

The Just Shall Live By Faith

The theme of Habakkuk is “*The Just Shall Live By Faith*” as found in Habakkuk 2:4.

Habakkuk 2:4 (NKJV)

4 “Behold the proud, His soul is not upright in him; But the just shall live by his faith.

Here we have the KEY verse of the book. This is one of the most important statements in Scripture.

“This statement in verse 4 is the central theme of all Scripture.” – **Tim LaHaye**

Habakkuk 2:4 presents a contrast between the proud in soul who are not right with God and the just who live by faith. Pride is the besetting sin of mankind. It is the fundamental sin problem. Here it is applied to Babylon.

The “**proud**” in this context represents the Babylonian nation which was headed up by Nebuchadnezzar who exemplified PRIDE (cf. Dan. 4:37).

The word translated here as “**proud**” (Heb. *apal*) has the basic meaning of “puffed up” or “swollen”. The Babylonian people were like a bloated toad all full of themselves hopping along towards judgment – they just didn’t know it.

In Habakkuk 1 in figurative terms the proud Babylonians are presented as worshipping their own military power.

Habakkuk 1:11 (ESV)

11 Then they sweep by like the wind and go on, guilty men, **whose own might is their god!**”

Habakkuk 1:16 (ESV)

16 Therefore he **sacrifices to his net and makes offerings to his dragnet**; [***Figurative for his own military power***] for by them he lives in luxury, and his food is rich.

The Babylonians were full of themselves. In effect, they worshipped self and the power of self.

God says, “**his soul is not upright in him**”. This pride is a soul problem. The word “**upright**” (Heb. *yasar*) denotes what is straight. His soul is not

aligned right with God. It requires the humbling of repentance to properly align the soul with God. This is the stuff of saving faith.

In contrast to the proud are the just (or the righteous) who live by faith. This is the ultimate issue. There are the proud who are lost and the saved who are humbled people of faith. Faith by its very nature has been humbled as seen in this contextual emphasis.

This verse speaks to the very nature of true faith. And this is the great issue before God. Whether we understand what is happening or not, before God the great issue in life is the FAITH issue.

The proud are self-sufficient and don't think they need God. People of faith rely upon God even when they can't understand the "whys" of life. They know the character of God and rest upon it.

What does it mean when it says, "**the just shall live by his faith**"? Is this saying that we have life by faith or that if we have true faith we will live accordingly? In short, I would argue that the answer is "yes".

But this is a significant theological question. ***Easy Believism*** says it means that you have life by faith, but not necessarily that you will live it out. For example, Zane Hodges wrote: "*There is nothing to support the view that perseverance in the faith is an inevitable outcome of true salvation.*" Zane went so far as to say one can become an "*unbelieving believer*".

I strongly reject that as false teaching. This verse here in Hab. 2:4b is the KEY verse quoted in the New Testament that develops the theme of "***Justification by Faith***". It is quoted three times in three KEY doctrinal NT books as seen in Rom. 1:17; Gal. 3:11; and Heb. 10:38.

"It may be best to enrich our idea of the NT meaning of "faith" from the OT. ... Indeed, if many modern evangelical preachers would give to the word "faith" the meaning which the Hebrew word bears, there would be less superficiality in the profession and practice of Christianity." – ***Wycliffe Bible Commentary***

That makes perfect sense since Paul and the writer of Hebrews quoted from this foundational text in Hab. 2:4b to establish their premise of justification by faith. It makes sense that the principle regarding the nature of justifying faith is being built upon. Further revelation builds upon already existing revelation.

The word translated as “**faith**” (Heb. *emunah*) in Hab. 2:4b could just as well be translated as “**faithfulness**” (cf. 2 Kg. 12:15; Jer. 5:1).

“The word translated *faith* in this passage is *emuna*, which means *firmness, faithfulness, fidelity*. ... The word translated *faith* denotes *faithfulness*. Justifying faith will manifest itself in faithful living before the Lord.” – **David Levi**

“Faithfulness and faith are related. One who trusts in the Lord is one who relies on Him and is faithful to Him.” – **The Bible Knowledge Commentary**

“Thus, these ideas are more similar than they are different. One who has faith in God will also live in faithfulness to Him. Likely, the author intended both ideas in this verse.” – **The Moody Bible Commentary**

Consider the NT usage as Paul and the writer of Hebrews both quote from Habakkuk 2:4.

Romans 1:16–17 (NKJV)

16 For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes, for the Jew first and also for the Greek.

17 For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith; as it is written, “**The just shall live by faith.**”

Here in Romans Paul emphasizes that the believer’s salvation is acquired by faith, but at the same time shows it is then lived out in faith. The righteousness acquired in saving faith is revealed from faith to faith as the just live by faith.

Thus, Paul here combines faith with the fruit of faithfulness.

Galatians 3:10–11 (NKJV)

10 For as many as are of the works of the law are under the curse; for it is written, “Cursed is everyone who does not continue in all things which are written in the book of the law, to do them.”

11 But that no one is justified by the law in the sight of God is evident, for “**the just shall live by faith.**”

Here in Galatians Paul shows that salvation is not achieved by keeping the works of the law but rather is acquired simply on the basis of genuine faith alone. Here his emphasis is that we have a righteous standing before God on the basis of faith alone. Thus, we live by faith alone!

Hebrews 10:38–39 (NKJV)

38 Now the just shall live by faith; But if anyone draws back, My soul has no pleasure in him.”

39 But we are not of those who draw back to perdition, but of those who believe to the saving of the soul.

Clearly, Hebrews uses the quote from Hab. 2:4 to show that a true saving faith perseveres – it continues on. He shows that those justified by faith will live by faith as an ongoing lifestyle pattern.

The context of the quote in Hebrews 10 then segues into the Hall of Faith chapter of Hebrews 11 where many examples of what saving faith looks like are brought out. In each case the emphasis is on faith that demonstrates itself in the life.

When you put this combination all together it becomes clear that we have life by faith but also that those who have life by faith then also live by faith. They go together. You can't have one without the other.

This phrase, “**Justification by faith**” became the watchword of the Protestant Reformation. And fittingly, the Reformers emphasized that **we are saved by faith alone, but the faith that saves does not remain alone**. This is the right balance and nuance of “the just shall live by faith” as seen in Habakkuk 2:4.

If the prophet Habakkuk was expecting an answer that satisfied his intellectual qualms that was not forthcoming. Instead, God emphasized that the real important thing is FAITH in Him.

“God does not have to explain Himself to humans. We must let God be God and trust in His goodness even when we find His ways difficult to understand.” – **Holman Christian Standard Bible**

This is a lesson on faith. We may have tough questions that we can't figure out and indeed some things may even seem contradictory. We must humble ourselves and realize that we see only a small part of the BIG PICTURE. God sees everything. And if we truly saw everything, we would see that God is totally consistent.

So, what we are called to do is trust in the character of our God even if we can't figure it out. The nature of faith humbles self before God and continues to faithfully trust Him even in spite of things that don't make sense.

It's not up to us to figure everything out – but rather to live by faith. The faith that justifies continues on even in the hard times when things don't make sense to us.

We have “life” by faith and then we “live” accordingly. Both truths are tethered to the sense of Habakkuk 2:4 and both are reflected in how the NT quotes this reference. The just have life by faith and then they live by faith. BOTH ARE TRUE! This is THE RIGHT KIND OF FAITH! This defines the very nature of a true saving faith!