

The Righteous Shall Live by Faith

Grace, mercy, and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord; dear friends: We just sang “From depths of woe I cry to Thee”. It’s the Lutheran hymnal’s version of that old *Hee Haw* song that goes “Gloom, despair, and agony on me; deep dark depression, excessive misery”. We hear the prophet Habakkuk singing his own version of it in today’s Old Testament reading – and not without cause. The world as he knew it was going to hell in a hand basket.

Good King Josiah was dead. He had been killed in battle some five years earlier. During his righteous thirty-one year reign, the nation of Judah had undergone a religious revival and reformation. He aggressively rid the land of idolatry and the worship of false gods. He refurbished the temple of the Lord in Jerusalem: God’s dwelling place on earth. And it happened while they were digging through the temple treasury in order to find the funds to pay for the work that they discovered the greatest treasure of all: the Holy Scriptures that had been long neglected and forgotten. When the sacred Scriptures were read before the king, Josiah’s reformation went into hyper-drive. He restored the right and proper worship of the Lord. More than that, he saw to it that he and his people actually lived lives that conformed to the Word of God. For faithful people like Habakkuk, Josiah’s reign was a golden age of orthodoxy.

But like I said, Josiah was dead. And no sooner did his body begin to cool that everything he had done start to unravel. Five years later it had all but been erased. The idols of the Canaanite gods and goddesses were back in the temple – and popping up like mushrooms in countless shrines and high places throughout the land. And with them came cultic prostitution (both straight and gay) which was part of the worship of these false gods – as well as was human sacrifice: people throwing their infant children onto burning altars in order to appease their insatiable pagan deities. True religion – the few that practiced it – was forced underground. And without God’s Word and Spirit to guide them, people’s morals sank to new depths of vice and depravity. There was widespread corruption at all levels of government. The justice system worked for anyone with enough money to pay for it: buy whatever verdict you wanted in cases criminal or civil just by greasing the palm of the judge. Workers were denied their wages. Marriage and family life collapsed. Widows and orphans starved. Crime and random violence reigned in the streets. And day by day things only got worse. (Sounds a lot like our times.)

So Habakkuk had plenty to feel gloomy about. But his biggest complaint was that the Lord didn’t seem to be doing anything about it. We hear his desperate cry of woe from the depths of his despair, “O Lord, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not hear? Or cry to you ‘Violence!’ and you will not save? Why do I have to keep looking at all this sin going on around me? And why do you look on at it as if you do not care?” Habakkuk was a student of Scripture. He knew the Lord’s character. He knew of the Lord’s gracious actions on behalf of his people in the past. But in view of all that was happening now, he didn’t seem to be living up to his reputation. You acted in the past in response to your people’s prayers. And here I am crying out loud for you to come to the rescue. Why aren’t you doing anything? What kind of God are you, anyway?

Now, unfortunately, the folks who devised the lectionary decided to chop a big chunk of material out of the middle of this text – thirteen more verses of chapter 1 to be precise. What’s in the skipped over section is the Lord’s response to Habakkuk’s complaint, and then the

prophet's unhappy reply which turns out to be an even more grievous second complaint. To understand what follows, it will be helpful for us to know how that conversation went.

So, in reply to Habakkuk's accusing the Lord of being negligent in his duty, the Lord says essentially this: I do hear you, Habakkuk. I see what's going on. It grieves me more than it does you. But you are wrong in thinking that I am not acting. Even now my plan is unfolding. And when you hear it, you're going to be astounded. Here's what I'm doing. I'm bringing in the vast armies of the Babylonian Empire, hoards of ruthless, bloodthirsty soldiers, and they are going to wipe the nation of my rebellious people clean off the map. *That* will put an end to all the wickedness you are complaining about.

Well, the Lord was right (as always). Habakkuk was astounded; completely blown away. And suffice it to say he didn't like the Lord's reply. I imagine he was thinking that maybe the Lord could send another king like Josiah, someone who would lead the nation to another spiritual and moral revival. *That's* what we need. Instead what he heard sounded more like a homeowner dealing with a mouse problem by burning his house down. It gets rid of the mice, sure; but at an unacceptably high price.

But the Lord's dire solution to the problem led the prophet to a moral conundrum that he could not resolve. He asked, how can you, a just, holy, and loving God bring judgment on your people, Israel, for their sins by the hands of a people even more sinful, violent, and idolatrous? The Babylonians were like the Nazis of the day; in Habakkuk's mind ten thousand times worse than the people of Judah. A just God should be destroying them, not using them to destroy us. Habakkuk demanded of the Lord, explain to me how this can be? How can you, a just and perfect God, use such a wicked, filthy instrument as Babylon to work your holy will? I'm going to stand here waiting until I get an answer from you.

As we heard, the Lord did answer. Write this down. Use great big letters so that even someone running with it can read it with ease. The explanation you're looking for awaits its appointed time. It's coming. Wait for it. But in the meantime, examine yourself. Your soul is puffed up. It is not upright within you. The righteous shall live by his faith.

That's the answer. But what does it mean? Simply this: to make the complaints and to ask the questions of the Lord that Habakkuk was asking betrays a lack of trust in the Lord. It presumes to sit in judgment of the Lord and his actions – as if I, a puny, sinful, finite human, have a better, wiser, and more just and perfect plan than he does. It presumes to know more than God knows. It's me saying, "You're doing it wrong, O Lord." That is the height of arrogance. It's placing myself above God – making myself my god. It is the opposite of living by faith in him.

But the just shall live by his faith – his faith in the Lord, his trust that despite what he sees going on in the world around him, the Lord *is* working his good and gracious will to save his people. Habakkuk didn't believe it. And that's why the Lord called him on it – to repent of this most arrogant sin of self-idolatry; to die the death of repentance, be forgiven, and rise again living by faith in the Lord. *That's* the Lord's answer to the problem of human sin: death and resurrection. A short-lived moral revival in society doesn't cut the mustard. Oh, on the surface things may appear better; but the fact that after Josiah's death things went so quickly south showed that the peoples' hearts were still far from the Lord. The Lord knew that the only way to save the nation of Judah was to kill it and to bring it to life again – which is precisely what he did at the time of the exile and its aftermath. And to do it, yes, he used the hands of sinful people.

Just as he did when, at the appointed time, he most definitively and decisively dealt with the problem of human sin. He did it by taking all human sin on himself, in the person of God the Son, who for us took on a human nature, and though he knew no sin, became sin for us. By the hands of sinful men he was lifted up on the cross to suffer and die. That was the Lord's solution to the problem of human sin – though at the time the faithful did not recognize it. It looked to them like the worst thing that could ever happen. But above his head, written in big letters so that all could read (in three languages, no less), was the mocking inscription that we need to believe to be saved: Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews. So he was. And so he still is, having risen from the dead. He's the Savior King we need; not another Josiah. He's the King through whom we also daily die the death of repentance for our lack of trust in the Lord, and through whom we rise again, forgiven, and trusting that no matter what happens in the world around us, the Lord *is* working his good and gracious will for our salvation. He's the King through faith in whom we will also one day die in this world and rise again to new life in the world to come.

And that's the lens through which we must see all that goes on in this world. God hasn't promised to make this world a better place for us to live in. No, he's said that because of our sin, it's only going to get worse; and therefore he's promised to destroy it and recreate it again in perfection. Strictly speaking, in this age he hasn't promised to make us better people. In this life we will always be sinners in need of the death of repentance, his forgiveness in Christ, and his Spirit to give us new life. Now, it's true that outwardly at least this new life will result in an aversion to sin and produce acts of kindness, generosity, and love for our neighbors that are the fruit of faith. But on the inside you will only become more aware of how deep and persistent your sin is, and how much more you need to trust in the righteousness that God imputes to you by faith in Christ. The righteous will live by faith – and only by faith: faith in Christ who suffered and died for sinners and then rose again.

When, in the face of adversity and violence and all of the horrible things that people are doing, we ask questions like "Lord, how long?" or "Lord, how could you?" we show ourselves to be doubting that he can be trusted to do what is right, and therefore that we are not righteous by faith in him and his saving work on behalf of sinners. Let's not go there.

Instead, let us recognize that the Lord is working in all things for the good of those he has chosen and called to be his own in Christ Jesus. Let us repent of ever thinking otherwise. And let us pray with the disciples, "Lord, increase our faith" that by that faith we may be counted righteous in his sight and live through the merits of Jesus Christ our Lord. In his holy name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!