

Be People of Perseverance

Expositions of Habakkuk

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Bible Text: Habakkuk 2:3-4; Hebrews 10:35-38

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And turn in your Bibles, if you would, to the book of Hebrews chapter 10 and we will read a few verses from Hebrews chapter 10. I would like to begin at verse 26 and then reading through the end of the chapter.

Hebrews 10 verse 26. Hear God's Word.

For if we go on sinning willfully after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a terrifying expectation of judgment and THE FURY OF A FIRE WHICH WILL CONSUME THE ADVERSARIES. Anyone who has set aside the Law of Moses dies without mercy on the testimony of two or three witnesses. How much severer punishment do you think he will deserve who has trampled under foot the Son of God, and has regarded as unclean the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified, and has insulted the Spirit of grace? For we know Him who said, "VENGEANCE IS MINE, I WILL REPAY." And again, "THE LORD WILL JUDGE HIS PEOPLE." It is a terrifying thing to fall into the hands of the living God. But remember the former days, when, after being enlightened, you endured a great conflict of sufferings, partly by being made a public spectacle through reproaches and tribulations, and partly by becoming sharers with those who were so treated. For you showed sympathy to the prisoners and accepted joyfully the seizure of your property, knowing that you have for yourselves a better possession and a lasting one. Therefore, do not throw away your confidence, which has a great reward. For you have need of endurance, so that when you have done the will of God, you may receive what was promised. FOR YET IN A VERY LITTLE WHILE, HE WHO IS COMING WILL COME, AND WILL NOT DELAY. BUT MY RIGHTEOUS ONE SHALL LIVE BY FAITH; AND IF HE SHRINKS BACK, MY SOUL HAS NO PLEASURE IN HIM. But we are not of those who shrink back to destruction, but of those who have faith to the preserving of the soul.

And then, turning back, again, to the book of Habakkuk to the second chapter and two verses there. They are the two verses which the writer to the Hebrews quotes in the passage which we just read.

Habakkuk chapter two and verses three and four.

For the vision is yet for the appointed time;
It hastens toward the goal and it will not fail.
Though it tarries, wait for it;
For it will certainly come, it will not delay.
Behold, as for the proud one,
His soul is not right within him;
But the righteous will live by his faith.¹

Let's pray.

Father, again we thank you for your Word. We pray now as we have opportunity to look into it that you would be pleased to bless us with your grace. We pray, Father, that we would have that persevering grace about which the writer to the Hebrews speaks quoting from the book of Habakkuk. Work in our hearts, Father, that our hearts would, indeed, be fixed on you. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

As we sat around the dinner table with a group of seminary students, one of the men, a member of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, was bemoaning the state of his church. There is a push, as in other denominations, for the ordination of homosexuals. And he was saying that this year their synod is very likely to pass the proposal. And those who are pushing this proposal know that 40% to 60% of the people within the church will leave. Yet they persevere in this evil knowing that probably over a half of their membership will depart.

Yes, we do shake our heads. We shake our heads because of this perseverance in evil. And the question is, friends, Christian friends: Are you prepared to persevere in that which is good, in that which is righteous, and in that which is favorable in the eyes of God?

Our text this morning is Habakkuk chapter two and verses three and four. And the writer to the Hebrews quotes Habakkuk chapter two verses three and four in the context of perseverance. He exhorts those Christians to whom he is writing to persevere in the faith once for all delivered to the saints. And his point, quoting from Habakkuk, is simple. Persevere, do not turn your back on Christ. Persevere, don't shrink from Christ. And this is the message for you this morning. And, of course, it is the message for me also. Persevere, do not shrink back from Christ.

We start, again, in the book of Habakkuk, this morning, and then we will turn to the book of Hebrews to see how the writer to the Hebrews applies the teaching coming to us from

¹ Habakkuk 2:3-4.

Habakkuk. So let's look at Habakkuk chapter two and, first of all, verse four. "Behold, as for the proud one, His soul is not right within him."²

Of course, you remember that Habakkuk is in a quandary with regard to the evil in Judah. God has promised to send the Babylonians to judge the Judeans. Habakkuk takes exception to this. God reminds Habakkuk that true righteousness comes down from heaven. Ultimately, it is not to be found in this world. And God reminds Habakkuk here in verse four, "Behold, as for the proud one, His soul is not right within him."³

The proud one is, first of all, the Babylonian. And, as you will recall, the Babylonian found his justice and authority within himself.⁴ The Babylonian popped up his chest in opposition to God. He was the proud one. But because of the evil in Judah and in Jerusalem, the proud one also resided among the Jewish people. The proud one, even among the Jews, was an individual whose soul was not right with God.

This was a profound problem and this is why God was reminding Habakkuk that true justice and righteousness comes from above. We too need to be reminded, do we not, that within the good old US of A and within the Church of Jesus Christ, the visible Church of Jesus Christ, the proud one does exist. Think about the sin of homosexuality once again. The governor of the state of Maine has signed a bill approving of so called same-sex marriages. I say "so called" because this is surely an oxymoron. There is no such thing as a same-sex marriage. Maine becomes one of five states in America approving of such relationships.

This last week the city council in Washington, DC approved a resolution which will allow the District of Columbia to accept the validity of same-sex marriages performed in other states. The significance of this move is that the Congress of the United States of America must pass judgment on all of the ordinances passed by the city council of Washington, DC. This means that the Congress of the United States must say thumbs up or thumbs down with regard to this specific ordinance. The Congress of the United States may just pass it by and allow it to stand. And in doing so the Congress of the United States of America, if it does take such an action, will be putting the stamp of approval of the United States government on same-sex marriage. This is the position of the proud one whose heart is not right with God. You need to pray, friends, you need to pray for this country.

Our text goes on to say that the decree of judgment against the proud will not fail. Look at verses two and three in Habakkuk two.

Then the LORD answered me and said,
"Record the vision
And inscribe it on tablets,
That the one who reads it may run.

² Habakkuk 2:4.

³ Ibid.

⁴ See Habakkuk 1:7.

For the vision is yet for the appointed time.”⁵

The vision, which is a vision with regard to judgment against the proud in Judea and in Babylon, indicates this judgment is appointed. “It hastens toward the goal and it will not fail.”⁶ God is telling no lies, is the essence of the text. “Though it tarries, wait for it,”⁷ God says to Habakkuk, “For it will certainly come, it will not delay.”⁸

If it tarries, wait. But then it will not delay. There seems to be, perhaps, a little contradiction in the text here. But the commentators, I think, are correct. A day in the sight of the Lord is like a thousand from our perspective.⁹ The judgment is certain. It might delay for a time as far as Habakkuk is concerned, as far as the Babylonians are concerned, as far as we are concerned, but it is fixed. It will not delay as far as God is concerned.

You should notice here that we are making a connection between the judgment of Judah and the judgment of Babylon and the final judgment. Last week we made the connection between the judgment of Judah and the judgment of Babylon and that judgment of 70 AD when the temple was once for all destroyed in Jerusalem. But now we are making another connection, a biblical connection. The Bible is connecting the words of Habakkuk to the final judgment, the final coming of Jesus Christ a second time in glory. And we will see this more specifically as we come to Hebrews chapter 10.

But now, given the fact of this sin, given the fact of the inevitability of judgment, you have to understand, friends, the message of Habakkuk, the central message of Habakkuk, in this text, in verse four “The righteous will live by his faith.”¹⁰ This is the need of the proud one, the one whose soul is not right with God. It is the need of such an individual. It is your need and it is my need to have a righteousness, a righteousness that comes from God, an alien righteousness, a righteousness that you do not have and that I do not have, a righteousness that comes from God applied to our lives so that we will be right with God. This is what Habakkuk is talking about.

And this text from Habakkuk is quoted no less than three times in the New Testament. I would like you to look at these texts briefly with me, if you would. The first one is in Galatians. If you have your Bible, turn with me to the third chapter of Galatians and verse 11. “Now that no one is justified by the Law before God is evident; for, ‘THE RIGHTEOUS MAN SHALL LIVE BY FAITH.’”¹¹ You see, there is the quotation. “The righteous...shall live by faith.”¹² And Paul says at the beginning of verse 11, “Now that

⁵ Habakkuk 2:2-3.

⁶ Habakkuk 2:3.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ See 2 Peter 3:8.

¹⁰ Habakkuk 2:4.

¹¹ Galatians 3:11.

¹² Ibid.

no one is justified by the Law before God is evident.”¹³ It is evident because Habakkuk taught otherwise.

Think about the courtroom. An individual stands in the court, a civil court or a criminal court, and is accused of some misdeed. When the evidence is presented and the jury looks at the evidence, if the evidence is deemed to show the innocence of the individual standing before the court, the court pronounces its verdict, “Not guilty.” The court says of the individual standing there, “On the basis of the evidence you are not guilty.”

I submit to you that there is not one of us who are now in this auditorium who can stand before God and on the basis of the evidence say, “We are innocent.” I think you are with me on this. One ink blot on the ledger of your life shows that you are not pure as the driven snow. You are not innocent. And so you need righteousness, the gift of righteousness that comes from God. You need the righteousness of Jesus Christ, his perfect life, attributed to your life. You need to be forgiven of your sins and you need the perfect righteousness of Christ applied to your life. And you receive this righteousness by faith, by trusting Christ, by saying, “I have nothing to offer to you, God, but you have everything to offer to me.” You trust Christ. You receive this righteousness. You know that on the basis of the law you cannot be justified in the sight of God.

And when you realize this, what do you do? You rejoice. And when people ask you questions about your relationship with Christ, you are not ashamed of the gospel at all. You know that through Jesus Christ you have right standing with God.

And this brings us to Romans and one of the other texts that Paul quotes. Look at Romans chapter one and verses 16 and 17. Hear these words.

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. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith; as it is written, “BUT THE RIGHTEOUS man SHALL LIVE BY FAITH.”¹⁴

There it is again, that quotation from Habakkuk, “BUT THE RIGHTEOUS... SHALL LIVE BY FAITH.”¹⁵ And Paul says, “I am not ashamed of the gospel.”¹⁶ Most of the commentators say that the book of Romans is a theological treatise. I agree with this up to a point. But I say to you that the book of Romans is much more than a theological treatise. Paul is encouraging each of us when he says, “I am not ashamed of the gospel.”¹⁷ And there is never a reason to be ashamed of the gospel. Think of what God has done for you and me through Jesus Christ.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Romans 1:16-17.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

And when he finishes his recitation of the gospel in Romans chapter 11, he breaks into a doxology, “Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and unfathomable His ways!”¹⁸ Paul can hardly contain himself after rehearsing the gospel. He is not ashamed of it at all. And Paul is rehearsing this gospel, this gospel of justification by grace through faith to help you and to help me to never, never, never ever be ashamed of this gospel of grace.

And if you are never ashamed of the gospel, I submit to you, friends, you will never turn away from Christ. And this is what the writer to the Hebrews is talking about. So let’s go back to Hebrews again, Hebrews chapter 10 and verses 37 and 38. You once again see the quotation of Habakkuk 2:3-4.

FOR YET IN A VERY LITTLE WHILE, HE WHO IS COMING WILL
COME, AND WILL NOT DELAY. BUT MY RIGHTEOUS ONE
SHALL LIVE BY FAITH; AND IF HE SHRINKS BACK, MY SOUL
HAS NO PLEASURE IN HIM.¹⁹

The writer to the Hebrews is writing to Jewish Christians and the burden of his message is simple. Christ is a better high priest than the high priest of the Jewish economy. The covenant under Christ is a better covenant than that which was given to us through Moses. The temple in heaven is a better temple than the temple or tabernacle on this earth. The sacrifice of Christ is a better sacrifice than the sacrifices performed in the tabernacle and later in the temple. And so the writer to the Hebrews makes these comparisons. And he exhorts those Hebrew Christians, “Don’t turn back away from Christ to your former way of life in Judaism. You must not do this.”

Look at verses 35 and 36 in Hebrews 10. He says, “Therefore, do not throw away your confidence, which has a great reward. For you have need of endurance, so that when you have done the will of God, you may receive what was promised.”²⁰ Don’t throw away what you have in Christ. What do you need? You need endurance. You need perseverance. Persevere, don’t turn away from Christ. You see, this is the message.

And how is it that you may throw away your confidence? Well, one way you can do this is by saying to yourself, “You know, I am not such a bad person. I have taught Sunday school in this church for a long time. I have paid my dues. God will smile on me.” And what are you doing? You are adding works, your works, to Christ’s righteousness to gain approval before God.

Now I am pointing my finger at myself here, too. Pastor’s are particularly prey to this sort of thing. After all, I have gone to the committee meetings. I have served as chairman of these different committees. I have been moderator of presbytery. I have been in this church for a long time. I have paid my dues. Elders can begin to think the same thing.

¹⁸ Romans 11:33.

¹⁹ Hebrews 10:37-38.

²⁰ Hebrews 10:35-36.

And church members, too. You see, we can throw overboard our confidence in Christ quite easily. And we ought not to do this.

There is a theology arising in the Church today called a New Perspective on Paul. Perhaps, some of you have heard about this. So-called Protestant theologians are saying, “Oh, yes, the righteousness of Christ is good and you need the righteousness of Christ applied to your life. But you need to remember that God smiles on your good deeds and your good deeds are added to the righteousness of Christ so that you can have right standing before God.” We have an elder in the Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America who has been going through a trial with regard to this issue. And it is rising among Reformed churches. Don’t throw away the confidence you have in Christ.

Persevere in the gospel.

And then what else does our text tell us? Look at verses 38. “**BUT MY RIGHTEOUS ONE SHALL LIVE BY FAITH; AND IF HE SHRINKS BACK, MY SOUL HAS NO PLEASURE IN HIM.**”²¹ The writer to the Hebrews is quoting Habakkuk from the Greek Old Testament. This is part of the reason for the difference in the quotations. But the idea here is that if an individual shrinks back from the testimony of Jesus Christ, God will not have pleasure in such an individual. So you need to persevere in the faith and not shrink back.

How is it possible for you to shrink back? Well, I think it is possible for you to shrink back from the faith by submitting to the pressure of classmates in school or by feeling the pressure of individuals at work. And when push comes to shove you are ashamed of the gospel. I am not talking about just being timid or perhaps being a little embarrassed to step out and to speak. We are all different personality types. And some of us are a little more forward than others. I am talking about really being ashamed. You say, “Oh, no, I won’t go there.” You back away from the gospel.

Derrick Thomas tells a story about a woman, whom he knew in college as a preeminent Christian, a zealous Christian. She was a young lady who would buttonhole people and give them the gospel. She had no hesitation of speaking to people about Christ. But when she graduated from college her grandfather—I think this is correct—her grandfather said to her, “If you will give up this Christianity stuff I will buy you a house and I will set you up.” And she said, “Ok, ‘I’ll take the bargain.” She turned her back on Christ for the price of that house. And, as Derrick Thomas said, she has never turned back again.

There is our lesson. Persevere. Do not shrink back from Christ. Why? Well, let’s look at verses 37 and 39. “**FOR YET IN A VERY LITTLE WHILE, HE WHO IS COMING WILL COME, AND WILL NOT DELAY.**”²² In Habakkuk it is the vision that will not delay. But here in Hebrews it is interpreted as Christ who will not delay. He will come a second time in glory and judge the righteous and the wicked. You know this is the case.

²¹ Hebrews 10:38.

²² Hebrews 10:37.

And verse 39 says, “But we are not of those who shrink back to destruction, but of those who have faith to the preserving of the soul.”²³ You see, you are either in one camp or the other. And the proof of the pudding is perseverance. What are the several benefits that either accompany flow from justification, adoption and sanctification? The several benefits that either accompany flow from justification, adoption and sanctification are assurance of God’s love, peace of conscience, joy in the Holy Ghost, increase of grace, perseverance unto the end.²⁴ Perseverance to the end, this is one of the benefits of really being justified, of having righteousness from God through Jesus Christ. And so the apostle says, “We are not of those who shrink back to destruction, but of those who have faith to the preserving of the soul.”²⁵ And so the message this morning is simple, friends. It is the writer to the Hebrews’ application of Habakkuk: Persevere, don’t shrink back.

I remember an elderly pastor in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church by the name of W. Benson Male. When he retired from the pastorate he took up some home missions work. And when the home missions work was completed he began some foreign missions work. He went to Egypt. And at one point he came to our congregation to talk to us about the gospel going to Egypt. I remember him saying to me after I queried him about his activities, he said to me, “It is better to burn out than to rust out.” Reverend Male persevered to the end.

Some of you know John Gerstner. In his latter years he spent time writing three volumes called *The Rational Biblical Theology of Jonathan Edwards*. One of the last times he preached in Kansas, I wish I had been there. The word came back to me. He preached like a man standing on the edge of eternity. Dr. Gerstner persevered to the end.

And I remember a dear saint by the name of Alice Wilson in Sterling, Kansas, USA where I had the privilege of being a pastor. Every time I went to visit her in the Presbyterian Manner she said to me, “Pastor, I don’t want to live to be 100.” And I would say to her, “Alice, that’s not up to you. That’s up to God.” She persevered to the end, to her last day. And she *did* live to be over 100.

And you young people, you children here in the congregation today, you are in the best possible place you can be on this Lord’s Day, sitting here with your parents. Week after week you come with your parents and sit here with your parents. You need to remember, you need to persevere in the faith that your parents are teaching you.

And so this is the message this morning for all of you, young and old, and for me. Persevere, do not turn back from Christ.

Let’s pray.

Lord, thanks. Thanks that you are pleased to work this perseverance in us. Thank you for Jesus Christ through whom we have righteousness and forgiveness. Thank you for the

²³ Hebrews 10:39.

²⁴ See Westminster Shorter Catechism 36.

²⁵ Ibid.

way the writer to the Hebrews applies the text in Habakkuk to remind each one of us that the center and the heart and the core of Christianity is this faith we have in you, this trust we have in you. Cause us to persevere and never ever turn back from Christ. Be pleased, Father, we pray, to answer us in this regard: Persevere, don't turn back from Christ. Answer us. Answer our prayer, for this we ask in Jesus' name. Amen.