

Learning to Live by Faith

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 07 August 2005

Preacher: Rod McArdle

- [0 : 0 0] Even babies weren't spared. Mothers were forced to lay their infants on the floor and watch helplessly while police struck them with sticks. And in a scene right out of ancient Rome, Christian men were nailed to crosses.
- How would you respond if you were part of that community? If you were caught up in such violence? What if you were ministering to these persecuted Christians?
- What would you say to them? What comfort would you seek to bring as they struggled to understand what God is doing in the world and in their lives?
- Habakkuk knew what it was like to agonise over the relationship between God and the world. And if you were with us last week, you remember in chapter 1, we saw the massive struggles of Habakkuk as he seeks to make sense of what he knows of his God and what he knows of the world around him.
- But for those who might be here tonight and missed the message last week, let's quickly just review the context. Habakkuk is likely a temple musician prophet living during the reign of the sinful king of Judah, Jehoiakim.
- [1 : 2 1] Babylon is the new world power. Babylon has defeated both Assyria, the previous major empire, and Egypt. And there's great sinfulness in the land of Judah, in the land of Judah amongst God's people.
- And Habakkuk has been persevering in prayer and he's asking God, how long will it be before you intervene? And the Lord answers Habakkuk in an astonishing way.
- God is rousing up the Chaldeans, the Babylonians, to be his very instruments of judgment. And Habakkuk is stunned. How is it?
- How could it be that a holy God, a God with pure eyes, could allow this? And Habakkuk questions the Lord, as you recall in chapter 1, verse 13.
- Why do you tolerate the treacherous? Another question. Why are you silent when the wicked swallow those more righteous than they are? And as we come tonight to chapter 2, Habakkuk, as we remember at the end of last week, is at his watch post.
- [2 : 3 8] He's waiting for God to answer him, to answer his complaint. Habakkuk knows that there will be an answer. And it's a great example of faith. Waiting for the Lord.
- Sort of raises the question early, doesn't it? As to how our patience is, how our trust is. You see, waiting for the Lord, it's not just four little abstract words.
- It's a life discipline for the Christian. It's intense. And it's very personal. Now, this isn't a small matter for Habakkuk.
- God is going to judge his covenant people using the wicked Babylonians. I mean, how are the people of Judah going to respond to the prophet Habakkuk? Are they going to accuse him of being a false prophet?
- But Habakkuk doesn't have any words himself to give them that he can sort of make up himself. He needs a word from the Lord. He needs a revelation from Yahweh.

- [3 : 41] And Habakkuk recognises the need to wait. But the answer that comes to him, in fact, points to still further waiting for resolution of the fundamental problem.
- Let's look at the text then, beginning at verse 2. God answers Habakkuk, and Habakkuk is instructed to take notes, if you like, to write the vision of the future.
- One way to think of it, it's a revelation within a revelation. Write it down. Make it plain on tablets. It needs to be in a form that will enable others to read it.
- It needs to be written down because it's going to be some time before the vision comes to pass. And we read there in verse 3 that the vision speaks of the end.
- Now, certainly that has a meaning of the end of the Babylonian domination and the return of God's people from exile. But there's a greater sense. There's an eschatological application.
- [4 : 47] Fancy sort of word, if you were here last week for the Trinity lectures, you'll be up to speed with that. When God's judgment on all of the nations and on all of the enemies of his people will be consummated.
- The ultimate end is when Jesus the Messiah returns in glory and will then be acknowledged by all as the Lord of all. So, in this greater sense, the vision, in fact, still awaits fulfillment.
- Notice also in verse 3 that Yahweh confronts the skepticism of those who are going to hear Habakkuk's message. God's prophecies will be fulfilled.
- But the people are to wait. They're to wait for God's revelation. Of course, the temptation's going to be, isn't it, to disbelieve. Disbelieve because of the long wait.
- And that applies to us, doesn't it? Waiting for an answer from God. And during those waiting periods, the devil sowing seeds of doubt in our mind.
- [5 : 52] Seeds of doubt. Is God really good? Is God actually faithful? And apart from the devil, just simply our own fallenness showing itself in impatience.
- Ah, yes. There's much in just this little book of Habakkuk, just three chapters, that we can each learn from. I mean, the faithful in Judah were surely tempted to wonder where God was, what he was going to do when the wicked appeared to succeed over and over again in the land of Judah.
- And those who, in not many years down the road, were going to go into Babylonian exile, for 70 years, they were also going to be tempted to doubt God.
- Faith requires waiting for God's judgment. God's setting things right. Well, Yahweh is warning the people.
- He's saying to them, don't dismiss the words of my prophet Habakkuk. They're true words. And of course, that's God's word to each of us, isn't it?
- [7 : 01] Don't disregard my revelation in scripture. It's true. It's like God saying, all of my promises will come about. And Habakkuk needs to get his message published.
- Write it down. Write it down on tablets. Look with me at verses 4 and 5. There are simply two ways to live in the world.
- And God describes them to the prophet this way. There's the way of the proud and there's the way of faith. Now, chapter 2, like chapter 1, is a text about judgment.
- But chapter 2 is also a gospel text. We're going to consider both aspects. But firstly, we're going to consider the aspect of judgment. Remember back in verse 3 of chapter 1, the prophet had asked God, why do you tolerate destruction, violence, strife, and contention in Judah?

And God told Habakkuk that the Babylonians would be his very agents of judgment. And at the beginning of chapter 2, Habakkuk is still waiting for God's answer to his question, Lord, why do you tolerate then the Babylonian atrocities?

[8 : 24] Look then where the Lord gets Habakkuk to focus in verse 4. He says to him, Habakkuk, look at the proud. Of course, the Lord is referring to the Babylonians.

They were first mentioned back in chapter 1 in verse 6. And the word that's used there for proud has the sense of being puffed up, of being swollen up, like a tumour that swells out.

Recall also, back in chapter 1, that the Babylonians were described by God as promoting their own honour. Verse 7, of worshipping themselves, worshipping their strength.

In verse 11, the Lord says that such pride, such self-sufficiency leads to crookedness. Such people actually live a lie.

Their life isn't straight. It's a lie to believe that we can live rightly without a personal relationship with God. pride. In my former vocation, I noticed that the higher I climbed up the corporate ladder, the more I came to see that the most obvious characteristic of people both around and about me, it wasn't wisdom, it wasn't intellectual prowess, but the most noticeable characteristic was pride.

[9 : 50] It's debilitating in just this temporal, earthly life. life. It's disastrous in the afterlife when this body stops working.

There are two ways to live in the world. There's the way of pride, prideful self-sufficiency, and there's the way of faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. Last Sunday morning, Warwick Grant gave a powerful example of having a humble and a submissive heart before the Lord.

Warwick recalls how as a youth minister here in this church, Holy Trinity, he would sometimes have to preach to a congregation that included Dr. Leon Morris. And Leon, of course, is a world renowned Bible scholar, I think, Paul, correct me if I'm wrong, but I think he's the author of more than 40 books and a past principal of Ridley College.

And Warwick, on these occasions, was understandably edgy with Leon in the congregation. And one day, Leon's wife, Mildred, who's now with the Lord, said to Warwick, Warwick, settle down, don't worry.

Leon is just here to hear what God is saying to him this morning. I think that's just the most wonderful illustration of having a humble heart before the Lord.

[11 : 13] It's a challenge to me. I wonder, is it a challenge to you? That as we sit under the word of God, that we have that approach. Lord, I'm here to listen and respond to what you're saying to me in this message.

Well, the way of the puffed up, the way of the proud, the way of the self-sufficient is further addressed in verse 5. Look with me. Three points are made.

Wealth is treacherous. Not that wealth itself is intrinsically evil, but it's treacherous. Why? Because it makes us feel self-sufficient. It makes us feel more important than others.

The second mark of being proud is arrogance. And the third characteristic is greed. Someone has said, greed marks the way of the wicked like a gravestone.

The Babylonians were never satisfied. They consumed everything. But they were never full. They were never satisfied. A few years ago, the Australian Financial Review reported that when one of the most powerful and wealthy businessmen in the Australian retail sector had heard that he'd bought a very famous horse stud, this very famous businessman simply didn't bat an eye.

[12 : 35] And the \$4 million bid hardly registered with him when the Australian Financial Review rang him up and told him, in fact, that his offer had been accepted. His response was, oh, I got it, did I?

And the business tycoon is a self-confessed serial property collector. He commented that buying properties is what we do when we're alive.

We build and build and accumulate. It's a disease. Friends, the more you have to live for, the less you need to live on.

Those who make acquisition their goal, they never have enough. Verse 5, wealth is treacherous, the arrogant do not endure. They open their throats wide as sheol, like death, they never have enough.

They gather all nations for themselves and collect all peoples as their own. You see, God's answer is clear to Habakkuk, isn't it? The Babylonians, the prideful, the arrogant, they will not endure.

[13 : 39] That's what the Lord says in verse 5. And then God reveals to Habakkuk woes against the Babylonians. And that's the next part of the chapter, verses 6 to 19.

God speaks through Habakkuk's vision and he says that the captives will speak woes to their captors as taunts.

A little complicated, but that's the first part of verse 6. God is the one speaking to Habakkuk through the vision, telling him that the captives will speak to the captors, the woes being taunts.

And the woes, you'll see, list the sinful behaviour and they describe the consequential judgment. And we're just going to briefly look at these as we flick down the five of them.

The first woe, verses 6 to 8. A simple point, victims will take revenge. Tyranny has within itself the seeds of its own destruction.

[14 : 46] There may be many examples in the world. The one that came to my mind as I reflected on this was the Soviet Union. The former great Soviet Union, no longer great, and in fact, still this day, going through phases of self-destruction in its outer territories.

Woe number two, verses 9 to 11, Babylon has built a security, but the security itself will be broken to the ground. Woe number three, it's similar in fact to the first two rows, but now Yahweh the Lord is mentioned in the taunt.

You see, the crimes of the Babylonians, they're not just to the countries in that surrounding region, against those countries. Their crimes also against the Lord, against Yahweh.

All of the Babylonians' labour will count for nothing. The fourth woe, verses 15 to 17, the proud, the arrogant, amuse themselves at the expense of others, and they're going to be exposed, they're going to be shamed, they will suffer disgrace.

As I thought about that woe, I have to say the image that came to my mind were those shameful pictures taken in the Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq. Remember those photos of naked, hooded men being subjected to mock torture, disgusting behaviour, and a massive blow to the image of the US.

[16 : 21] Those who amuse themselves at the expense of the captives will experience God's judgement. Look at verse 16, the cup in the Lord's right hand will come around to you and shame will come upon your glory.

And then the fifth woe, verses 18 and 19. This fifth woe actually has a different structure. Notice verse 18. You see, the woe this time begins with the ground on which the threatening is made, and the ground is idolatry.

Friends, the fundamental failure of the Babylonians was their refusal to accept the Lord, Yahweh, as their ruler and their God.

An idol has absolutely no value. And just notice this biting, stinging taunt in verse 19. Wake up to silent stone. Rouse yourself.

Can it teach? See, it's gold and silver plated, and there's no breath in it at all. The arrogant and the proud trust in everything and anything but the one true living God.

[17 : 43] and such people, the Babylonians and all who followed down that path since, they'll experience spiritual isolation. Well, that's quite a list of sins, isn't it?

Because this wasn't just the Babylonians. I mean, there were many in Judah who were proud, who were greedy, who exploited the poor and worshipped idols. and Judah was judged.

Jerusalem was ransacked and the temple was destroyed by the Babylonians. Judgment also came on the Babylonians themselves. When the Persians, under Cyrus, captured their city at the end of October 539 B.C.

And then, of course, the exiled Judeans were allowed to return to their homeland and rebuild their city. So, God has answered Habakkuk's question about the Babylonians.

But the question of why the wicked succeed, it's very up to date, isn't it? I mean, it's a question for all places and it's a question for all times.

[18 : 58] Will righteousness, justice, and peace actually ever prevail on this earth? Well, the chapter's got a lot to say about judgment.

But as I mentioned, it's also got a lot to say about the gospel and it's got three wonderful gospel promises. Let's look at the first one. If you turn back to verse 4, and I want you to look particularly at the second half of the verse.

Six simple but extraordinary words. The righteous live by their faith. You see, this is God's response to Habakkuk's complaint about God's inaction, his inactivity, his injustice.

And that second half of verse 4 instructs the person who's already righteous how to face the difficulties of life. And especially the apparent, not the actual, but the apparent contradictions between God's promises and then what actually happens in history.

For the original readers reading this text, living by faith meant believing Yahweh's word, believing the word given through Habakkuk.

[20 : 20] It meant waiting 70 years for return from exile to the homeland. In fact, what it meant is well summed up in chapter 3, which we'll look at next week.

But the prophet's question of God is for all time. I mean, if you're like me at all, you probably ask God the sorts of questions that Habakkuk did.

And God's answer is the same for us as it was for the people of Judah at the beginning of the 6th century BC. I mean, perhaps you are perplexed at the relationship between God and the world.

Perhaps you're deeply troubled when you see wickedness and injustice in the world, and you see it apparently succeeding. perhaps you struggle as you experience the strangeness of God's ways, as we talked about last week.

Well, God's answers to our questions, God's answer to our laments is exactly the same. The righteous live by their faith.

[21 : 31] And the root of the Hebrew word translated faith means fidelity, it means durability, steadfastness. So the sense of what God is saying is this, those who want to live in a right relationship with God and a right relationship with his people will live by their trust in the promises of the Lord.

God. The proud seek to be self-reliant, but the righteous in Habakkuk's day and us, as followers of the Lord Jesus, we're to rely on the Lord.

Living is holding on to the promises of God, even during the dark times, even during those times when you're unable to see how God is actually at work in your life.

Don't constrain this word living to simply physical survival. Christians die, Christians are killed by the enemies of Christ. Living, as we see in the book of Deuteronomy, is enjoying the full covenantal blessing, if you like, the blessing of being in a covenant relationship with the Lord.

And these famous words in Habakkuk 2, verse 4, in the second half, part B, they're quoted three times in the New Testament, in Hebrews, Romans and Galatians.

[22 : 56] And in Hebrews chapter 10, verse 38, the words are applied to a community that's actually suffering for Christ, who steadfastly look for the coming of the Lord, when their faith will win them eternal life.

And the focus in the book of Hebrews is ongoing reliance on God's promise, waiting for God to finally resolve the problem of evil.

But Paul's use of Habakkuk 2, verse 4, is the most distinctive. In Romans 1.17, Paul takes the quote as, the one who is righteous through faith will live.

And in fact, that's really Paul's basic text on the gospel of justification by faith. God's righteousness and God's righteousness and God's righteousness of God because he'd been taught to understand that, that that meant a just God punishing unjust sinners.

Luther says, I hated this just God who punishes sinners. And if not with silent blasphemy, at least with huge murmuring, I was indignant against God.

[24 : 31] But Luther came to understand that the righteousness of God is the person being credited with Christ's own righteousness. How? Through faith in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

And Luther records that he says, I felt myself straight away born afresh and to have entered through the open gates into paradise itself.

It was a massive revelation and transformation in Martin Luther's life. The faith that's reckoned to believers as righteousness is faith in Jesus Christ.

Why is that? Because Jesus Christ is the one in whom God has brought his saving grace. So you see, when we read Habakkuk 2.4 in Paul, the focus is primarily on how an individual acquires a right standing before God.

But don't see the use in Habakkuk, the prophet Habakkuk, and in Romans as being disconnected. See, scripture doesn't know of a true faith that is without subsequent faithfulness.

[25 : 43] It doesn't know of it. It doesn't know of a true faith without subsequent faithfulness. Or, put it the other way, it doesn't know of a true faithfulness that is not a product of genuine faith.

Faithfulness, what is it? Constancy through the different circumstances of life, the different happenings in the world that is inextricably linked to faith, which is ongoing reliance on God.

That's verse 4, the first gospel promise. Look at the second promise in verse 14. But the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.

I mean, that's an extraordinary statement, isn't it? And it extends way past Habakkuk. You see, God is revealing to his people through the prophet, more than just judgment.

The vision is also about God's big gospel plan. The earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord. And verse 14 indicates that the vision provides not only a near-term resolution of the problem of evil, but the ultimate solution as well.

[27 : 02] The Babylonian kingdom that reigned through that period of the 7th and 6th centuries BC. And all of the future Babylonians will be judged and they'll be destroyed.

And we read about that in Revelation 17 and 18. Everything and everyone who's hostile to the Lord will be judged so that the glory of God will actually fill the earth.

I don't know about you, but I think that's the most fantastic vision. Instead of a world, if you like that's polluted with blood, the earth will be permeated with God's glory.

That's the vision. Habakkuk lived in a wicked, violent society and world. We live likewise.

God's world. And in the midst of our perplexity, living as God's people in this fallen, this rebellious world, we hold on to the great promise.

[28 : 08] The person who lives by faith trusts in the promise that one day as the waters cover the sea, the glory of Yahweh the Lord will fill the earth. And the chapter finishes with the third gospel promise, verse 20.

The Lord is in his holy temple. Let all the earth keep silence before him. The Lord Yahweh is in his heavenly temple, his heavenly dwelling. And that's a tremendous promise to hold on to.

It's a promise, it's the assurance of God's government. What a great comfort for Habakkuk. You see, the Babylonians might invade, they might destroy the temple, the physical temple in Jerusalem, but God still reigns.

And that's a great comfort for us, that God is still on the throne. Hold on to that special truth. Hold on to it at all times, but especially during those times in your life, when life is very dark and very difficult.

Those who live by faith and by God's plan for his world, they will prevail. The peaceable kingdom of God will come. It's going to be consummated at the coming of the Lord Jesus as we've been reflecting on just in the last week here.

[29 : 24] God pronounced judgment on Judah. Sinful, rebellious Judah. God pronounced judgment on the Babylonians.

Proud, greedy, bloodthirsty, idolatrous Babylon. And having done that, there's nothing more to be said. God's answered Habakkuk.

God's given the prophet and the nation what they needed to know. And God's given us what we need to know. He's given it to us in his very word. I wonder whether you think now you'd be better placed if you were talking to the persecuted Coptic Christians.

There are just two ways to live in the world. There's the way of the proud, self-sufficiency and there's the way of faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

In each of those woes, the lack of faith takes the form of relying on oneself instead of relying on God. And that's the world that we live in, isn't it, friends?

[30 : 32] this is the sin that even we as believers can fall into. Relying on and giving credit to almost anything but God himself.

We too easily give ourselves the credit. And all around of us we see sin, don't we? Acts of sin described in the woes. Selfishness, arrogance, covetousness, murder, exploitation, idolatry, in all of its forms.

And nothing is going to withstand God's holy judgment unless it's covered by the blood of Christ. So if I'm speaking to someone tonight and you know in your heart that you don't know Jesus Christ, then friend, come to the cross tonight.

Come to the cross where the Prince of Glory died. The place where Christ, the Son of God, died. Where he took the punishment for pride. sin.

There are two ways to live. The way of the proud, the way of faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. Which path are you on? In a sinful, violent and fallen world, and often a very perplexing world, the word of the Lord comes to God's people this night through Habakkuk chapter 2.

[32 : 01] The righteous will live by faith. The earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord. And the Lord is in his holy temple.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.
Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.