

“Living By Faith”

Habakkuk 2:1-4

Let me invite you to take your Bible this morning and turn with me to the second chapter of the book of Habakkuk. For the last couple of weeks, I have been preaching from this small book found in a section of the Old Testament that is known as the minor prophets. The book of Habakkuk consists of only three chapters, but it reveals a message that is very appropriate for our time. One commentator has said that it begins with gloom, but ends with glory. It starts out on a sour note, but it ends on a sweet note. The first chapter begins with the prophet worrying over things that were beyond his control, but the last chapter ends with the prophet worshiping God as he realizes the Lord is on His throne.

The prophet Habakkuk lived in the southern kingdom of Judah. He was a contemporary of the prophet Jeremiah, and his ministry took place prior to the Babylonian invasion of Judah. He was deeply concerned over the spiritual condition of his nation. But before things would get better, the Lord tells Habakkuk that they would get worse. God gives him a vision of what was to come.

In 586 BC, King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon invaded Judah. He destroyed the city of Jerusalem and carried away its inhabitants into captivity. The reason was idolatry. Years before it happened, God’s people had turned aside to worship idols and had despised God’s law. The religious falling away in Judah had resulted in moral, political, and societal decline. There had been reform here and there, but not revival. Habakkuk is deeply burdened by all that he sees. In chapter one, we’re introduced to the burden of Habakkuk. Verse 1 begins in this way—“The oracle that Habakkuk the prophet saw.”

“Oracle” — *word means burden or ominous announcement*

It means that Habakkuk was a man who was burdened for his generation. He longed for God to send revival. Something had to be done to address society’s ills, yet it bothered him that heaven remained silent. He could not understand why God seemed to let His people persist in their sin. And so when we are first introduced to him in chapter 1, he is a man who is wrestling with God. That’s what his name means. Habakkuk means to wrestle or embrace.

He is faced with some perplexing issues. There are things going on in his world that he doesn't understand. He is troubled by all that is happening in his world. He pours out his soul to God, and the Lord answers him and says:

Habakkuk 1:5—“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.”

God tells him that He is raising up the Chaldeans, or the Babylonians, as an instrument of judgment in His hands. Now, that wasn't the answer that Habakkuk wanted to hear. He had been troubled by unrighteousness and ungodliness in Judah. Yet when God reveals to him that He was about to use the wicked Chaldeans as an instrument of judgment in His hands, Habakkuk becomes even more troubled.

The change in Habakkuk comes in the second chapter. It comes as a result of the truth that God reveals as it relates to a believer's faith. The central verse of the book is 2:4, where God tells Habakkuk, “The righteous shall live by his faith.” This statement serves as God's answer to all the questions that Habakkuk raises in chapter one. (Read)

James Boice—*“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 was this verse that gripped the heart of Martin Luther and led to the Protestant Reformation. The gospel says that a person is justified before God, not by works, but on the basis of faith in what God has done in Christ. That truth had become clouded by the traditions of much of medieval Catholicism. Luther grew up under that medieval system and felt the burden of his sin. He didn't know how to free himself of it. He entered an Augustinian monastery and began to study the Bible. It was the words of Habakkuk 2:4 that he couldn't let go of—“The just shall live by his faith.” He later said:

Martin Luther—*“Before those words broke upon my mind I hated God and was angry with Him...But when, by the Spirit of God, I understood those words, then I felt born again like a new man; I entered through the open doors into the very Paradise of God.”*

The words that led to a change in Martin Luther were the words that led to a change in the prophet Habakkuk. And they are the words that lead to a change in the heart of any sinner who comes to Christ in repentance and faith. From these verses, notice with me a few things about faith and what it means that ‘the just shall live by his faith.’

1—Faith’s POSITION (2:1)

“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.”

Habakkuk has expressed his concerns and poured out his complaint before God. He has been troubled by what he sees in Judah. The Lord shows him that He would most certainly deal with the sin of Judah, but the way He would do it involved raising up a nation even more wicked than they had been. The Chaldeans, or Babylonians, would be an instrument of judgment in His hands. God says in 1:6, “I am raising them up.” At the time, the Assyrians were the threat that everyone feared. It had been Assyria that had overtaken the northern kingdom in 722 BC. It was nearly 110 years later that Nineveh fell to the Babylonians in 612 BC. After that, they literally swept through the earth just as the Lord tells Habakkuk.

So things were bad, but they were about to get worse. The Lord answers Habakkuk’s prayer, but the prophet doesn’t like the answer. God was raising up the Chaldeans as an instrument of judgment against His wayward people. He tells Habakkuk, “If you think you are uncomfortable now, you’ve not seen anything yet. I’m about to do a work that you would not believe if I told you.” God says that He was raising up the Chaldeans, and they are going to sweep across the world like a plague.

Habakkuk then finds himself wrestling with God’s sovereign purposes. He essentially wonders how a holy God could use such an unholy instrument. How could God punish the sin of people by using a nation that was even more wicked than they? Instead of giving the prophet an explanation, the Lord supplies with him with revelation. And instead of messing around with what he doesn’t know or can’t fully understand, Habakkuk stands on the solid ground of what he knows to be true of God. He says here in verse 1:

“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.”

In other words, he says, “I’m going to get alone with God and assume a position and posture of faith.” He’s going to back away from the problems he’s been worried over and is going to leave them in the hands of God. Because that is what faith does. Faith is responding to and submitting to what God initiates. It isn’t a blind leap in the dark. It isn’t believing in spite of a lack of evidence. Rather, faith is a confidence in God that shows up in a willingness to listen and a readiness to obey. It is obeying God no matter the consequences. It is acting upon God’s truth as He has revealed it in His Word. Habakkuk teaches us three things about faith’s position:

A position of knowledge

Verse 1 is connected to the second complaint of Habakkuk that begins back up in 1:12. He wrestles with the question of how God could use such a wicked nation as Babylon. In his heart, he goes back to what he knows to be true of the Lord. He recalls the attributes of God, such as:

- He is everlasting

When the world around him was falling apart, it was the truth of God’s eternal nature that brought him stability.

- He is self-existent

Look at the covenant name of God that is used in verse 12, “O **LORD**, my God.” It was the name that God had revealed to Moses in Exodus 3—“I AM.” Do you know why Habakkuk reminds himself of this? Because people in his day were running around saying that God was dead. No matter what other people said, Habakkuk will go right back to what he knows to be the truth. God is not at the mercy of nations. He doesn’t depend upon anyone or anything for His existence. He is the ‘I AM!’

- He is totally righteous

Notice how he refers to God as ‘my Holy One.’ It means completeness or wholeness. It simply means that God is always consistent within Himself. He is what He is, and He always is, and He’s never different than who He has always been. He is holy, righteous and good, unchanging in His character and in His person, the same yesterday, today, and forever.

- He is completely sovereign

Notice how Habakkuk refers to the Lord God as his ‘Rock.’ Other translations say render it ‘mighty God.’ It is the idea that God is all powerful. When the world around him seemed to be sinking in quicksand, all of his trust and all of his confidence was found in the Rock, the One who has absolute power. He is the Almighty One who is working out the details of His plan on time and according to schedule.

When the bottom falls out of life, when the world seems to be coming apart around us, we can be encouraged by the truth that our God is the Rock. He is the mighty God who will perform what He has promised.

Psalm 91:1 — “He who dwells in the secret place of the Most High shall abide under the shadow of the Almighty.”

- He is always faithful

In verse 12, Habakkuk says, “We shall not die.” It is his way of expressing his knowledge of God’s covenant faithfulness. He is a God of promise, and He will never go back on His Word. God had made a promise to Abraham and Israel, that they would be a nation as numerous as the grains of sand on the sea shore, as innumerable stars in the night sky. And so the prophet remembers this and says to himself, “God has made us a promise, and so whatever His intentions are with these Chaldeans, no matter how bad it may have to get, it will not result in our utter destruction.”

A position of humility

Faith isn’t arrogant or demanding. It is submissive, even in the face of what it doesn’t understand. When you think of the opposite of faith, more than likely you think of unbelief.

But the root attitude of unbelief is pride. I'll get to this in a minute, but notice in verse 4 how faith is seen in contrast to pride.

Warren Wiersbe — *“The contrast here is between people of faith and people who arrogantly trust themselves and leave God out of their lives.”*

Human pride is the opposite of divine faith. And this is the default position of fallen humanity. Proverbs 6:16 says there are six things that the Lord hates, seven that are an abomination to Him, and ‘a proud look’ is at the top of the list. James 4:6 says that God ‘opposes’ the proud, or resists the proud. It means that God sets His face against the one who is puffed up with pride. Peter says the same thing:

1 Peter 5:5-7 — **“God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble. Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God so that at the proper time He may exalt you, casting all your anxieties on Him, because He cares for you.”**

A position of trust

Habakkuk says in verse 1, “I’m going to take my stand at my watchpost and station myself on the tower. I’m going to look out to see what the Lord will say to me, and what I will answer concerning my complaint.”

“Watchpost” — *some translations say ‘rampart’ or watch tower; the highest point on the wall of an ancient city*

Cities often built stone towers on their protective walls so that watchmen could easily identify approaching threats. The watchmen on the wall were to sound the alarm so that the city could be on the alert. Habakkuk is saying that he is going to watch in a place of trust. He is saying, “I’m going to stop arguing and start trusting. Instead of running my mouth about what I don’t understand, I’m going to silently watch God go to work.” It is faith’s position. Then notice:

2—Faith’s PRINCIPLE (2:2)

“And the Lord answered me: ‘Write the vision; make it plain on tablets, so he may run who reads it.’”

When Habakkuk got still and entered his watchpost, the Lord answered him. It was only when he got still, entered his watchpost, and waited on the Lord that He got a word from God. The answer that God gave Habakkuk came by way of revelation. God says to him, “Write the vision.” And that is a very important word. It means the answer that he was given was not the result of his insight, nor was it the result of his intellect.

Proverbs 3:5-7—“Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and lean not unto your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge Him, and He shall direct your paths. Be not wise in your own eyes; fear the Lord, and turn away from evil.”

In other words, don't rely on your own insight. Don't rely on your own intellect. Many of our failures to understand life in the world around us comes as the result of seeking an answer through our own human intellect. The reason is our pride. We rely on our faulty reasoning rather than faith in the revelation that comes from God. He has revealed Himself to us in many ways, and we need Him to open our eyes that we might see.

Matthew 16:15-17—“But who do you say that I am? Simon Peter replied, ‘You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.’ And Jesus answered him, ‘Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but My Father who is in heaven.’”

Habakkuk is in a position of humility and trust, and God opens his eyes and gives him a revelation of what He is about to do.

Psalm 46:10—“Be still, and know that I am God; I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth!”

The prophet Elijah had to learn this lesson. After the show down with the prophets of Baal on the top of Mt. Carmel, he was sure that revival was about to come to Israel. He's on the mountain of victory in 1 Kings 18, but finds himself in the valley of despair in chapter 19. He

comes to learn that God's way is not only best, but it is the only way. I can trust Him to always do what is right even when I don't understand it. I'm to trust Him in the dark.

V. Raymond Edman — *“Never doubt in the dark what God has revealed to you in the light.”*

He got a word from God who gave him the vision that he needed to bring him from a place of wrestling with God to embracing God in faith. Notice that it involved speaking, writing, and reading.

Speaking the Word

God speaks to Habakkuk. God revealed to Habakkuk His Word for His people. In fact, that is how you and I have a copy of God's Word in our possession now. God's Word is inspired. 2 Timothy 3:16 says it is 'God-breathed.' 2 Peter 1:20 says that no prophecy of Scripture is of any private interpretation, for prophecy never came by the will of man, but holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit. God revealed His Word to the prophets of the Old Testament and the apostles of the New Testament.

Writing the Word

Notice that the Lord tells Habakkuk to 'write the vision and make it plain.' God speaks, and the prophet writes down what is spoken. It was important that it be written down so that it be preserved. You and I would not be studying this book today had the prophet not obeyed God's instructions to write down what God had shown him.

Reading the Word

The Lord says, "Write the vision, make it plain on tablets, so he may run who reads it." God speaks, and Habakkuk is to write down what is spoken. This writing would be permanent so that each passing generation could read what had been revealed. And it was to be made plain on tablets, written in a way that anyone could read it. In other words, the Lord says, "Habakkuk, I am going to give you My Word. I want you to write it down, and I want you to write it so plainly that anyone who reads it will be able to immediately understand it and spread it all throughout the land." It is an important statement about the character of God's

Word. God has revealed it to humanity, He has preserved it in the pages of Scripture, and it is to be read and obeyed in faith.

Romans 10:17—“So then faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the Word of God.”

In order for a person to believe Christ in faith, they have to hear His Word, and the Holy Spirit then produces faith in the heart. Jesus illustrated this in the parable of the sower.

- seed that fell along the path and was devoured
- seed that fell on shallow ground with no depth
- seed that fell among thorns and became choked
- seed that fell on good ground and produced fruit

The point of the parable is that a person must ‘take heed’ how he or she hears the Word of God.

3—Faith’s PATIENCE (2:3)

“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.”

A third lesson that Habakkuk learns about faith is that it demands patience. The Lord says, “Habakkuk, what I’m telling you isn’t going to happen overnight. There is going to be a period time that will pass, but it will happen.”

When God says that something is going to happen, it is as good as done. It will happen! God doesn’t simply ‘pencil’ things in His calendar. Instead, He writes it in stone. Then He says, “Don’t worry about what happens in between. Even though it looks like everything is going wrong, like evil is winning the day, what I have decreed will come to pass.”

Now, I want to show you something. Notice in verse 3 how many references there are to the vision that God reveals to Habakkuk. He says, “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.” The vision is referred to there seven times. Seven is often the number used in

Scripture to describe completion. This same passage is referred to by the writer of Hebrews who was encouraging believers to endure on the basis of this same promise. But listen to the language that is used:

Hebrews 10:37-38—“For yet a little while, and He who is coming will come and will not tarry. Now the just shall live by faith.”

Habakkuk says, “Surely it will come, it will not delay.” The writer of Hebrews says, “He who is coming will come, and will not tarry.” Do you see that? Jesus is the fulfillment of Habakkuk’s vision. To be sure, the Babylonians were to come and invade the land and carry God’s people away into captivity. But that would only be partial fulfillment of what God revealed. God’s promises to His people would be ultimately bound up in the person and work of Jesus Christ, His Son. Habakkuk could only see in part, yet the writer of Hebrews has the return of Jesus in mind. The much greater fulfillment of Habakkuk’s prophecy is a King who is coming to rule the nations with a rod of iron. And it is iron clad on God’s calendar that He has fixed a day in which He will judge the secrets of men by a Man that He has ordained—Jesus Christ!

Faith understands this and recognizes that God doesn’t operate according to our timetables. But what He has revealed will always come to pass. Faith is therefore patient and knows how to wait. God tells Habakkuk, “If it seems slow, wait for it; it will surely come; it will not delay.”

4—Faith’s PARTICIPANTS (2:4)

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

Having considered faith’s position, faith’s principle, and faith’s patience, let me mention a word about faith’s participants. You will notice that two types of people are described in verse 4. On one hand, there is the one who is described as being ‘puffed up’ in his soul and is not upright. On the other hand, there is the one who is described as being ‘just’ or righteous, one who lives by his faith. These are two types of people, two different ways of living. One is the way of pride, and the other is the way of faith. One is the way of the wicked, and the other is the way of the righteous.

The pride of the sinner

“Behold, his soul is puffed up; it is not upright within him...”

The first part of verse 4 is a reference to the Babylonians who were ‘puffed up’ with pride over their military strength and conquests. Their empire was an impressive one by the world’s standards, one for which they were very proud. Babylon was probably the most famous city in the ancient world. Its walls were 387 feet high and 85 feet wide, so wide that four chariots could be driven side by side along the top of them. The city boasted of wide streets and big buildings. It had a population of more than a million inhabitants. The Euphrates river flowed through it, and there were shrines to the Babylonian deities everywhere. The focal point of the city was no doubt the hanging gardens that Nebuchadnezzar built for his wife, and they were known in history as one of the Seven Wonders of the World.

Nebuchadnezzar looked around at his city and his empire and was overcome with pride.

Daniel 4:30—“The king spoke saying, ‘Is not this great Babylon, that I have built for a royal dwelling by my mighty power and for the honor of my majesty?’”

The pride and the arrogance of the Babylonians would be their downfall. God will reveal to Habakkuk in the rest of chapter 2 how He would execute judgment upon them in due time. Pride always goes before a fall, and a haughty spirit before destruction.

Proverbs 29:23—“A man’s pride will bring him low. But the humble in spirit will retain honor.”

The faith of the believer

“...but the righteous shall live by his faith.”

The pride of unbelief is juxtaposed with the humility of faith. It is a contrast of contrasts. It is one of three assurances that God gives in the chapter to encourage His people in their faith. For instance:

- In a world of unbelief filled with man’s pride, the just shall live by his faith (v. 4)

- Though the world is filled with sin and unrighteousness, the earth will one day be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord as the waters cover the sea (v. 14)
- Even as man's empires rise and fall, the Lord is in His holy temple, and is seated on His throne (v. 20)

Unbelief is demonstrated through man's pride, but the just shall live by his faith. Those who are righteous live by faith in God. This verse is referenced three times in the New Testament, and each reference has something to say by way of insight.

- Romans 1:17—"The Just" (declaration)
- Galatians 3:11—"Shall Live" (participation)
- Hebrews 10:38—"By His Faith" (illustration)

God tells Habakkuk that the very things in which the Babylonians trust will be their downfall. The things that they worship cannot save them from judgment. Neither can today's idols save those who worship them. But the just shall live by faith. Those who are declared righteous through faith in God's Son shall live by that faith. My sin has already been judged at the cross of Jesus Christ, and I have been forgiven. I have been justified. And I have got some good news—you can be too! But you have to repent of your pride and turn from your sin, and in faith, turn to the Lord Jesus Christ.

*Before the throne of God above,
I have a strong and perfect plea,
a great High Priest whose name is Love,
who ever lives and pleads for me.
My name is graven on his hands,
my name is written on his heart.
I know that while in heav'n he stands,
no tongue can bid me thence depart,
no tongue can bid me thence depart.

When Satan tempts me to despair*

*and tells me of the guilt within,
upward I look and see him there,
who made an end to all my sin.
Because the sinless Savior died,
my sinful soul is counted free;
for God, the just, is satisfied
to look on him and pardon me,
to look on him and pardon me.*

*Behold him there, the risen Lamb,
my perfect, spotless righteousness,
the great unchangeable I AM,
the King of glory and of grace!
One with himself I cannot die.
My soul is purchased by his blood!
My life is hid with Christ on high,
with Christ, my Savior and my God,
with Christ, my Savior and my God.*