

The Righteous Will Live by Faith

SCOTT HOEZEE

The English author, John Donne, wrote many lines that have long since passed into common speech as popular sayings, or even clichés: For whom the bell tolls; no man is an island; death, be not proud. We know these sayings so well that if we actually run across them in a book by John Donne, we are a little startled. “So that is where that came from,” we might say. Well, something like that happens in Habakkuk 2. Nestled in the middle of a lot of gloomy talk about judgment are two really well known sayings from the Bible; one of which gets quoted by the Apostle Paul in the New Testament. We might be surprised to discover these words came from Habakkuk originally. So today on Groundwork, let’s dig into these verses to see what they mean. Stay tuned.

DAVE BAST

From Words of Hope and ReFrame Media, this is Groundwork, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Dave Bast.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And I am Scott Hoezee, and Dave, we now move into program number two of a planned five-part series on the prophecy of one of the minor prophets, Habakkuk. Habakkuk, we think, lived in the late 7th century BC; so maybe 80 to 100 years after the time when the northern kingdom of Israel was wiped out; but before the time when Judah would get deported into captivity from the Babylonians. So, Habakkuk lived in an in-between time when the main threat to Judah, where he lived, in the southern kingdom of Judah, had been Assyria, and that is who wiped out Israel – the northern kingdom. Then the Assyrians got wiped out by the Babylonians. In terms of international relations of the day, Israel is in kind of an in-between time – an interregnum.

DAVE BAST

Yes; Dame Fortune has been spinning her wheel, and Assyria is gone and Babylon is on the rise. We said that the background in the kingdom of Judah was one of terrible corruption, idolatry, injustice. The long reign of Manasseh filled much of the 600’s BC. He was followed by a good king, Josiah, but Josiah did not live very long and made a very strategic blunder in aligning himself with Egypt, and he was killed in a battle – I think that was like 605 (BC) – so right about then is when Habakkuk is writing. His more famous contemporary is Jeremiah, and the threat of Babylon is getting closer and closer, and Habakkuk begins by asking God: Why aren’t You answering my prayers for help? I am calling out to You about the situation in our society. It has become so godless – it has become so corrupt – Hello, anybody? Does it ring a bell? And then God says: Yes, okay; I am going to do something about it. Look, here come the Babylonians; and Habakkuk says: Wait a minute; they’re even worse. What is going on here? My God, I just don’t understand. That is Chapter 1.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And then we move into Chapter 2; and so Habakkuk is still sort of reeling from the shock and the surprise that God is going to use the Babylonians to clean up Judah’s act, which was not exactly what Habakkuk, or anybody, would have expected; but then, we are going to get a passage here as we read the first four verses of Habakkuk 2, the last line of which ends up becoming quite famous; and then we want to talk about what that line means here and in the New Testament. So, let’s listen to these words from Habakkuk 2:

²Then the Lord replied, “Write down the revelation and make it plain on tablets so that a herald may run with it. ³For the revelation awaits an appointed time. It speaks of the end and will not prove false. Though it linger, wait for it. It will certainly come and will not delay. ⁴See, the enemy is puffed up. His desires are not upright, but the righteous person will live by faith.” (Or, the righteous person will live by his faithfulness.) We will talk about that little translation glitch in a minute.

DAVE BAST

Yes, that is a big verse. Interestingly, that was verses 2 through 4; in verse 1 of Chapter 2 Habakkuk says: Hey, okay, I am going to climb up on a watchtower or a rampart, and stand there and wait for You to answer me, God; and so we get this picture of Habakkuk kind of standing on the city wall, maybe, waiting for God to answer...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Arms folded across his chest, tapping his toe.

DAVE BAST

And God says: I’ll tell you what, I am going to answer, and I want you to write My answer down, and I want you to write it so that a “herald may run with it,” is one way to translate verse 2; it could also be translated: Write it so that even somebody running past can read it. You know, write it in big letters. But the point is, this is an important message; I want you to get it out to everybody, and make it clear.

SCOTT HOEZEE

But it might take a little while, God said. It might linger. Just wait, but you know, the enemy is puffed up; evil people are puffed up; their desires are not upright; but then that line: The righteous person will live by faith; and that is the line that if you had never heard of the New Testament and you were reading Habakkuk, you would not stop on that line and think that is a terribly important verse. It does not scream out: I am important. I am an important line. But it becomes one of the most famous lines in the Bible because of who quotes it later...

DAVE BAST

Yes, exactly.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And that is the Apostle Paul.

DAVE BAST

Right; but first, before we jump to Paul, just listen to the context, as you said. Just ignore the New Testament for now. What is being said to Habakkuk by God, because God is speaking in these verses to him – to the prophet directly. What He is saying is: Look, there is an answer; there are answers to all of your agonized questions.

It is like the old country gospel song says: Farther along we’ll understand it all by and by. There will be answers that will be given, I want you to make that plain and clear, but meanwhile, the *righteous* person – the person who belongs to Me – who lives in integrity – will live by their faithfulness. If you are committed, if you stay faithful to Me, that is how you will live.

SCOTT HOEZEE

You will hang in there by your faith. So Paul picks up on that, and now the question will be: Does Paul use that in quite the same way? So, let’s listen to Romans 1:16, 17. Paul writes:

¹⁶For I am not ashamed of the Gospel, because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes; first to the Jew and then to the gentile; ¹⁷for in the Gospel, the righteousness of God is revealed; a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written, “The righteous will live by faith.” And so, there is Paul quoting Habakkuk 2:4; and so, is Paul using that the same way? As you just said, Dave, in Habakkuk 2, it seems to be God’s way of saying; Stay faithful; hang onto your faith in Me; and hang in there

because the answers to your hard questions are coming; justice will come; righteousness will come; hang in there. Now Paul is saying that the whole Gospel is about righteousness, but it is Jesus' righteousness that we receive by faith – “the righteous live by faith,” – is Paul saying the same thing?

DAVE BAST

Well, it sure seems like he is not – like he has kind of taken Habakkuk 2:4 and he has stood it on it's head, because Habakkuk seems to be clearly implying that it is our own subjective faithfulness that will make us live before God. It is by remaining faithful. It is by not giving up.

We talked in the last program about the little prayer: God is great, God is good... You know, hang onto both those things even when events seem to be belying your faith, even when experience seems to challenge your belief in a good God or the possibility of His answers. No, you have to be faithful; and if you remain faithful, then you will live; and that is how you live, by being faithful and hanging onto God. Paul uses this verse to teach justification by faith. The one who has faith in Jesus is righteous and will live. The one who exercises faith – that is the path to righteousness, not the other way around – not righteousness leading to faith, but faith leading to righteousness.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; so it looks a little like maybe Paul was using it in a different way; or maybe Habakkuk and Paul and Habakkuk's words and the Gospel can converge. I think they probably do, and we will look at that next.

DAVE BAST

You are listening to Groundwork, where we are digging into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Dave Bast.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And I am Scott Hoezee, and we just are looking at now, Dave, Romans 1:17, where Paul lifts up an otherwise obscure, little quote from Habakkuk 2:4: The righteous person will live by faith – the righteous live by faith; and we were wondering if they are saying the same thing. Is Habakkuk saying that *you* have to be faithful and then God will reward you, whereas Paul is saying: Faith is a gift. It has nothing to do with what you do. Is there a way to kind of bring these together, or are they closer together? One thing that we noted, Dave, in the first segment is that a lot of the Hebrew here in Habakkuk is hard to translate, and it depends on what version of the Bible you read, Habakkuk 2:4 can sometimes be translated that the righteous person will live by *his* faith, or by faithfulness, and some people think that what God was saying to Habakkuk was that you will live by *My* faithfulness, so maybe we are talking about *God's* faithfulness. It is a little hard to say exactly what the focus is, or maybe it is a little of both, hard to say.

DAVE BAST

Yes; you could ask all kinds of questions about both instances – Habakkuk's original phrase and then Paul's quotation of it – basic question: Whose faith is mentioned here – or faithfulness? Is it ours or God's? Second question: What is the righteousness that is being talked about here? Again, is it ours that we produce, or is it something God gives us? Third question: What does it mean to live? Is it just sort of ordinary, day-to-day existence or is it eternal life and salvation that comes to us through faith in Christ, which is Paul's point, I think. He really wants to hammer away, as he does consistently, that we need a different kind of righteousness, and that is going to be a major theme in the letter to the Romans.

SCOTT HOEZEE

It may just be, as somewhat typical of the Bible and of theological reflection on scripture, it may just be that the answer to all of your questions just now, Dave, is yes. Yes, it is about our faithfulness to God, but our faithfulness to God is rooted in God's faithfulness to us, which is always preeminent. If it were up to us, we would have been lost a long time ago; so, what God was saying to Habakkuk was: Hang in there. You live in evil times. You are waiting for Me to give a definitive answer. It might linger, but hang in there. You are watching evil people build up their lives through ill-gotten gain. They are stealing, they are corrupt. They are building mansions on the foundation of the poor people they have crushed to get there, and you are

wondering why. Hang in there. Remember that what some people think makes for a good life – namely stealing and cheating and just looking out for number one – is no life at all. Faith and faithfulness and abiding in God as God abides with us, that is the true foundation for true life.

DAVE BAST

Well, I think the common denominator and the linkage point between Habakkuk and Paul is the concept of trust. Trusting God is what faith is all about. Faith is not primarily an intellectual exercise. Faith is not believing *that*. Faith is trusting *in* in its full biblical sense; and so, when we trust in Christ, it is all by faith from first to last, as Paul says here in Romans Chapter 1.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; and that Greek in Romans 1 is also hard to translate. Faith from first to last is how the New International Version has translated it. In Greek, it just says that our righteousness is from faith to faith. It is faith to faith; faith, faith, faith; Paul piles up the words for faith in these two short little verses, and he is almost tripping over his own words and saying things that almost do not make sense on the face of it because Paul wants to say: Look, the righteousness that you have is all based on faith, and it is all from God; so the faith you get from God leads to faith – from faith to faith – faith from first to last – faith leads to faithfulness, but it is all rooted in Jesus; and so, I think here also, Dave, is a key linkage. Habakkuk is saying: When are you going to do something about evil, God? And God says: Hang in there and be faithful to Me as I am faithful to you and you will see. And Paul is saying: God has dealt with evil; it is on the cross of Jesus, and the righteousness Jesus achieved on the cross is now yours by faith. The righteous live by faith because that is the true source of your life. So, there is sort of the connection about the nature of evil. Habakkuk is wondering about it. Jesus definitively answered it and that is what Paul is talking about in Romans 1.

DAVE BAST

Right; and the righteous who live by faith, and who, in fact, are made righteous by that faith in Jesus also need faithfulness; so there it is again. I mean, faith and faithfulness are two sides of the same coin. Faithfulness is a fruit of the Spirit, Paul will say in writing to the Galatians. It is one of the things that the Spirit enables us to do. It is what Hebrews calls endurance – you have need of endurance says the writer to the Hebrews. So, faith is never a one-shot deal. Faith is never an instantaneous decision: Oh, I raised my hand in a meeting or I walked down the aisle. I accepted Christ. That is it; that is the end of it. Boom, I'm good. No, faithfulness is faith in an ongoing, lifelong, waiting on God, believing in God, trusting in God.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Which we need so much because to loop back to the first program now also, Dave, where Habakkuk was saying why don't You do something about evil, O God? This is a source of great comfort to us to know that God has done something about evil. He has definitively done something about evil on the cross of His Son, Jesus Christ; but He is still doing it, and part of why the gift of faith leads to faithfulness, as you were just saying, Dave, is that this helps us to stick with God in a world where even post-Easter – even as Christians who know far more about what God finally did than Habakkuk in some ways could have guessed – even we have our days where, as we said in the first program, we wonder why God isn't doing something. Well, our faith that helps us to stick with God and to trust in God is rooted in the idea that God is doing something – He has done something – He has already won the definitive victory and He is continuing to roll back evil even if we cannot see it clearly every day, we trust. We live by faith – faith in Jesus Christ; faith that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself and He is still doing that. God has won the victory. He will have the final word. The evil we see around us is nothing compared to the incomparable glory and riches of knowing Christ.

DAVE BAST

And knowing what God is about and what He is going to do; all of that is wrapped up in the promises of the Bible, which urge us to look forward – not just backward, but forward – in the belief, in the confidence, in the faithfulness and trust of what God is about to do; and one of those promises, one of the most beautiful in all of scripture, also comes here in the second chapter of Habakkuk, and that is where we are going next.

SCOTT HOEZEE

I am Scott Hoezee, along with Dave Bast, and you are listening to Groundwork, where today we are digging into the second chapter of the prophecy of Habakkuk from the Old Testament. We have already seen a very famous line that became more famous because it was quoted by Paul in Romans 1; but Dave, there is another famous line that comes up a little bit later.

DAVE BAST

There is; but before we get to that, maybe we should say a little something about the body of Chapter 2, which consists of a whole series of woes. In Hebrew the word is *oy*, as in *oy vey*; *oy vey*; and that is one of those prophet's words, I think, that kind of gives credence to the caricature of the old... You know, it is a wrath of God thing... It is a bearded figure who is thundering and lightning: Woe to you. You know, the world is about to end – kind of a cartoon figure; but there is nothing funny about the concept of woe, which also occurs, incidentally, in the New Testament; don't make this purely an Old Testament thing...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Jesus has some.

DAVE BAST

But it is a kind of combination of alas, mourning, and warning: Mourning and warning... If we could say: *m-o-u-r-n-i-n-g* and *w-a-r-n-i-n-g*; so it is sort of a lament mixed in with a look out because God's judgment is real, and there is a whole catalog of people here in Chapter 2 that it is pronounced on. The common denominator is basically those who exploit their neighbor.

SCOTT HOEZEE

So, let's pick it up at verse 12. This is just one in a series of woes, but it does kind of capture the tenor of the chapter:

Woe to him who builds a city with bloodshed and establishes a town by injustice. ¹³Has not the Lord Almighty determined that the peoples' labor is only fuel for the fire? That the nations exhaust themselves for nothing? ¹⁴For the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.

So here, after a whole series – almost twelve verses – of woes and condemnations, particularly for people who build their lives by taking life from others – who steal, who cheat – and then all of a sudden comes verse 14; kind of like the other verse we looked at in segment 2; kind of out of the blue this lyrical little piece of a psalm, almost: For the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.

DAVE BAST

That is actually a quotation from Isaiah; or if it is not a quotation, they both had the same inspiration...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, God gave them both...

DAVE BAST

Because that same verse, almost word for word, appears in Isaiah 11.

SCOTT HOEZEE

But here, the knowledge of the glory of the Lord is used as a contrast to the source of true life as opposed to those who build cities based on bloodshed; and as the rest of Chapter 2 said, Dave, those who beef up their life by sucking life out of others; you know, they steal other people's money; they take over other people's homes; they cheat the poor; they murder people to get ahead. It sounds like the Mafia. I mean, a lot of this chapter sounds like the way the Mafia operates. What God is saying to Habakkuk now by talking about filling the earth with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord is that if you really had knowledge of the glory

of the Lord, you would see that everything else that people think is so substantial is flimsy. The thickest investment portfolio that the richest man in the world has right now compared to the knowledge of the glory of the Lord, it is just paper – it is kindling wood. Light it on fire. It is fuel for the fire, God says.

DAVE BAST

Yes, exactly. That is the phrase: The peoples' labor is only fuel for the fire... Has not the Lord Almighty determined this, that all this stuff that we heap up and that we are willing to do almost anything to get, you know... That is what Paul is getting at, I think, when he says, "The love of money is the root of all kinds of evil," in the New Testament. I mean, the passion, the desire, the appetite to have, to get, leads people to do almost anything to each other; and what they are, in essence, destroying their own souls for is worth nothing; it is going to be burned up. It is like kindling wood, as you said.

I saw a news story on the Internet the other day that said some plutocrat – some wealthy person – is building a 450-million-dollar yacht. I mean, for 450 million dollars? And it is going to be burned up. It is nothing.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; and you know that, God is saying to Habakkuk, you know that for sure when you bring that 450-million-dollar yacht next to the knowledge of the glory of the Lord. Compared to God, compared to having a relationship with the God of the universe, compared to having faith, as we were saying in the previous segment, and being faithful to this God as this God is faithful to you, nothing compares. Everything pales by comparison. Everything you thought was important is fuel for the fire and it is finally insubstantial, not substantial at all; but this is also, of course – this 14th verse – it is a promise. It is not true yet, and nothing in Habakkuk 2 tells us when this is going to happen.

DAVE BAST

Right; and so, we live by faith again, or how about faithfulness or how about both? We live by faith and faithfulness in the belief that this is where the world is headed – that this is the actual future, not some Star Trek vision of on and on, upward, out into outer space; not some idea that someday the robots are going to take over and stamp out humanity. God has the future well in hand and He knows where it is headed and He knows what He has decided for it; and His decision is that His glory will permeate everything, and we will enjoy that forever and ever. "At Your right hand are pleasures forevermore," says the psalmist. So that is our future – that is our hope.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And it is still our hope; but in the New Testament, we have a taste of it already because after Jesus died and rose again and ascended into heaven, He sent the Holy Spirit, and as Jeremiah predicted, the knowledge of God would not be on tablets of stone anymore; He would write it on our very hearts; and that is the Holy Spirit. So we have now what John Calvin so often talked about: The inner testimony of the Holy Spirit filling us with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord, and through us now in the Church... You know, the ancient Church used to picture kind of a three-tiered fountain, where from the fountainhead of God flows knowledge that comes down to us as people, and then from us the second tier overflows into the bottom of the fountain and begins to fill the whole earth as the waters cover the sea. So, as people of Pentecost who are now living, walking, breathing, talking temples of the Spirit – filled ourselves with intimations of the knowledge of the glory of the Lord – we are the ones who are starting to fill the whole earth through our witness to the Gospel.

DAVE BAST

And our witness to the Lord Jesus because He is ultimately the glory of God; and so, when we read that one day the knowledge of Him will fill it, it is the knowledge of Jesus, we are convinced; and in the meantime, maybe we can be about sharing that knowledge and telling the world about Jesus.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Amen. Well, thank you for joining our Groundwork conversation. I am Scott Hoezee, along with Dave Bast, and we would like to know how we can help you to dig deeper into the scriptures. So go to our website, groundworkonline.com, and suggest topics and passages for future Groundwork programs.

<https://groundworkonline.com/episodes/the-righteous-will-live-by-faith>

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