

The Righteous shall live by faith

Habakkuk 1:12-2:5

Covenant Waterfall, 29 August 2021

Read

Pray

Introduction

If there is one thing we are guaranteed in life, it is that we will face unexpected trials, challenges, suffering and calamity. As a community, we got a taste of it last month – unrest. Also increased uncertainty of where this country is headed. Like we asked last week – where is God in all this? Aren't we his covenant people? Hasn't he promised to be our God – to protect us, bless us and preserve us? How then can God allow and purpose these bad things in the lives of his people? How can a holy and good God use evil and injustice to achieve his purposes?

We are not the first people to wrestle with questions like these. Thousands of years ago, the prophet Habakkuk wrestled with these same questions. In last week's sermon, we saw that God revealed to Habakkuk that he was going to raise the up Babylonians to punish his people, Judah, by invading them and taking them into captivity; because they had sinned and broken the covenant he made with them. In this morning's text, Habakkuk responds to God's plans by questioning God: If God is really holy and faithful, how can he use a wicked nation like the Babylonians to crush his chosen people and feed them to the wolves? Is he not faithful to his people? Will the wicked Babylonians not be punished?

What we will see this morning that God will indeed preserve his people. Because God is faithful, the righteous will live by faith.

- Habakkuk's complaint
- God's response
- Who is righteous?

A. Habakkuk's complaint, 1:12-2:1

How can God possibly bring calamity upon his chosen covenant people, using the wicked Babylonians to inflict violence upon them? This is the heart of Habakkuk's complaint to God, after we saw from last week, God's intentions to discipline Judah. Habakkuk starts out his complaint to God by reminding him of his own character, v.12:

“Are you not from everlasting, O Lord my God, my Holy One? We shall not die. O Lord, you have ordained them as a judgement, and you, O Rock, have established them for reproof.”

Habakkuk provides us here with a wonderful doctrine of God: God is “from everlasting” – he's eternal – he has no beginning nor end – he's the One who was, is, and is to come. He's also “my God” – he's a God who has entered into a covenant relationship with his people. He's not impersonal, distant, far off and dis-interested in his people – no he's drawn near to us, he cares for us – he is our God, and we are his people.

He is also the “Holy One” – he alone is perfect, pure, blameless – because of his holiness, he cannot tolerate sin in his presence. He is also the “Rock” – he's faithful and unchanging. He keeps his promises and he's entirely trustworthy. And he's also the Righteous Judge – he exercises justice – he always does what is right.

Why does Habakkuk remind God about his own character? He's assured that because of the truth of God's character – eternal and faithful, therefore God's people “won't die” (v.12). But he seems to think that there is a contradiction between God's character and his actions. How so? Verse 13 continues...

“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?”

How can God who is holy, who is “of purer eyes than to see evil and cannot look at wrong” – how can he then use the wicked Babylonians to swallow up, to punish his own people, Judah, surely more righteous than them. How can he ignore Babylon's wickedness, but punish his own people who are, compared to Babylon, pretty good?

Verses 14-15 continue:

“You make mankind like the fish of the sea, like crawling things that have no ruler. ¹⁵ 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.”

Habakkuk then starts to describe what the Babylonians will do to them – catch them by the hook, drag them into nets like fish. Verses 16-17 go on to say that they will force them into idol worship of their idols and that they will carry on killing nations forever. But Habakkuk starts off verse 14 by saying that it is God who makes people like the fish of the sea. In other words, he holds God complicit for the evil actions of the Babylonians. God’s the one who has made mankind like fish swimming all over the sea, only to allow the Babylonians to catch them. How could God do this? How could he abandon his people like this?

Habakkuk concludes his complaint to God in verse 1 of chapter 2, by saying that he will now wait for God to answer him, he will look out, like a watchman, at what God will say to him in response.

Don’t we resonate with something of Habakkuk’s complaint? In the midst of our own challenges, don’t we also cry to out God – how can he allow bad things to happen to us, his people? Does this mean that God has then abandoned us? How can he possibly allow the wicked in our land to inflict harm to the righteous?

B. God’s response, 2:2-5

God then starts to answer Habakkuk (vv.2-3):

“And the Lord answered me: “Write the vision; make it plain on tablets, so he may run who reads it. ³ 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.”

God first tells Habakkuk to write down the revelation – as it’s intended for all of God’s people, not just Habakkuk. Then in verse 3, God says that he is working in his own time. It may seem to Habakkuk as God is acting slowly and as if evil is prevailing over good. Yet he promises that he will accomplish his purposes at the “appointed time”. Habakkuk must be patient, God will surely act, he will not delay.

Contrary to Habakkuk's accusation to God that he is giving the wicked Babylonians a free pass, God says here that he will be true to his character. Evil will be punished, he will keep his promises to his chosen people. But he will do so according to his own time.

We see this promise eventually fulfilled. Though the Babylonians did grow into a mighty empire and ended up taking Judah into captivity; 150 years after Habakkuk's death, God was true to his promise, and judged Babylon. The empire was destroyed and invaded by the Persians in 539 BC. And it was the Persian King Cyrus, who allowed the captives from Judah to return back to their land.

Verse 4 continues...

“Behold, his soul is puffed up; it is not upright within him, but the righteous shall live by his faith.”

God then makes a distinction between the wicked and the righteous. Remember, it's Habakkuk who has accused God of letting the wicked off the hook, and instead allowing the righteous to suffer evil. God responds here to this.

First looks at the wicked – he says their soul is puffed up and not upright. He's certainly describing the Babylonians here, but also all who choose to live their lives independently of God. Everyone who is godless – in other words, living without reference to God, self-reliantly, is “puffed” – arrogant and proud. This includes all the wicked in Judah – those whom Habakkuk was initially complaining about in chapter 1.

Before God, they are not upright – not righteous, and as a result, will be condemned and judged. Contrary to Habakkuk's charge that God is not being consistent to his character, God is most certainly a holy, righteous judge who will by no means clear the guilty, as Exodus 34:7 tells us. All wickedness will face God's wrath – that's his promise!

The rest of verse 4 goes on to say, **“but the righteous shall live by his faith.”** The Hebrew text actually says, “the righteous shall live by his faithfulness.” Despite Habakkuk's fears that God will abandon his people and allow evil to prosper at their expense; here we see that God promises to be faithful to his chosen people.

There is a remnant within Judah whom he calls here, “the righteous”. God's chosen people – the righteous ones – won't die. God will preserve them through the wickedness of the

Babylonians. He won't cast them off, they won't face his wrath, like the wicked will. Instead, they will *live*. The Hebrew tense of "live" in this verse, is in the imperfect, indicating that this promise of life is everlasting, it will carry on forever.

How will the righteous live? By their faithfulness, or by faith. They will live by their trusting in God and in his covenant promises to them. Just as Abraham believed in God against all odds, that he would become the father of many nations, despite having no children of his own in his old age, and God counted his faith as righteousness and fulfilled his promises to him; so God's people must patiently trust in him, despite our circumstances, because he will most certainly fulfil his promises to us too. He did save and preserve a remnant from Judah. And he will save and preserve us his church. And it's by faith that we trust that he will deliver on his promises. Indeed, the righteous shall live by faith!

C. Who is righteous?

So who then are "the righteous"? If we look at the Scriptures, for example, Psalm 1, we see that the righteous are those who delight in the law of the Lord and meditate on his law, day and night (Ps 1:2). In other words, the truly righteous person is the one who completely obeys God's law.

But there's a problem here. No one can fully obey the law. That's the story of God's people in the OT – keep failing, keep disobeying. That's why Judah ended up in exile in Babylon, they broke the covenant, disobeyed the law. So actually, weren't righteous. Our story too – no matter our best intentions, always fall short of God's law.

So what's the point then? Why did God give us the law if we just end up breaking it? The reason God gave us the law was to show up our sinfulness. Romans 7:7 says, **"If it had not been for the law, I would not have known sin. For I would not have known what it is to covet if the law had not said, 'You shall not covet.'"**

The law shows up the fact that we can't save ourselves. It shows up our self-righteousness. It should lead us to despair, that despite all our efforts, we just are never good enough before God. Romans 3:10 says, **"None is righteous, no, not one..."** Because all of us are lawbreakers, none of us are actually righteous.

There is one exception to all this. Only one Person has ever managed to completely obey God's law. Only one Person who is therefore truly righteous within himself – Jesus Christ. During his life on earth, he lived the perfectly obedient life in every respect. But what hope is there for us if only Jesus is righteous, and we are not?

Romans 5:19: **“For as by the one man’s disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man’s obedience the many will be made righteous.”**

If we trust in Christ, in his perfect obedience to the law to the point of death on the cross, God counts Christ's perfect righteousness to us. In other words, he justifies us, he makes us right before God: he forgives our sins – clears our debt, and credits us with Christ's own perfect righteousness, so that before God, it is as if we have completely obeyed the law. In Christ, we are in fact made righteous by faith.

This is why Romans 1:16-17 says: **“For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. ¹⁷ For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, “The righteous shall live by faith.”**

Paul quotes Habakkuk 2:4 here for a very important reason. Its true meaning is fulfilled in Christ and his gospel. Who then is righteous? Everyone who realises that they are in themselves unrighteous, but instead puts their faith in Christ's perfect righteousness: they are the righteous who live by faith!

Conclusion

In Habakkuk 2:3 we saw that God would appoint a time when he would fulfil his justice. On one level he did that by punishing the wicked Babylonians. Yet on another level, that appointed time has not yet come to pass. Our eternal, holy, just and faithful God promises us though that one day he will return to judge the living and the dead, and right all wrongs – destroy the wicked and save the righteous.

Yet as we've seen, actually none of us are righteous in ourselves – no not one. On our own, we actually deserve to be destroyed by God, because we too are wicked – all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God (Rom 3:23).

Our only hope is to repent – acknowledge your need for God, and trust in the perfectly Righteous One – Jesus Christ. By faith, know that your sins are forgiven, that he counts his perfect righteousness to you and that he now grants you life that is ongoing forever – eternal life. He will keep his covenant promises to his righteous ones, he will never leave us nor forsake us – he will preserve us to the end. Indeed, the righteous shall live by faith!

Amen.