposes. “You must trust me.”

Third, God reminds Habakkuk that the unrighteous will be judged. In 2:4-20, God describes the situation with these Chaldeans and what will happen to them. He talks about their drunkenness and their appetites. Self-importance and self-indulgence motivate these wicked people. Then he pronounces a series of woes and judgments on the Chaldeans, all of which are given to Habakkuk to help him see. God is saying, “For the moment I am going

to allow this evil nation to gain ascendancy in this area and dominate even Israel, because that's how I will purge Israel of its sinfulness and spiritual impotence and all the things it has done to forsake its covenant commitment to me. But that doesn't mean that I am favoring the Chaldeans over my people. It simply means that I am no longer going to protect my people from this enemy, in order that they might understand their need to trust me. And judgment will come on the sin of the Chaldeans, just as it should." So he promises Habakkuk that ultimate justice will be meted out fairly according to his sovereignty.

Finally, back in verse 4, God reminds Habakkuk that the righteous will not be abandoned. "The righteous will live by his faith." That simply means that we are able to live in the midst of confusion and frustration by trusting in the fulfillment of the promises of God, even when we don't yet understand them. God is the sovereign Lord of the universe and the Lord of our lives. And as we trust him, he will not abandon us but will encourage us when nothing makes sense to us.

## **Humble worship**

In chapter 3, Habakkuk in response lifts up a song of praise to God. In the first section of the song he cries out for God's mercy in the midst of his wrath, but he remembers how God has dealt with Israel across the years and has been their faithful God. Then in the last section he writes these words (16-19):

**I heard and my inward parts trembled,  
At the sound my lips quivered.  
Decay enters my bones,  
And in my place I tremble.  
Because I must wait quietly for the day of distress,  
For the people to arise who will invade us.  
Though the fig tree should not blossom,  
And there be no fruit on the vines,  
Though the yield of the olive should fail,  
And the fields produce no food,  
Though the flock should be cut off from the fold,  
And there be no cattle in the stalls,  
Yet I will exult in the LORD,  
I will rejoice in the God of my salvation.  
The Lord GOD is my strength,  
And He has made my feet like hinds' feet,  
And makes me walk on my high places.**

At the very end of the text is the phrase "For the choir director, on my stringed instruments." This indicates that this song of praise was to become a hymn sung by the people of God. In it Habakkuk still acknowledges the anguish of his soul: "I'm scared to death. I'm shaking. My lips are quivering." But he goes on to say, "I am going to stand here and wait for the day the invaders come. I am going to accept whatever happens, even if everything we have is taken away, because I trust that you know what you're doing. I will still praise you, honor you, lift up your name." The response of Habakkuk in the end is humble worship before his sovereign Lord.

Allow me now to summarize this powerful, short book. I'll give you five principles of living by faith that we can learn from this interchange between Habakkuk and God.

## **Getting in tune with God's purposes**

First of all, if we are to live by faith as God's righteous people, we must begin by being in tune with what God is doing. We must be committed to his purposes. In 2:14, in the midst of the woes that God pronounces on the Chaldeans, he says,

**For the earth will be filled  
With the knowledge of the glory of the LORD,  
As the waters cover the sea.**

Ultimately God's purpose is that his name will be proclaimed in all the world. The world will know that he is the sovereign Lord of the universe, inviting them to worship him and experience his love. So the ultimate purpose of God that we must align ourselves with is the glory of God. That is what's askew with so much of the modern thinking on faith living, which says it's all about *me* and what blessings God may give me. It's true that when we walk with God there are blessings untold that come our way. But enjoying the goodness of God's blessing is radically different from being motivated at the core of my being by what God is going to give me, or what's in it for me. Habakkuk had to learn that living by faith is making the central motivation of my life the glory of God, that his name be proclaimed in all the earth.

Back when I worked in Eastern Europe with BEE International in the late eighties, there were a number of us who enjoyed verbal jousting. We would randomly engage in discussion of anything and everything--theology, life, whatever. We would play devil's advocate with one another and generate a little heated discussion to refine our ideas. (I still enjoy that.) One day we got around to discussing a very interesting question: "What if the Soviets win the Cold War? What if America is no longer the dominant power?" That wasn't a very encouraging thought, particularly for the American churches at that time, where so much of what I think was being preached was preserving the American status quo. But what if, because of the anemia of the American church and the way it was ignoring so many important needs worldwide and at home, in God's sovereignty he allowed us to be overrun? Could that be a good thing? Could that be what would unleash revival in America as it did in Romania and parts of the Soviet Union? Could that be what would motivate people in other parts of the world to take on the burden of proclaiming the gospel to the world? (Are we so arrogant as to think that only Americans can do that?)

We came to realize how much of our own emotions were invested in the idea that Americans are always right and that we need to win. Now to be honest, I'm glad we didn't lose that particular conflict in world history. But we are so averse to even entertaining that notion that sometimes we are willing to sell our souls to preserve the American middle-class status quo rather than see God glorified. We are scared to entertain the thought that maybe God has a plan that is bigger than what we can see.

But here in his word to Habakkuk, I believe God is calling us to be willing at the core to say that nothing is more important to us than proclaiming God's name throughout the whole earth. His glory will fill the earth. To be men and women who live by faith, we must begin by saying that we want to be in tune with God's purposes and committed to them.

Second, God is a holy God, and he will justly judge in the end. In 2:20, at the end of the woes he pronounces on the Chaldeans, he says,

**But the LORD is in His holy temple.  
Let all the earth be silent before Him.**

In the summation of his proclamation to Habakkuk, both in his call to live by faith and in his pronouncement of the woes on the Chaldeans, he is basically saying that it is time for everyone to recognize that he is the holy, righteous judge. He will mete out justice and bring everything to its proper conclusion. And what it means to live by faith is to trust not only in God's sovereign purposes, but in his holy, righteous judgment, to say, "Even though sometimes I think my plan is better than God's and the injustices of this world ought to be handled differently, there comes a point when I silently bow before him, because he is the holy God, and I'm going to let him be in charge."

Third, living by faith does not mean that we may never question what we do not understand, that we must be silent about what disturbs us. God never chastises Habakkuk. He never says to him, "Habakkuk, I've heard enough of your smart mouth. Stop whining and get on with it." God invites our questions. *God is greater than the disturbances of our hearts*. There are things out there that I don't understand. I cannot answer all the questions that are thrown at us by the injustices of the world, what seems like the capricious victories of evil, and the suffering of

innocents. But God says of the frustration and futility in my heart, “Throw it at me--I can take it.” It’s okay to question. He encourages Habakkuk to pour out his anguish. We don’t have to live in denial of the harshness of the world. God wants us to ask the unanswerable questions.

The fourth principle is that we must ultimately trust in God’s ways even when we can’t figure everything out. Habakkuk’s response is, “I’m ready to take your wrath, and I’m going to trust you no matter what.” But he is not thrilled. In the statements “I wait quietly for the day of distress” and “Decay enters my bones,” Habakkuk is not at all happy with what is about to transpire, and probably still can’t figure out exactly why God is doing what he’s doing. So once we’ve questioned and poured it all out to God, ultimately we just have to trust him.

Finally, perhaps our truest expression of trust is praise. All this ended up leading Habakkuk to worship and praise. In our worship services we sing many songs that call us to acknowledge that God is beyond our understanding, that his ways are above our ways, but he invites us to place our trust in him.

So the faith lesson from Habakkuk in this little statement, “The just will live by faith,” is perspective. It means that we are willing to step back out of our narrow view of what is going on in our world. It means that when it looks unjust, and there are questions we can’t answer, God says, “There is a broader perspective--my perspective. Trust me.”

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Catalog No. 4671  
Habakkuk 2  
1st Message  
Danny Hall  
June 18, 2000

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