

Message: Habakkuk 2/3

Introduction & Catching Up:

Well, friends! I'm honored, as always, to speak with us. We're continuing in our walk through Habakkuk, the last Minor Prophet Israel will have for 80 years. He prophesies under the reign of evil king Jeohoiakim, right before Babylon comes and partially exiles the city, sets up a puppet King, and then returns a decade later to wipe Jerusalem to the ground.

Last week we talked about this basic narrative outline of Habakkuk:

1:1-4: Habakkuk: What about Judah's sin?

1:5-11: God: They'll be punished. I'll use Babylon.

1:12-2:1: Habakkuk: Wait, you're going to use Babylon? They're terrible.

2:2-19: God: Yeah, Babylon will be punished, too.

2:20: Habakkuk: [Crickets Chirping]

3:1-19: Habakkuk: Well...Okay, then. Praise God.

We looked at that moment of silence Habakkuk calls for in 2:20, and what might have been running through

his head when God responded the way he did to Habakkuk's complaint.

Today we're talking about that long response God has to Habakkuk about how he's going to give to Babylon what they've been giving out, let them reap what they've been sowing. It's a long passage--basically all of chapter 2--and it's an incredibly important passage for the Church, too.

In talking about Habakkuk, a book we never open, we'll be brought right around to Christ, which is pretty amazing, really. But hear me: There's theology in play today, important ideas, and framework for what we believe. I want our minds to be kindled; our thoughts spark.

Let me pray for us, if I can.

Prayer:

NT & Church Use:

One thing we ignored completely last week was the way Habakkuk is used in the New Testament by the early Church.

And the truth is that it is incredibly theologically significant. There are places Habakkuk is quoted that aren't so significant, though; I've put an insert in our bulletins to talk about one of them.

First, though, let's look at today's passage again, quickly.

Habakkuk 2, Again:

Remember, Habakkuk said, "I'm waiting here until you answer me how you can possibly use Babylon to punish Judah, when they are so terrible." And God replies to him without directly answering him.

***"Write down the revelation
and make it plain on tablets
so that a herald[b] may run with it.
3 For the revelation awaits an appointed time;
it speaks of the end
and will not prove false.
Though it linger, wait for it;
it[c] will certainly come
and will not delay.***

God, through Habakkuk, is telling the Israelites not to forget what he's saying. What he's going to say

“awaits an appointed time; it speaks of the end and will not prove false.” It will linger; it’s not soon. But it will come. And so when God goes on from here to declare Babylon’s destruction, all those Israelite exiles in Babylon shouldn’t be surprised, some 60 years later, when in 539 Cyrus the Great, the Persian Emperor, triumphs over Babylon and sends the Israelites home.

My guess is, though, most of them stopped “waiting for it.” It’s just what happens.

God continues, talking about Babylon. He says things like this about Babylon:

***...he is as greedy as the grave
and like death is never satisfied,
he gathers to himself all the nations
and takes captive all the peoples.
6 “Will not all of them taunt him with ridicule
and scorn, saying,***

***“Woe to him who piles up stolen goods
and makes himself wealthy by extortion!
How long must this go on?”
7 Will not your creditors suddenly arise?***

***Will they not wake up and make you tremble?
Then you will become their prey.***

***8 Because you have plundered many nations,
the peoples who are left will plunder you.
For you have shed human blood;
you have destroyed lands and cities and
everyone in them.***

God promises, too:

***17 The violence you have done to Lebanon will
overwhelm you, and your destruction of animals
will terrify you. For you have shed human blood;
you have destroyed lands and cities and
everyone in them.***

God condemns Babylon for idolatry, but does it in a way that points out how ignorant they are to think something that they create can come to life. (Which preaches to, like, AI researchers, I guess?) God takes a moment to particularly condemn those who try to get other people drunk so that they can have sex with them, which, unfortunately, many men need to hear.

Habakkuk 2:4: A Call For Perseverance

And at the start of all of this condemnation, God says

this:

**4 “See, the enemy is puffed up;
his desires are not upright—
but the righteous person will live by his
faithfulness[d]—**

Or, he says, “the righteous person will live by faith.”

It’s a hard passage to translate, for all sorts of reasons. We read “live by” and think of moral codes that we ourselves “live by” or “follow,” but given the situation Habakkuk is talking about, he probably means “survive by,” will continue to live by [one translation, CJB, says “attain life by,” which smacks of something other than life, really,].

We read “righteous person” and think of “moral person,” but forget that “moral,” for Habakkuk, meant “law-following,” someone who was keeping God’s covenant faithfully. So Habakkuk was probably saying something like, “Look! The enemy is puffed up, his desires have nothing to do with the covenant of God, but whoever keeps God’s covenant will survive on account of his or her faithfulness.” And, truthfully, that “his or her” isn’t there anyway. It’s really, “whoever

keeps God's covenant will live--or survive--on account of faithfulness."

This is probably what Habakkuk was communicating when he spoke. God just got done saying "What I'm about to say will come true; don't give up waiting on it. Don't give up faithfulness, because it'll help you live. But the enemy we're talking about, Babylon, will go down."

Habakkuk is giving a call for perseverance.

NT & Church: Habakkuk 2:4

And this phrase, this passage, is one of the most important passages that one of the most important authors, Paul, uses when he's expressing what he believes has happened through Jesus' life and work and death and resurrection. Paul draws on it Romans 1:17, in Galatians 3:11, and the author of Hebrews leans into it 10:38.

I've put an exploration of what Hebrews says in our bulletins, but for both Hebrews and Habakkuk, talking to very different groups, they are saying that those who keep faith with God will survive or be saved or lived. There are differences: It's not our faithfulness we

depend on anymore, really; we depend on Jesus', it's his faithfulness that we trust in. Jesus is the righteous one who lived by his faithfulness, and our trust in that faithfulness incorporates us into his body. Habakkuk probably wasn't envisioning the Messiah when he wrote. Frankly, Habakkuk didn't have resurrection in mind; Hebrews does. That's a critical difference.

This side of Jesus there is simply no way for a New Testament author to read Habakkuk and not take into consideration Easter. The "will live" or "will survive" of Habakkuk 2:4, just like the entire Old Testament, is read in light of the truth that Jesus was the Messiah in a way almost no one expected the Messiah to be, and the Spirit has been let loose in the world because of him.

Paul got this. He quotes Habakkuk twice, in Romans and Galatians, where in both places he lays out the basics of what he believes has happened in Jesus.

Hab. 2:4 & Paul: Galatians 3:11

In Galatians Paul makes an enormously important argument about the Law, and how there is no place for Torah-keeping for those who keep faith with Jesus. The Law was a nanny, a babysitting tutor, for people until

God's promises to Abraham could come true in the life of the Messiah, and those who trust the Messiah could through faith and baptism, become recipients of the promise God made to Abraham. He says "If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise."

Paul lambasts the Galatians for trying to keep Torah, then says:

6 So also Abraham "believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness." [c]

Righteousness and Justification are words we've talked about before. They share a root, in greek, it's "dikaion," but in english we use two different words to talk about the same thing; justification and righteousness, which makes them hard to discuss well. But to justify is to right-wise, to make righteous. Righteousness is a covenant term, not necessarily a moral one. It has to do with being in a right-relationship with God.

Here, Paul points out that Abraham's belief in God--his trust, his faith--the greek word "pistis" is the same root in all three of this words, and we should maybe say

faith-keeping, because trust and belief leave out the activity too much. But it's Abraham's faith-keeping, his faith in God that God receives and, in turn, is the foundation of his right-relationship with God. Paul continues, I'll jump to a few verses later:

10 For all who rely on the works of the law are under a curse, as it is written: "Cursed is everyone who does not continue to do everything written in the Book of the Law." [e]

Paul assumes that's impossible for us, because of sin, but then goes on to say, ***11 Clearly no one who relies on the law is justified before God, because "the righteous will live by faith."***

And he quotes Habakkuk. Paul is saying, "Clearly"--I love that--"Clearly no one who relies on the law is considered by God to be in a right relationship with God, because--and he quotes Habakkuk, "the righteous will live by faith," that is, those who are in a right-relationship with God will live by faith."

He's piling up passages that point out that faith or faithfulness--the same word in Greek and Hebrew--have always been central to a right-relationship with

God. It's faith or faithfulness that declare someone is right with God, is faithful to the covenant God makes with his people or not. It's never been about Torah-keeping. They are justified, declared righteous, on account of their faith, trust, belief. They were when Abraham started, Paul is saying there were when the Minor Prophets prophesied, and he's saying we are now, this side of Jesus. But he's saying it with a Jesus-centered twist.

Before this long argument, Paul said this, near the start of Galatians:

15 "We who are Jews by birth and not "sinful Gentiles" 16 know that a person is not justified by the works of the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ. So we, too, have put our faith in Christ Jesus that we may be justified by faith in[d] Christ and not by the works of the law, because by the works of the law no one will be justified.

But, look, the way I read this is a bad english translation of greek. And the best translations are starting to change the way that this reads, because "faith in Christ," doesn't make sense of the Greek, which says "faith of Christ." And if we remember that

“faith “can be” faithfulness, or trust, or belief, and if we pay attention to the textual notes that the newest translations give, we read this, instead. This is what I’ll teach Bo to memorize.

15 “We who are Jews by birth and not “sinful Gentiles” know that a person is not justified--that is, considered in right-relationship with God--by the works of the law, but by the faithfulness of Jesus Christ. So we, too, have put our trust in Christ Jesus that we may be justified--that is, considered in right-relationship with God, on the basis of the faithfulness of Christ, and not by the works of the law, because by the works of the law no one will be considered faithful in God’s covenant relationship.

Paul can say this, because he believes Jesus was faithful, and when we keep faith with Jesus--actively trust, believe, hope, or show faithfulness with Jesus--then we are “in the right” when it comes to our relationship with God. Jesus’ faithfulness to God opened up faithfulness to us.

“The righteous will live by faith,” Habakkuk writes, and

Paul writes more or less the same thing, with a lot more words: We live on account of Jesus' faithfulness, which was vindicated in his resurrection, and our trust in it has resulted in the pouring out of the Spirit upon his church, so that we ourselves can live a new covenant life, faithful, until we're vindicated as faithful, too when we're raised from the dead.

We live on account of Jesus' faithfulness, which was vindicated in his resurrection, and our trust in it has resulted in the pouring out of the Spirit upon his church, so that we ourselves can live a new covenant life, faithful, until we're vindicated as faithful, too when we're raised from the dead.

Before Jesus, the main markers of covenant membership were the obedient actions done in obligation to the covenant. Torah-keeping. This side of Jesus the main marker of membership in God's Covenant People is faith—a faith, or trust, in Christ's opening up of the covenant to all those who are “in him” as Paul puts it, who “have clothed themselves with him.”

Our faith in Jesus marks us out as God's Covenant

People, those who, as Hebrews puts it, “have faith and are saved,” will be vindicated when we ourselves are resurrected.

Hab. 2:4 & Paul: Romans 1:17

And when Paul says, in Romans,

16 For 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, then to the Gentile. 17 For in the gospel the righteousness of God is revealed—a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, [e] just as it is written: “The righteous will live by faith.”[f]

He’s saying this same thing: He’s not ashamed of the good news he brings, because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who trusts/believes/has faith: first to the Jew, of course, and then to the Gentile.

And then he makes the same claim he’s made in Galatians. That it is faith or faithfulness, trusting faith-keeping, that has always been the thing that has defined God’s Covenant People as being right with

God.

He says, “For in the gospel, the righteousness of God-- that is, God’s own faithfulness to his covenant people-- is revealed, a covenant faithfulness that is from first to last (or, in the greek, from “faith to faith”) just as it is written: “the righteous will live by faith.”

In saying from “faith to faith” or, as the NIV puts it, “from first to last” Paul is saying that the same way God related to the Jewish People is how he relates to the Gentiles; God’s been consistent all along.

It is our faith-keeping that defines us as being made right with God--which is what “justified” means.

Ha-Back to Habakkuk:

Habakkuk wasn’t really making a theological argument when he was laying out this prophecy for the future. He was saying, simply, that those who are sn’t really concerned with this. When he said, “the righteous will live by faith (or faithfulness)” he was saying “whoever keeps God’s covenant will live--or survive--on account of his or her faithfulness.” Paul is lifting up this verse to point out that “faith” or “faithfulness” has always been the marker of someone in a right-relationship

with God.

Habakkuk uses the phrase “the righteous will live by faith” to encourage perseverance in faithfulness, in Torah-keeping, by those who are God’s Covenant People.

Hebrews:

Hebrews keeps the same thrust of the passage--the call for perseverance in faithfulness, but of course assumes that Jesus will be the focus of who his audience “trusts” or “keeps faith with” or “actively believes.” Hebrews emphasizes the group character of those who are right with God, rather than any one individual.

Paul:

Paul doesn’t use this as a call for perseverance, but does emphasize the group nature of those who are considered right with God, faithful covenant partners. But in emphasizing the “faithfulness” part of “the righteous will live by faith,” he uses this as proof that God has always counted faith-keeping as the the defining characteristic of someone who is considered a faithful covenant partner with God. Justification, for Paul--the proof that we’ve been declared righteous--

was clear in Jesus' life when he rose from the dead, and will be clear in ours because we have the Spirit, are part of the renewed covenant, which, like the old covenant, still has faithfulness as its standard membership marker. For us, our faithfulness is to Jesus, who opened us up to a right relationship with God.

So...what?

So what, right? Here's what.

First of all, understand that Habakkuk's passage is incredibly important because it was used by Paul to prove God has always been consistent in what he asks of His People. He's always asked for their faithfulness, that they keep faith with him. That's what a relationship with God demands. One of the questions the New Testament has to answer is "What about the Law?" And Paul used Habakkuk to say that while the Law was important, it was just a nanny, a tutor, until the Messiah could receive the promises God made to Abraham. Abraham's descendants kept trusting God, learned ways to live with God that resulted in blessing, stewarded God's hopes of total creation redemption, but faith-keeping was their standard all along, and it's

ours, too. It enables us to live past death; to persevere, and someday be counted among those who are saved, who survived creation's renewal.

Habakkuk drives us to this: Are you keeping faith with Christ? In what ways are we letting go of our perseverance? Jesus has passed the Spirit on to us, God's faithful covenant people, because we trust him. Does the Spirit have anything to say to you with regard to your faithfulness lately?