

Colin Giles - Habakkuk

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I thought that I wanted to give some thoughts at this time because of the uncertainty in world affairs. In Melbourne just recently we had demonstrations and there seem to be some people who want to say that COVID 19 doesn't exist, and so there's that anxiety amongst people of this medical epidemic which is sweeping the world and bringing distress and death to the elderly and bringing in that necessity for lockdowns and other methods of disease control, and that also brings with it financial problems. So there is a need, as I say it, to reassure ourselves that God is aware of the present situation and has purposed a plan to deal with the problem.

For this reason I have determined to give a message of hope which is the foundation of our faith, and I think it is nicely found in the message contained in one of the books of the Older Testament. What I have in mind is found in the writings of Habakkuk and his thres repeated in the New Testament, and it is also a verse made famous during the Reformation in the words the just shall live by faith. To understand this verse and its meaning, it is needful for us to examine the circumstances in which it was first given and to whom the message was given.

We have very little knowledge of the life of Habakkuk and when he wrote the message, but the nature of the message gives us some indication of its purpose. It would seem that the prophecy was meant for the two tribes of Judah. As the ten tribes had already gone into captivity in Assyria, the people of the two tribes were also drifting into idolatry. So this would suggest that the prophecy was given in round about 600 BC, not that much earlier than actually being carried into captivity in Babylon. The name of the prophet, one who embraces it seems to be a wrestling term, may give some indication of the character of Habakkuk and his style of writing as it suggests that the writer is someone who is challenging God to explain why he is or is not doing something about evil.

There are common questions like if God is good and all powerful, how is it that the innocent suffer and the guilty go free? When we witness man's inhumanity to man, we can only wonder how does God feel about is an age old problem. But at least Habakkuk received an answer that also helps us to understand God's way and it also underlies the way God is bringing about his righteousness. There are also some other notable verses in the book of Habakkuk that sums up what have been his conclusion when he understood God. Verses such as Romans 11:33, 36 would perhaps give a good summary of Habakkuk's conclusion.

Oh, the depth of the riches, both of the wisdom and knowledge of God. How unsearchable are his judgments and his ways past a finding out. For who has known the mind of the Lord, who has been his counsellor, or who has first given to him, and it shall be recompensed unto him again. For of him and through him, and to him are all things to whom be glory forever. Amen.

The following verses also have that same general theme of responding to God because of his goodness. So I will now give a detailed view of the salient points which I see in this book, and so that we perhaps can see the sequence of his thoughts and the way he was reasoning in chapter one and two. In chapter one, verse two to verse four, Habakkuk asked the question as to why evil goes unpunished. O Jehovah, how long shall I cry, and thou wilt not hear? I cry out unto thee of violence, and thou wilt not save.

Why dost thou show me iniquity and look upon perverseness? For destruction and violence are before me, and there is strife and contention riseth up. Therefore the law is slacked, and justice doth never go forth, for the wicked doth compass about the righteous Therefore justice goes forth

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perverted.

A very common cry of people of how can God look on evil and not do something about it? But God does give an answer to that question in verses 5 and 6. Behold ye among the nations, and look and wonder marvellously. For I am working a work in your days, which you will not believe, though I be told you. For lo, I raise up the Chaldeans, that bitter and hasty nation that march through the breadth of the earth to possess dwelling places that are not theirs.

They are terrible and dreadful. Their judgment and their dignity proceed from themselves. Very graphic description of the Jaldans and their way they treated the people they conquered. But now Habakkuk cannot understand how a holy God can do this, to use a more wicked nation to punish the less wicked. So now he puts forward reason why God should not do this.

And it's best stated in verse.

From verse 13, which put forward his belief with the powerful words, and from verse 12, just to give the introduction. Art not thou from everlasting, O Jehovah, my God, my Holy One, we shall not die, O Jehovah. Thou hast ordained him for judgment, and thou, O Rock, has established him for correction. Presumably he's talking about the Chaldean person and verse 13 which has the key. Thou art of purer eyes than to behold evil, and thou canst not look on perverseness.

Wherefore lookest thou upon them that deal treacherously and holdest thy peace, when the wicked swallowest up the man that is more righteous than he? It's a powerful argument that Habakkuk is making of why God shouldn't do this. But as we go through the book of Habakkuk and he is trying to understand what is God's purpose, Habakkuk makes a decision to resolve the issue.

And he decides to stand and look and record just what God is going to do and how he'll work out his purpose. So in verse two, verse one, I will stand upon my watch and set me upon the tower, and I look forth to see what he will speak with me and what I shall answer concerning my complaint. So then in the next 15 verses beginning from verse two, we have God's answer to that question with some general statements.

And then it continues on for the next 12 verses.

I've not detailed them. You can look up them. In verses 5 to 8 we see that the Chaldean will be punished for his greed. In verses 9 to 11 the Chaldean will be punished for his covetousness.

Then verses 12 to 7 he will be replayed for his idolatry in the words that there of that the Chaldean will drink of the cup that he is being forced on other people to drink, and only the Lord is to be worshiped.

When Habakkuk has considered all this, he gives his reply in chapter three, beginning with a prayer in verse one and two that God's mercy will continue while he judges with wrath, and then he continues on in the rest of the chapter praising God for his judgments.

And then when we look from verse 16 onwards, there is a statement of Habakkuk's unswerving faith in the action that God will do in the future to put things right.

Verses 17 to 19 gives his thoughts in very vivid language. For though the fig tree shall not flourish, neither shall fruit be in the vines. The labour of the olive tree shall fail, and the fields shall yield no food. The flock shall be cut off from the fold, and there shall be no herd in the store. Saul's Yet I will

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rejoice in Jehovah, I will joy in the God of my salvation.

Jehovah, the Lord is my strength and he maketh my feet like hinds feet, and will make me to walk upon my high places.

We also think it very Much like the attitude that Job took, although he was suffering from many illnesses, but yet he had confidence in God.

I note there is a further statement in my Bible that these words were written and directed to the choirmaster with stringed instruments. So it may be that this prayer of Habakkuk was to be sung. One commentator suggested that it was designed to be sung while the people were in captivity, as it gave in it passages that gave hope for deliverance.

Habakkuk, like other minor prophets, is a very short book with a single message, the main part of it a single message. But it is unusual in that the message is contained in a dialogue with God. But it is also memorial because one key verse is quoted a number of times in the New Testament, and that particular verse is of course Habakkuk 2, 4. Behold, his soul is puffed up. It is not upright in him, but the righteous shall live by his faith.

The last part of this verse is quoted in three different places within the New Testament. As a way of help in understanding the lessons that are drawn from this verse. It will be profitable to consider how the meaning within the verse is applied in these various biblical references.

The first one that comes to mind is the Romans 1, verse 17.

This letter of Paul's to the Romans was written in about AD 58, after Paul had spent many years in missionary service preaching to both Jews and Gentiles.

The letter to the Romans may then by this time have the benefit of his mature Christ Christian thought and the reasoning of how to live that Christian life.

We do not know for how long the church in Rome had been established before they received that letter, which is important because it explained how Paul understood the way that God was bringing about the a righteous faith.

But judging by the ethnicity of the names mentioned in the greetings, it would seem that there were roughly an equal number of both Jews and Gentiles in the church at Rome, and Paul was writing on something that was a critical item for his comment, and it would seem that Paul quoted this verse from Habakkuk to support his understanding of how God was bringing all his people into a right relationship with himself.

To discuss this phrase as it appears in the letter to the Romans, we need to perhaps go back a little bit. In Romans it reads, for I'm not ashamed of the Gospel, for it is the power of God unto salvation to everyone that believeth Jew and also the Greek. The message of the Gospel has such a grand and beneficial purpose as to bring about the blessings of that Messianic kingdom to mankind.

Mankind in this part of Paul's letter is classified as Jew and Greek, which would suggest that Paul was thinking of a religious classification of mankind, and the sequence in which God has revealed himself to mankind is first of all, for it is the righteousness of God being revealed through faith. For faith as it is written, he who through faith is righteous shall live. This is I've taken that from the Revised Standard Version, which changes the word just. The just shall live by faith in the King

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James into the righteous shall live by faith.

And it seems to give a better understanding.

And so it shows how the purpose of salvation is being revealed because it demonstrates the righteousness of God and how it is to be made active.

The understanding of that key phrase, the righteousness of God is the one that needs some explanation.

And because it goes on and the words then commented as being supported by the verse in my key text of the just shall or the righteous shall live by faith.

It seems that the word righteousness in this passage seems to mean that is, that of the righteousness is that condition in man into which he enters by participation in the Messianic kingdom, not a righteousness that God possessed of himself, but that which mankind is to enter into.

And then the following verses in that Romans reference described how this righteousness is being declared, and it is by faith, and that faith produces more faith.

In the galatians reference chapter 3, verse 10, Paul here is making the contrast between the righteousness that was freely available by faith and the righteousness promised by the law, but because it was found impossible to be kept, it brought a curse.

The other place in the New Testament with this verse from Habakkuk quoted is in Hebrews 10:38, 39, where the writer is encouraging the reader to maintain their faithfulness which had been promised, and that it would bring about a great reward.

Perhaps it is of some interest that the writer of Hebrews may have been quoting from memory, as there seems to have been some small changes to the words of this quotation compared to those other places. Some translators also rearrange the verse to change the order of the keywords, so changing where the emphasis should be placed.

Translations such as the Diaglot are consistent across all references and put the order righteousness, faith, and live. But other translations like the Amplified are not so consistent across those various references and generally have righteousness live faith, but other righteousness can have righteousness live faith. I don't know enough about the Greek language, but I suspect that the ending of the words in Greek indicate where the emphasis should be placed and not as in the English, where the word order is important. However, from reading this verse and trying to understand it, I see that the emphasis should be placed on the outcome of faith, and that is to live to the fullest.

In the letter to the Romans there is a further development of this sort in that it states that it is the principle of how God is granting the righteousness that is to be revealed, in which it applies equally the Jew and Gentile, and corresponding or comparing that also mentions the wrath of God as being revealed in a similar way to the fact that Christ has shown the way of righteousness that wrath is being shown by it shows up the unrighteousness that is in people. In Galatians the principle of living by faith is used to explain what the law could not do. But now the gaining of righteousness is available by the coming of Christ.

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But in the Hebrews reference, the key verse seems to be about gaining righteousness so that it will encourage believers to continue in his or her faithfulness and not to lose hope in their reward. So my thought in taking up this discussion of the study of the book of Habakkuk was to remind both you and me where the source of our constant confidence in God's promises comes from. It is by hearing and reading of what God has done, and by being convinced what he has promised he will bring to pass so that we can build on our faith and that it will grow stronger with the present troubles in the world. It is easy to get us swept along by its anxieties and fears. Also, difficulties in relationship and in the conflict that can occur can disturb us and be a source of challenge to our Christian vitality.

And so I just like to sum up my message in the words in Hebrews chapter 10, verse 35, cast away, cast not away. Therefore your confidence, which has great recompense of reward. Thank you.