

The just shall live by faith

17/5/20 dkm

Read: Habakkuk 2, Hebrew 10:19-39

Text: Habakkuk 2:2-5

Psalms: 135:1-6, 1, 127, 72

The words of Habakkuk, as quoted by the apostle Paul in his letter to the Romans, are words that sparked the Reformation of the sixteenth century (Rom 1:17). Salvation by grace alone through faith alone became the cry of Luther, Calvin and others. It was the cry of the apostle Paul, the apostle to the Gentiles, as he rejected demands for the Gentiles to be circumcised in order to be saved. The church in Luther's day was similarly demanding observance of the sacraments and various church rituals in order to be saved. But after reading what Paul wrote in Romans, Luther came to believe that salvation is by faith alone, not faith plus law, faith plus works, or faith plus anything at all.

The writer to the Hebrews quotes even more of what the prophet writes; he does so in the context of pressing on in the faith (Heb 10:38). 'Live by faith' has the sense of being made alive by faith, or as Paul says, being justified by faith. He also teaches that this faith is the gift of God: 'For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves it is the gift of God' (Eph 2:8). 'Live by faith' also has the sense of living by faith, of pressing on and not drawing back, as we read in Hebrews 10. Faith means trusting in God, that he is able and willing to deliver us from evil and bring us to the heavenly home he has prepared for us. Salvation is not all here and now, nor is it all in the future.

Habakkuk faced the problem of evil in Jerusalem, but recoiled at the Lord's determination to bring a heathen nation to punish his own people, a people more righteous than Babylon (1:13). Where was the justice in such judgment he asked the Lord in his second question. He waited for the Lord to answer. And sure enough, the Lord answered Habakkuk. As we look at the first part of this answer we do so under three subheadings: fulfilment, foolishness, and faith.

1. Fulfilment

In his answer the Lord instructs Habakkuk to write the vision or revelation on tablets. The Babylonians wrote on clay tablets, and this was probably what the prophet would use. Clay tablets were not perishable, as evidenced by recent discoveries of Babylonian tablets. Moreover, whatever was written on a tablet could not be changed. Words written on paper can be changed. I still have a bottle of white correction fluid in my drawer. We know how the media sometimes leaves out a word to change the whole meaning of what someone said. God wrote his commandments on tablets of stone and gave these to Moses on the mountain. We no longer have these tablets but Moses ensured these commandments were written down and passed on from generation to generation as the abiding word of God.

‘Make it plain on tablets that he may run who reads it’ (2:2). The word ‘read’ can also mean ‘proclaim’. The revelation was for all to hear, especially in Israel but even beyond her borders. This revelation included God’s plan to use Babylon to punish Judah and Jerusalem, and later judge Babylon for her arrogance and brutality and failure to give glory to the God of Israel. God’s desire and determination is that ‘the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea’ (2:14). ‘At the name of Jesus every knee shall bow, of those in heaven, and of those on earth and of those under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father’ (Phil 2:10,11).

Habakkuk’s focus was more on God and Israel than on God and the nations. Yahweh was his covenant God, but God’s vision extended beyond the borders of Israel. God sent a vision to the apostle Peter showing him that the gospel of Jesus Christ was for Gentiles as well as Jews. The Lord wants all the world to hear the gospel because people from all nations will gather around the throne in heaven (Rev 7:9). ‘This gospel of the kingdom will be preached in all the world as a witness to all nations and then the end will come’ (Mat 24:14).

In his revelation to Habakkuk the Lord also spoke within a time frame; he spoke of the end. The vision was for 'an appointed time' (2:3). The word of God is not like the words of the newspaper, words that are read and then discarded. The words of God not only speak of today; they also speak of the future. People try to tell the future in all sorts of ways; they read the tea leaves, they read the lines on your hands, and they build computer models to tell you how many will die of coronavirus or what the temperature of the earth will be in twenty or fifty years. If you take the time to follow these models you will find them to be way off the mark; usually for the better. I was shocked to hear of a model predicting the number of youth suicides as a result of the pandemic - how tragic!

What God gave Habakkuk to proclaim was not something that might happen but something that was certain to happen because God would make it happen. He spoke of things that would happen in the distant future. It would be at least a decade before the Babylonians would come and destroy Jerusalem, and some seventy years before God's judgment would come upon Babylon. And even then the words of this prophecy would not be finally fulfilled. Ultimate judgment awaits 'the appointed day' when 'He will judge the world in righteousness by the man he has ordained' (Acts 17:31). God is the God of history, the God who is in control of all the nations and of all people. History is not going around in circles but is moving inexorably towards the end as determined by God. His plan is to establish his kingdom and his glory.

God has not revealed everything in his cosmic timetable, but he has revealed sufficient for us to be sure that what he says is true, not just a guess or a computer model, and certainly not deliberate deception. The fact that the Babylonians did come and destroy Jerusalem in 586BC was confirmation to Habakkuk and his generation that God's word is true. The fact that Babylon fell in 539BC was confirmation to the next generation that God's word is true; God told Jeremiah the

captivity would last seventy years and he wrote this down (Jer 25:12). Succeeding generations, including ours, can also be confident that God's word is true because of these and many other fulfilled prophecies.

In the coming of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, many prophecies were filled, as Matthew in particular records in his gospel. No prophecy of Scripture has ever been proven false because they did not come by the will of man but 'through men moved by the Holy Spirit' (2Peter 1:21). Some prophecies, of course, are yet to be fulfilled because we have not yet come to the end, to the day of the Lord.

The Lord told Habakkuk to wait for his word to be fulfilled 'because it will surely come' (2:3). When the Lord says, 'though it tarries' and then, 'it will not tarry', he is not contradicting himself. The first 'tarry' is linked to Habakkuk waiting for the Lord to fulfil his word, and the second is in reference to the Lord's timetable in which everything happens at the appointed time. Children are naturally impatient; they are supposed to learn patience, but some never do! We live in a most impatient society, a society that demands instant gratification- at least this was the case before a pandemic-inspired lockdown! Is God teaching us patience?

Patience is something the children of God must learn. 'Therefore brethren be patient for the coming of the Lord' (James 5:7). James points to the farmer waiting for the rain and the harvest. He also points to Job as an example of perseverance. Brothers and sisters, let us be patient and let us persevere as we await the coming of the Lord. This is the message of the Lord through Habakkuk to the early church (Heb 10:35-39) and to us today.

2. Foolishness

We always kept chooks on the farm where I grew up, so we had plenty of eggs. In those days 'chickens' were little chicks that ran after the mother chook. We never bought frozen 'chickens'. What we

ate at Christmas was a rooster, specially fed and fattened until its head was removed the day before Christmas. That rooster probably thought he was onto a good thing as he ate heaps and got fat.

The Babylonians thought they were onto a good thing as they plundered nation after nation following their victory at Carchemish in 605BC. Judah became one of those plundered nations. The Babylonians looted many cities, after killing the inhabitants or taking them captive to Babylon. An inherent danger in building a city with captives or slaves is revolt. Fear of revolt by the Jews sparked Pharaoh's brutal crackdown (Exod 1:10). The empire of Nebuchadnezzar came to a sudden and swift end in 539BC when one night Darius the Mede entered Babylon and killed King Belshazzar. It seems Darius faced little opposition in this city of captives. The king, as we know, was drinking heavily at the time (Dan 5:1).

'Behold the proud' or the puffed-up, the Lord said to Habakkuk as he went on answering his question (2:4). Babylon was indeed a proud nation with 'desires that were not upright' (2:4 NIV). Daniel tells us how King Nebuchadnezzar made a huge image of himself and ordered everyone to bow down to it. The next king, Belshazzar loved his wine. The Lord spoke of the puffed-up one being betrayed by wine (2:5). On commentator writes of Babylon: 'Her intoxication (both literal and figurative) with victory going to her head' and of this leading to her downfall. Her lust for plunder and power would never be satisfied. The Lord compares this insatiable desire to that of death and grave (2:5). Babylon would become as greedy as the grave. She devoured nation after nation, but in the end would be devoured herself, devoured by the grave. She would become victim to her own greedy accomplishments.

People or nations driven by a lust for treasure, pleasure or power, often fall victim to these lusts. Babylon was defeated by the Medes and Persians, aided by her own intoxication. Intoxication, whether it be with wine, or with power and plunder, blinds people to reality,

especially the reality of judgment day. Habakkuk, like the psalmist, assures us that, 'The Lord knows the way of the righteous but the way of the wicked shall perish' (Ps 1:6). Habakkuk may not have lived to see Babylon judged by God, and we might not live to see the wicked around us judged by God, but we can be sure that God is just and he will judge the wicked. What he calls us to do is to live by faith.

3. Faith

'But the just shall live by his faith' (2:4). We have already looked at these words and noted how the apostle Paul quoted them while teaching salvation by grace alone through faith alone (Rom 1:17). Faith or belief in Jesus Christ means eternal life (John 3:16). Like faith, eternal life is the gift of God- the same gift in fact (John 17:3). These gifts are heart changing and life changing. The just, or the justified as Paul understood this phrase, will live by faith, faith in God.

God was calling Habakkuk to believe that he, God, was in control and knew what he was doing with regard to the Babylonians. He was not turning a blind eye to wickedness or injustice. He might overlook wickedness for a while, and justice might be delayed from Habakkuk's perspective, but in the end God would judge the wicked. The end, as we have seen, is ultimately the return of Jesus and judgment day. Even if the wicked get to live a long life, a life characterised by greed and oppression, they will not escape the resurrection and the judgment (Ps 73:17). In the meantime, those declared to be just or righteous by God are to live by faith in God, faith in God's power and determined purpose to save the righteous and destroy the wicked.