

What do you do God promises judgment and destruction against the wicked, yet you realize you are at risk of being judged in the destruction as well? Habakkuk has asked God how long he will be deaf to his cries regarding the violence and corruption among God's people in Judah. But God has answered that Habakkuk is the one who needs to see the work God is doing. God is raising up the Chaldeans (i.e., the Babylonians), a bitter, hasty, dreaded, and fearsome nation, to bring judgment and destruction upon faithless Judah. This completely shocks Habakkuk. Will God allow the Chaldeans to mercilessly kill nations forever? If God can idly watch the wicked swallow up those more righteous than they, God is not who he thought he was.

I hope our study so far has caused you to want to cry out with him. This book should cause us to sit next to Habakkuk asking difficult questions and reworking our misconceptions about who God is. Habakkuk knows he has posed difficult complaints about God's judgment, so he says he will wait to see how God will respond. He is ready for answers and to be corrected. God's overall response spans Habakkuk 2:2-20 and is comprised of two sections - a word to Judah and a word to the Chaldeans. Our goal will be to receive the first portion - God's admonition to the currently judged Judah - and consider how we can endure trials, persecution, and even God-sent judgment today. Notice 2:2-3.

Judgment Will Surely Come (2:2-3)

This is not what Habakkuk hoped to hear. God tells Habakkuk to write the vision on tablets. The ten commandments were also written on tablets. This means the message is permanent. It is like when we say "write it in stone." God even tells Habakkuk to ensure that it is written plainly so that someone who is running can read it. It is like a billboard. God wants nobody to miss this message. The reason God wants the vision to be written clearly on tablets is seen in verse three. Habakkuk responded doubting God would really raise the Chaldeans against them, but God says the vision needs to be written clearly on tablets because his decision has been made. Judgment will surely come.

It is interesting that God, after he has already promised judgment, begins by warning Habakkuk to be sure he and everyone knows it is coming. Jesus did the same thing in Matthew 24-25 with the destruction of Jerusalem. Paul and Peter speak similarly in 1st Thessalonians 5 and 2nd Peter 3 when writing about final judgment. Do not fall asleep. Scoffers will say judgment is delaying, but they are wrong. God does not only warn of judgment. God warns, then says, "I'm serious about that." Why?

Notice the third line of verse 3. "*If it seems slow, wait for it...*" God reminds us he is serious because he knows that even after he promises judgment there will be times when it seems judgment will not come. God knows this because it is a typical human response to think future punishment can be avoided. Children do this when parents promise punishment when they get home. The immediate thought is, "Maybe they will forget." "Maybe if I am really nice I won't be punished." "We have been home for 10 minutes and nothing has happened. Maybe they forgot!" We are the same way with respect to God. Time passes and we begin to think, "God would not actually judge the world." "I've been doing some good things, God won't judge me now." God knows this, so before he gives any other admonition regarding judgment he makes the message clear, "I am not kidding about this."

We should first learn that if God did not want Judah to doubt judgment, we certainly must not doubt God's judgment of the whole world. It continues to shock me how many say God may not condemn anybody. "Maybe God will save everyone." "It has been 2,000 years and you still think he is coming?" Peter warned of this in **2 Peter 3:4-7**. "⁴ *They will say, 'Where is the promise of his coming?*

For ever since the fathers fell asleep, all things are continuing as they were from the beginning of creation.’⁵ For they deliberately overlook this fact, that the heavens existed long ago, and the earth was formed out of water and through water by the word of God,⁶ and that by means of these the world that then existed was deluged with water and perished.⁷ But by the same word the heavens and earth that now exist are stored up for fire, being kept until the day of judgment and destruction of the ungodly.” God always fulfills his word. God still flooded the world when only 8 believed. We need to spread the message that YHWH is faithful to his word. God cannot lie. He will punish.

Second, the fact that God warns of doubting his judgment should reveal God’s heart to us. God’s double-warning is gracious. God does not have to warn us to not be deceived into doubting judgment! God is showing us how much he loves us. Even if judgment is certain, he wants us to repent and be ready. He does not want us to be caught unaware. **Ezekiel 33:11**, “... *I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live...*” God takes no pleasure in destroying the wicked, but he will do it. Let us not be deceived. Judgment will come.

The Righteous Live By Faith (2:4-5)

This certainty of judgment is what makes 2:4-5 so shocking and beautiful. Habakkuk can be sure the Chaldeans are coming, not just because God promises it, but also because of the arrogance and greed of the Chaldeans. The Chaldeans arrogantly believe they can secure their own success, so they will march on to overtake Judah. But God contrasts the arrogance of the Chaldeans with a one-liner in verse 4 that must not be overlooked. “... *but the righteous shall live by his faith.*”

But what does God mean by this? The key question is God’s use of the word “live.” Does God mean that in judgment those who are righteous will walk by faith or does he mean those who are righteous will actually survive by their faith? It is true that the righteous walk by faith, but I will argue why I believe God is telling Habakkuk that those who are righteous will survive judgment by their faith. Let’s consider two reasons for this interpretation (see the end for a third^a and fourth^b reason).

A first clue that God is promising that the righteous will survive by faith is the context. In 1:13 Habakkuk charged God with idly watching the wicked swallow up those who are more righteous. God’s response is that judgment is surely coming, but Habakkuk can be assured that those who are truly righteous will survive by their faith. God will not idly watch them die. Habakkuk wants to know why God will allow the wicked to swallow up the righteous - God’s response is somewhat irrelevant if he is affirming that he and others are truly righteous if they walk by faith.

A second clue that God is promising that the righteous will survive by faith is God’s teaching elsewhere the righteous would actually survive the Chaldean attack. In Ezekiel God is speaking to the people of Judah who are experiencing the punishment of God via the Chaldeans. The people are concerned that they have no hope and are dead in their sins. **Ezekiel 33:14-16**, “¹⁴ *Again, though I say to the wicked, ‘You shall surely die,’ yet if he turns from his sin and does what is just and right, ¹⁵ if the wicked restores the pledge, gives back what he has taken by robbery, and walks in the statutes of life, not doing injustice, he shall surely live; he shall not die. ¹⁶ None of the sins that he has committed shall be remembered against him. He has done what is just and right; he shall surely live.*”

Judah was concerned that they had no hope in God’s judgment via the Chaldeans. However, the comfort in Ezekiel and Habakkuk are the same. Judgment is inevitable, but if you turn to live righteously with faith in God, you will live! This is contrasted with the first portion of verse 4. I like the NET Bible. **Habakkuk 2:4**, “*Look, the one whose desires are not upright will faint from exhaustion,*

but the person of integrity will live because of his faithfulness.” The message to Judah is clear. The appointed day for Judah’s reproof is near. If your heart is not right or if you think you can save yourself, you will perish. But those who are righteous will put their faith in me and they will last this.

Consider why faith would be so key and so difficult. A ruthless, unrighteous nation was coming to overtake the city. Hunger and thirst would be crippling. Friends would be slaughtered. To say the situation would be bleak would be an understatement. But those who were truly righteous would look at this situation with a unique perspective. Though we tremble as the thundering army draws nearer and though we starve without food - we will follow the law of our God, rejoice in the Lord, and trust him to preserve us.

Consider how Hebrews uses Habakkuk 2:4 to encourage persecuted Christians (see also Romans 1:17^c and Galatians 3:11^d). **Hebrews 10:32–39**, *“³² But recall the former days when, after you were enlightened, you endured a hard struggle with sufferings, ³³ sometimes being publicly exposed to reproach and affliction, and sometimes being partners with those so treated. ³⁴ For you had compassion on those in prison, and you joyfully accepted the plundering of your property, since you knew that you yourselves had a better possession and an abiding one. ³⁵ Therefore do not throw away your confidence, which has a great reward. ³⁶ For you have need of endurance, so that when you have done the will of God you may receive what is promised. ³⁷ For, ‘Yet a little while, and the coming one will come and will not delay; ³⁸ but my righteous one shall live by faith, and if he shrinks back, my soul has no pleasure in him.’ ³⁹ But we are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who have faith and preserve their souls.”*

Reproach, danger, and loss for the cause of Christ had returned. These Christians needed to not shrink back but have faith as they did before. But notice the nature of the faith needed here. Their faith was not that God would preserve physical life. They endured this treatment and the loss of all things because they had full confidence in God’s promise of an abiding possession and a great reward. The Hebrew writer takes it further in chapter 11 when he gives the example of those who willingly lost possessions and their physical lives because of faith. They had conviction of things not seen as they looked forward to the city built by God (cf. Hebrews 11:1, 10).

What does this mean? Notice the interpretation of Habakkuk 2:4 in verse 39. When the righteous live by faith this means they are willing to trust God’s promise to preserve their souls while they lose any physical thing, including life itself. The promise to us is different and greater than it was for Habakkuk. We will cry out for physical life to be spared, but in the midst of dark, bleak days when trials make us cry and make us sick to our stomachs, our faith must most importantly be in what we cannot see: the preservation of our souls in the city of God. Let’s consider three conclusions to help us be the righteous who find life by our faith.

Conclusion

1. Trust God’s Promise of Judgment. There is no reason to put faith in God if all are not condemned and if the future of the world is not destruction by fire. Let us not fall asleep and live carelessly. We must not doubt God’s judgment is coming but instead recognize and teach that his wrath on ungodliness will be revealed. Believing this destruction is the beginning of faith.

2. Trust God’s Promise of an Abiding Possession. But this does not mean we simply believe God’s promise of an abiding possession. This trust means we will stop putting our hopes in having the good life, the American dream, and a place to call home in this world. This trust means we will actively hope in our eternal home. I grow weary of the temptation to make sure I have a good life

here. Christians, if we look through the eyes of Habakkuk, we will see all is already gone. We must let go of physical hopes because we will be separated from all physical things. Whether trials, persecution, judgment from God, or death separates us from comfort, it will happen. In that day we want to already be clinging to our abiding possession. Even when our physical bodies decay we will be able to smile as we cling God's promise and to our assurance of our souls' preservation.

3. Trust God When We Do Not Understand. I was recently troubled how many conversations about prayer recently have been defaulting to us being okay with not always understanding God. I no longer care. Faith means we hope so intently in God's promise of an abiding possession that it does not matter when we do not understand. Consider, God is giving us eternal life with him simply because we trust him! Let us be satisfied with this. This hope can take us through any lack of understanding. We will still cry out to God "How long?" when we do not understand. But in that day we will also declare that no matter what happens, *"I will rejoice in the LORD; I will take joy in the God of my salvation"* (Habakkuk 3:18). Let's trust God's promise of judgment so we can let go of life here and hope in our eternal home with the Father. Then we can accept not understanding God. This is faith and this faith is how the righteous live.

^a **Reason #3.** The NET Bible argues for a translation of the first line of verse four which makes more sense of the poetry. **Habakkuk 2:4**, *"Look, the one whose desires are not upright will faint from exhaustion, but the person of integrity will live because of his faithfulness."* The NET argues the word commonly translated "puffed up" (i.e., "proud") could be translated as "faint" (i.e., from exhaustion). Pride is a common theme in the book of Habakkuk with respect to the Chaldeans, but not with respect to Judah. If fainting is in view, this would follow the common translations for Isaiah 51:20, Amos 8:13, and Jonah 4:8. If the NET Bible is correct in its translation, the fainting of those who are not upright contrasts the righteous who survive by their faith. This would certainly align with other biblical teachings regarding the survival and renewal of those who put trust in the Lord instead of growing faint in unrighteousness (cf. Isaiah 40:30-31, etc.).

^b **Reason #4.** It is possible that the Hebrew word translated as live, *hayah*, is never used to describe the nature of a subject's living, but instead to refer to the fact of a subject's being alive. From my studies, *hayah* is used very frequently in the prophets to refer to survival and the preservation of life, but never to refer to the quality of someone's day to day life. It is possible this word cannot even be used to refer to describe the nature of someone's living. Not being a Hebrew scholar, I cannot make a definitive argument here.

^c **Romans 1:17.** The message of Romans 1-5 must be considered to understand the usage of Habakkuk 1:4 here. All are under sin and deserve condemnation, but the gospel reveals God's righteousness to be the God of both Jews and Gentiles. This is because the gospel reveals how it is that *"the righteous shall live by faith."* The gospel reveals that all can survive by faith because of Christ. Walking in the footsteps of faith like Abraham describes real faith (Romans 4:12ff), but it is more contextually appropriate to interpret "live by faith" as the righteous surviving the wrath of God against ungodliness (Romans 1:18) by their faith. This also is more contextually appropriate because the progression of faith leading to righteousness which leads to life is common in Romans. After Paul argues for the righteousness and life that comes by faith through the righteous action of Christ, Paul contrasts this with the sinfulness and death that came through the sinful action of Adam in Romans 5:17-21. Because of Jesus' faithfulness to be a sacrifice of atonement (Romans 3:21-26) faith in Christ without unbelief leads to righteousness (Romans 4:20-25), and righteousness leads to eternal life. As the marginal ESV reading for Romans 1:17 says, *"The one who by faith is righteous shall live."*

^d **Galatians 3:11.** The message of Galatians must be considered to understand the usage of Habakkuk 2:4 here. The message of Galatians 3 must especially be understood. Everyone who relies on the works of the Law of Moses are cursed because they do not abide by all things written in the Law. Notice the parallel and contrast in Galatians 3:11-12. *"The righteous shall live by faith,"* and *"The law is not of faith, rather, 'The one who does them shall live by them.'"* Paul usage of the word "live" is parallel in both verses and it makes more sense for him to be speaking of life and survival, not walking by faith. It would be redundant for Paul to say of the Law, "If you do them, you walk by them." Furthermore, the discussion in Galatians is regarding the curse and subsequent death that comes by relying on the Law of Moses. Paul makes the answer clear. As the marginal ESV reading for Galatians 3:11 says, *"The one who by faith is righteous will live."*