

"The Just Shall Live by Faith"

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[0 : 00] Good morning, church. Would you turn with me to the book of Habakkuk? That's page 737 in the Pew Bible.

737. Habakkuk is a book that helps us wrestle with God when we're in the midst of troubled times. The book is structured around two complaints and a prayer. And in the first complaint, Habakkuk wrestles with God because he doesn't see evidence of God's justice in the world.

There's wickedness and unrighteousness, destruction and violence. Judah itself is filled with exploitative rulers, and it seems like God isn't doing anything. And God's answer to that complaint that we saw last week was that his justice was indeed going to come. He was going to send the Chaldeans, the Babylonians, to judge evil.

And that brings us to Habakkuk's second complaint, which is what we're looking at today. Habakkuk wrestles again with God, questioning how a righteous God could use such unrighteous means to bring about his purposes.

How could God use evil Babylon to punish his own people? That doesn't seem just at all. So let's read together Habakkuk's complaint, and then we'll take a look at God's response.

[1 : 39] This is Habakkuk chapter 1, starting in verse 12. And we'll read the whole way through the end of chapter 2 to see all of God's response. Habakkuk's second complaint begins like this. He says, Are you not from everlasting, O Lord my God, my Holy One? We shall not die.

O Lord, you have ordained them as a judgment, and you, O Rock, have established them for reproof. You who are of purer eyes than to see evil and cannot look at wrong, why do you idly look at traitors and remain silent when the wicked swallows up the man more righteous than he?

You make mankind like the fish of the sea, like crawling things that have no ruler. He brings all of them up with a hook. He drags them out with his net.

He gathers them in his dragnet so he rejoices and is glad. Therefore, he sacrifices to his net and makes offerings to his dragnet. For by them he lives in luxury and his food is rich.

Is he then to keep on emptying his net and mercilessly killing nations forever? I will take my stand at my watch post, station myself on the tower, and look out to see what he will say to me.

[3 : 08] And what I will answer concerning my complaint. And the Lord answered me. Write the vision. Make it plain on tablets, so he may run who reads it.

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.

Behold, his soul is puffed up. It's not upright within him. But the righteous shall live by his faith. Moreover, wine is a traitor, an arrogant man who's never at rest.

Greed is as wide as Sheol. Like death, he never has enough. He gathers for himself all nations and collects as his own all peoples. But shall not all these take up their taunt against him with scoffing and riddles for him and say, Woe!

Woe to him who heaps up what is not his own. For how long? And loads himself with pledges. Will not your debtor suddenly arise? And those awake who will make you tremble?

[4 : 17] Then you will be spoiled for them. Because you've plundered many nations, all the remnant of the people shall plunder you. For the man of blood and violence to the earth, to cities and all who dwell in them.

Woe to him who gets evil gain for his house, to set his nest on high, to be safe from the reach of harm. You have devised shame for your house by cutting off many peoples.

You have forfeited your life. For the stone will cry out from the wall and the beam from the woodwork respond. Woe to him who builds a town with blood and founds a city on iniquity.

Behold, is it not from the Lord of hosts that people's labor merely for fire and nations weary themselves for nothing? For the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.

Woe to him who makes his neighbors drink. You pour out your wrath and make them drunk in order to gaze at their nakedness. You will have your fill of shame instead of glory.

[5 : 25] Drink yourself and show your uncircumcision. The cup in the Lord's right hand will come around to you. And utter shame will come upon your glory.

The violence done to Lebanon will overwhelm you. As will the destruction of the beasts that terrified them. For the man of blood and violence to the earth, to cities and all who dwell in them.

What profit is an idol when its maker has shaped it? A metal image, teacher of lies. For its maker trusts in his own creation when he makes speechless idols.

Woe to him who says to a wooden thing, awake to a silent stone arise. Can this teach? Behold, it is overlaid with gold and silver and there is no breath at all in it.

But the Lord is in his holy temple. Let all the earth keep silence before him. Let's pray together.

[6 : 30] Father, would you be with us now as we take a few brief moments to consider this message that you spoke to Habakkuk so many years ago.

And continue to speak to us today through your Holy Spirit, by your word. Grant us understanding that we might grasp these things and live in light of their truth.

Pray this in Christ's name. Amen. So here then we have Habakkuk's second complaint. This is chapter 1, verse 12 through 2, 1. And then we have God's long response in chapter 2, verses 2 through 20.

You'll remember in chapter 1, verse 6, Habakkuk had heard of God's plan to use the Chaldeans, that is to use the Babylonians, to bring justice upon evil Judean rulers.

But hearing that message now in our passage, the prophet's even more perplexed than he was at first. How can a good God use evil Babylon to punish his own people?

[7 : 38] Habakkuk is finding it difficult to reconcile God's character with his actions. Look again at verse 12. Here in verse 12, Habakkuk correctly affirms the many attributes of God.

God is eternal. God is holy. God is even powerful and sovereign over the nations, appointing them to do his will. Habakkuk's even confident in what God's character means for God's people.

Knowing God to be eternal and holy and sovereign, Habakkuk says, we shall not die. But in light of all this, there's still a problem. The prophet cannot understand why God would use the seemingly more evil nation of Babylon to punish the seemingly less evil nation of Judah, God's own people.

Look at how he states this in verse 13. He says, You who are of purer eyes and to see evil and cannot look it wrong, why do you idly look at traitors and remain silent when the wicked swallows up the man more righteous than he?

And make no mistake, Babylon was an unjust and fearsome nation. Habakkuk here pictures them like an ancient fisher with a hook and a net, just dragging humans off into exile as easily and as violently as fish would be dragged out of the sea and hoisted onto land.

[9 : 04] And then to make it worse, the Babylonians turn around and they worship their nets, as it were, which is to say they worship their own power and wealth. And Habakkuk ends by saying, Is he, that is the Babylonians, is he then to keep on emptying his net, God, and mercilessly killing nations forever?

In other words, God, this is how you're going to bring about justice? Through them? Shouldn't God's instrument for the accomplishment of his purpose reflect something of his own purity and righteousness?

The Babylonians display the same evil qualities as those against whom they were executing God's judgment. The Judean rulers at the time of Habakkuk were very wicked, and yet the Babylonians were wicked on an even greater scale.

It seemed as if the cure was going to be far worse than the disease. And that didn't make any sense at all. And indeed, many of God's ways don't seem to make sense in this life.

We often see the wicked prosper and the righteous suffer. We often see one unjust system or government collapse, only to be replaced by one that's even more unjust.

[10 : 39] And in the midst of it all, we can feel like fish in a net, just being dragged against our will through the waves of human greed and selfishness.

And it seems like there's never an end in sight. How can God allow this to go on? How can God use and allow such evil things when he is righteous?

Well, God's answer to Habakkuk and God's answer to our own questioning hearts comes in two halves in his response.

On the one hand, God reminds Habakkuk that evil will never ultimately prosper because God is still providentially orchestrating history for his own righteous purposes.

We actually see this in the second part of chapter 2. We're going to look at that first. That's verses 5 through 20 where God pronounces five woes upon Babylon in Habakkuk 2, 5 through 20.

[11 : 50] God's reminding Habakkuk here that evil isn't going to ultimately prosper, that he is still providentially orchestrating history for his own righteous purposes. So he gives Habakkuk a preview of the woe that is the ultimate sorrow and judgment that is coming upon those who ignore God and who multiply injustice and evil, regardless of the plan that they might play in the unfolding of history.

As we scan over these five woes, we see that the first woe is a woe to the empire builder. And the second woe is a woe to the exploiter.

The third woe is a woe to the arrogant slave driver who would use humans like capital to build up wealth. The fourth woe is a woe to the demoralizer.

And the fifth woe is a woe to the idolater. And these woes reveal God's judgment, not just upon the Babylonians, but upon any human power that sets itself up against God's reign and rule.

The reality is every generation will see kingdoms that achieve a measure of temporal earthly success.

[13 : 17] From the tower builders of Babel to the empire builders of Rome, down to the nation states of today. Every generation will see kingdoms that achieve temporal earthly success.

And God may even use some of these earthly kingdoms to achieve his purposes. Consider God used the Tower of Babel and the scattering of their languages to populate the earth and to spread them out, which was his will.

God used the Pax Romana during the Roman Empire as a time when communication and travel was very easy to spread the gospel.

God continues to use different nation states and political movements to seemingly advance some of his purposes. God still can do that.

But none of these earthly kingdoms will ultimately prevail or escape God's judgment. God's righteousness will triumph in the end.

[14 : 28] God's glory. And it is his glory that will cover the earth like the waters cover the sea. It was once said that the sun never set on the British Empire.

But friends, that was just a parody and at times even a mockery of God's glory that will truly cover the earth like the waters cover the sea.

And any nation or political movement who thinks that they're going to spread their glory and bring in a reign of peace and justice will be surprised on the last day when it collapses.

So what God wanted Habakkuk to see and what he wants us to see is that the prophet lived in between the times. Habakkuk lived between the already and the not yet.

Already God's kingdom had begun to take shape. Already God's kingdom was on the move. We were seeing glimpses of his righteousness, his justice, his mercy, his advance.

[15 : 36] But it was not yet fulfilled and completed all the way. The rise and fall of earthly empires, the seeming prosperity of the wicked, the seeming confusion of God's purposes and plans.

God wanted Habakkuk to see that none of that was the last word. Yes, Babylon would be an instrument in his hands, but they too would face judgment. Yes, God might use them for a short time to achieve his purpose, but they too would fall before his perfect justice.

It would not be their glory that covered the earth. It would be God's glory. And this promise of worldwide glory, of God's glory covering the earth, that was a promise that God would one day fulfill and will one day fulfill in Jesus Christ.

Philippians 2 says that one day every knee will bow in heaven and on earth, and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father. You see, it's not through earthly empires that God's glory will spread.

It is in Christ's sinless life, his sacrificial death, his victorious resurrection, and his vindicating reign, that is how God's righteousness is finally revealed to all humanity over all the earth.

[17 : 00] So for the church today, we too need to hear what God says to Habakkuk. The kingdoms of this world are not everlasting.

They will fall. Even when God chooses to use an unrighteous instrument for his purposes, that doesn't mean they will escape his ultimate justice.

One day, every knee will bow to Christ. One day, woe will come upon all who choose to exploit others or worship false gods or ignore God's commands.

And the only way to safely come through God's judgment is to willingly bow our knees to Christ and confess him as Lord.

You know, friend, perhaps today you enjoy privilege or power or success of some kind. But you know, in the end, none of those things will save you.

[18 : 09] Being highly educated won't save you. Being a citizen of a certain country won't save you. Even doing lots of good deeds won't save you.

Perfect justice is coming. God's righteousness will prevail. And the only thing that will save us is the righteousness of Christ.

In Jesus Christ, God became a human being and he lived the life that you and I should have lived. And he died the death that we deserve to die. So that God's justice could be satisfied and so that we could be accepted on the basis of his works and not our own.

That is the only way to escape God's coming perfect justice and to stand before God in a right relationship with him. So this is the first part of God's answer to Habakkuk.

When his ways seem inscrutable and when we can't understand how a just God could be at work in an unjust world, God reminds Habakkuk and us that we aren't at the end of the story yet.

[19 : 22] That his justice will be vindicated and will be seen. And living in light as we are of the New Testament, seeing what God has done and is doing in Christ, we know that God's justice will ultimately be demonstrated because we've seen it happen in Christ and we have the promise that he will fulfill it in the future.

So this leads us to the second thing that God wants Habakkuk to know. First, they have to know that evil isn't going to ultimately prevail but second, this means that God's people are called to live by faith.

We see this in verses 2-4 of chapter 2. Habakkuk says, And the Lord answered me, write the vision and make it plain on tables so he may run who reads it 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. There God is saying, look, the time of justice is coming, write it, publish it, hold on to it.

If it seems slow, wait for it, it is coming. And then he says in verse 4, before, behold, his soul is puffed up, it is not right within him. He's sort of looking at a hypothetical person who doesn't trust God, like the Babylonians.

[20 : 44] But then in the second half of verse 4, he says, but the righteous shall live by their faith. Though the timing of God's just purposes may seem slow, God reminds Habakkuk that it is surely coming.

And although some will remain puffed up with pride, God's people are called to live not in pride, but in faith.

That is, we're called to trust God and to keep on holding on to his goodness and his righteousness even in trying and troubled times, even when God's ways are not clear.

Habakkuk says, the righteous, God's people, this is how they're to live in this in-between time, through faith, trusting God. But keep in mind, this path of trusting God, it's not a sort of path of just blind faith, right?

It isn't just wishful thinking. No, what Habakkuk invites us into is a deep-rooted trust in the eternal, providential, ever-present God.

[22 : 02] We're called to trust in God and who God's revealed himself to be. You know, on the one hand, what Habakkuk seems to want in this second complaint, what he seems to want is just a quick answer to his perplexing circumstances.

God, help me sort this out. But you know, that's not what God gives him. He doesn't give him a quick answer. Instead, what God invites Habakkuk into is a deeper knowledge of God himself to trust him.

It's a lot like the book of Job, you know. You know, you remember the story of Job. Job was sort of the wealthiest man of his day. But then suddenly he loses everything.

Loses his wealth, he loses his family, he loses his physical health. And for many chapters, Job wrestles with God. And then Job's friends wrestle with him.

And many of Job's questions to God, you know, they remain unanswered by the end of the book. But the amazing thing about Job is that whereas Job doesn't get answers, what he does get is God himself.

[23 : 23] God reveals himself to Job in the midst of his suffering as sovereign, as wise, as good. And for Job, that is enough.

In the end, Job says, I humble myself before you, God, and I remain silent. I trust you. And is it interesting that here in Habakkuk we read at the end of chapter 2, but the Lord is in his holy temple.

Let all the earth keep silence before him. Things may be going completely, to our perspective, chaotically in the world around us. But the Lord is in his holy temple.

Let all the earth keep silence before him. Consider what the temple meant for God's people in the Old Testament. The Lord is in his temple.

Consider what the temple meant. You know, the temple was the place of God's symbolic presence in their midst. But it wasn't just that. It wasn't just sort of the place where God dwelled.

[24 : 39] For the Israelites, the temple was the place where God provided atonement for his people. It was where the sacrifices happened for the atonement of their sins.

So the temple then, it wasn't just God's holiness that was revealed, his holy presence, but also his mercy was on display there. God's holiness and mercy were shown to them in the temple.

And we're told, in Hebrews, we see this, and also there's echoes of this in the Old Testament as well, that the earthly temple was just a sort of figure of God's heavenly temple where his holiness and his mercy were on infinite display.

The Lord is in his holy temple. And it is faith, it is trust, in this God, the holy and merciful God, that Habakkuk calls us to.

And we are called to trust that this God, the holy and merciful God, unfolds all things, even the difficult and inexplicable things, according to his wise and compassionate purposes.

[25 : 54] You know, this part of Habakkuk reminds us somewhat of Psalm 73. Do you remember Psalm 73? In Psalm 73, the psalmist kind of struggles to reconcile what he sees on the one hand, which is the prosperity of the wicked, and on the other hand, God's apparent inactivity.

The psalmist sort of sees all these unrighteous people prospering, and God seems to do nothing about it as they get richer and richer and richer through evil and injustice.

But then in verse 17 of Psalm 73, the psalmist, he says, he goes to the sanctuary, to the temple, and he realizes what the end will be.

In the temple, the psalmist is assured of God's providential rule over all things and that the wicked will not ultimately prevail.

God will be merciful and righteous. He will vindicate himself and his people. Now, friends, can we find that assurance today?

[27 : 01] Can we, like Habakkuk, see God in his holy temple and be silent before him in trusting faith? Can we, like the psalmist in Psalm 73, behold God in the sanctuary and be assured that his mercy and justice will prevail?

Well, you know, we don't have the temple anymore, do we? But we do have something better. Because we know the one who fulfilled the temple.

We know the one that the temple merely prefigured. Because Jesus Christ, God's Son, is God's ultimate temple. When Jesus said in John's Gospel, destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up, he was saying that in his own person, in his own body, he was the true temple.

He was the true place where God's holiness and mercy were realized. Destroy this temple, Jesus said, and in three days I will raise it up.

What was Jesus talking about there? Well, he was looking ahead to the cross and to the empty tomb. And today, when we look to the cross and when we look to the empty tomb, when we behold God in the incarnate sanctuary, in the true temple, the crucified and risen Jesus, you see, then our faith, friends, isn't just blind faith or wishful thinking.

[28 : 38] Then it's faith in who God really is. And it's a sure faith. And it's a certain faith. And it's a persevering faith. And this is the assurance, this is the trust that can see us through the most trying times.

Romans 8, 31 through 32 says it best. Paul says, What shall we say then to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us?

He who did not spare his own son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things? Paul looks to Christ, sees his circumstances.

We're like sheep led to the slaughter, Paul says. And yet he can look at Christ and say, no. If God did not spare his own son, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?

God's justice and mercy will, they must prevail. Faith in the God who provided his only son, that is the foundation for living with confidence and hope in a fallen world filled with many trials and tears.

[29 : 58] others. And you know, it's only through faith that we can live. The Apostle Paul will quote this verse from Habakkuk 2.4 when talking about the very heart of salvation.

When talking about the very heart of our salvation, Paul will say, it's not by works that we're saved. It's not by our own good deeds.

He says, the righteous live by faith. Don't you remember Habakkuk? Now we might think, man, is Paul kind of quoting that out of context? I thought Habakkuk 2.4 was about persevering in trying times.

Now he's saying it's about justification by faith. But Paul sees that it's the same, it's two sides of the same coin. It's trusting God above all else.

Faith isn't just the path to persevere in trying times. Faith's the only way to embrace God's saving grace in the first place. So as we wrap up then, how about you, friend?

[31 : 14] Perhaps you're here, you're a Christian and you look around at the world and you maybe look at your own life and maybe you don't see much evidence of God's righteousness, of God's goodness, of God's mercy, of God's faithfulness.

Habakkuk is here to remind us to keep trusting God. His righteousness will prevail. His kingdom will come. It might not be clear how or when, but we can know it will.

And how can we have that kind of assurance? We consider the true temple of God, the Lord Jesus Christ. God's faithfulness and as we ask, as we ask with Habakkuk, can God use, how could God use unjust instruments to accomplish His just purposes?

Is God losing control when the wicked seem to prevail? When as believers those questions crop up in our hearts? Friends, we look to the cross. Have you considered that the cross was the most unjust and wicked act ever perpetrated by human beings?

We literally killed the Lord of life. But through this unjust and wicked act, God sovereignly brought about forgiveness and justification and salvation for all who believe.

[32 : 43] look to the cross and trust that God is working all things for good for those who love Him and are called according to His purpose.

Perhaps you're here and you're not a Christian and you know, friend, the invitation is actually the same for you. It's a call to trust. It's a call to faith.

The righteous shall live by faith, Habakkuk says. And you know, the funny thing is when you think about it, we all place our faith in something, right? I guess at the end of the day, the question isn't whether we believe or not, whether we have faith or not.

The question is, what do we put our faith in? What do we put our trust in? Is there a worthier object of your trust than Jesus Christ?

Who else loved you enough to die for you? Who else is willing to forgive you and restore you and bless you though you've done nothing to deserve it? You can try to earn God's favor or work for your salvation or try to sort of build a righteousness on your own so you have something to offer back to God, but it won't work.

[33 : 59] Your best efforts can't sustain the weight of your whole life and they certainly won't sustain the weight of God's perfect justice. But Jesus can and he's done it for you.

So trust him. Trust him and you will live, God says. Let's pray. Father, hearing Habakkuk's call, your call through Habakkuk to live in faith, we at times feel like the man who came to Jesus with the son who was suffering and who said to Jesus, Lord, we believe.

Help our unbelief. So in these quiet moments here, we look to you, Lord Jesus, saying, help our unbelief.

We know you're good. We know you're righteous. We need your spirit to come to strengthen our faith once again as kingdoms rise and kingdoms fall, as the unjust and the wicked seem to prosper, as we get so confused who to trust, which end is up?

Lord, recalibrate us, realign us to you. And would we walk in faith and trust in you? God, and as we do so, we pray that we would experience the great gifts of faith, that trusting you in trying times, we would find joy.

[36 : 00] We would find peace. We would find perseverance. We would find compassion for others. We would find wisdom. Lord, and as we walk in this way, we pray that it wouldn't be us who get the glory, who get the praise.

Lord, we don't need people to look at us and say, my, how stable they are. No, God, we want people to see you and how stable you are and how good you are to all who come to you.

Lord, indeed, our hope is built on nothing less than Jesus' blood and righteousness. amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen.