
What It Means to Live By One's Faith

By David Wilkerson

February 9, 2009 “Behold, his soul which is lifted up is not upright in him: *but the just shall live by his faith*” (Habakkuk 2:4, my italics). The phrase I emphasize here is familiar to Christians all over the world. For centuries “living by faith” has motivated the daily decisions of believers in every generation.

Habakkuk’s prophecy here is the first mention of the concept of living by faith. Later, in the New Testament, the apostle Paul invokes the phrase three times. And today Habakkuk 2:4 remains one of the most preached texts in all of Scripture. It has formed the basis of many church doctrines. To “live by faith” speaks of how we are justified and sanctified, how we find peace and joy, how we obtain victory over sin. These are all wonderful applications of Habakkuk’s powerful truth.

Yet I want to focus on the historical context of this passage. When Habakkuk spoke of “living by faith,” it was to help Israel know how to face a coming crisis. Here was an eternal truth meant to help the people navigate a calamity that was about to befall them. And it was delivered during a time very similar to our present day.

Habakkuk had received a dreadful burden from the Lord about a destructive calamity coming upon Israel. At the time, God’s laws were being ignored and despised. Judges ruled in favor of the wicked. The wealthy used God’s law to rob the poor and build up fortunes through fraudulent practices. Covetousness became a public obsession.

Habakkuk was grieved deeply by everything God showed him. Scripture calls this “the burden which Habakkuk the prophet did see” (1:1). Worldliness had infiltrated the church. Morality had collapsed in the surrounding nations. As Habakkuk beheld all this, he cried, “Lord, why all this iniquity? Why do the wicked triumph over the righteous?”

“Why dost thou shew me iniquity, and cause me to behold grievance? For spoiling and violence are before me: and there are that raise up strife and contention. Therefore the law is slacked, and judgment doth never go forth: for the wicked doth compass about the righteous; therefore wrong judgment proceedeth” (Habakkuk 1:3–4).

Habakkuk asked the Lord how long he would allow such perverseness to continue: “Thou art of purer eyes than to behold evil, and canst not look on iniquity: wherefore lookest thou upon them that deal treacherously, and holdest thy tongue when the wicked devoureth the man that is more righteous than he?” (1:13). “How long shall I cry, and thou wilt not hear? Even cry out unto thee of violence, and thou wilt not save?” (1:2).

Just when the prophet became overwhelmed by his burden, God gave him an incredible vision. “Behold ye among the heathen, and regard, and wonder marvelously: for I will work a work in your days, which ye will not believe, though it be told you” (Habakkuk 1:5). The Lord told Habakkuk, “I’m going to raise up a rod of correction to bring judgment on the land. And it will all be my doing. If I told you how swiftly it will come and how terrible it will be, you would not believe it.”

Here is the word Habakkuk received about God’s rod of correction: “The Chaldeans are coming! They’re going to march through the breadth of the land devouring all in their path” (see 1:6).

This terrible vision shook Habakkuk to his core. He tells us, “When I heard, my belly trembled; my lips

quivered at the voice: rottenness entered into my bones, and I trembled in myself, that I might rest in the day of trouble: when he cometh up unto the people, he will invade them with his troops" (3:16).

Now Habakkuk reflected on his calling as a prophet. He knew the godly remnant in Israel would come to him asking, "How can we get through these terrible things to come? If our nation and those around us are under God's chastening, what will we do? How will we live? And what does the Lord expect of us?"

I hear the same questions being asked by God's people right now, as our world faces increasing calamity. And the upheaval we're seeing is most certainly the work of God. Once again he has risen up to deal with covetousness and Sodom-like perversity. He also has raised his rod against the greedy robbing of widows and defrauding of the poor.

How did Habakkuk respond? He hid himself away with the Lord in prayer. He set his heart to wait on God for a word to his people. Here is how the prophet began his prayer: "I will stand on my guard post, and station myself on the rampart: I will keep watch to see what he will speak to me, how I may reply *when I am reproved*" (2:1, my italics). Notice Habakkuk began by opening his heart to reproof. He prayed, "Lord, let your work begin by first examining me."

We know Habakkuk had already questioned God's slowness to answer his prayers: "How long shall I cry, and thou wilt not hear?" (1:2). I wonder if Habakkuk had to deal with a bit of "Jonah syndrome" in himself. He knew he dare not gloat, saying, "I told you so," as God brought down the proud.

The Lord did give Habakkuk a word. And it changed the prophet's prayer from, "Why have you withheld judgment?" to, "Lord, as you judge, remember your mercy." "I have heard thy speech, and was afraid: O Lord, revive thy work in the midst of the years ...in wrath remember mercy" (3:2).

Habakkuk was instructed to write down the vision. The incredible word Habakkuk received was meant not only for his day but for every generation, down to our present time: "At the end it shall speak" (Habakkuk 2:3). God made it clear to Habakkuk this word wasn't for the proud or those who turn to flesh trusting in the promises of men.

Right now, many in God's house are placing their hope in government bailouts — trillions intended to save the economy, rescue the financial system, provide millions of jobs. They're hoping the brightest leaders in our land will solve our problems and get us back to prosperity. Oh, how arrogant to think money can correct man's ways! How proud to believe our currency can withstand God's righteous ways.

"By faith" is the only way God's people are ever able to face a calamity or affliction. It was the only way in Habakkuk's day, it was the only way in every Old Testament generation, and it was the only way in New Testament times. Now in our present calamity the same foundational truth stands: "The just shall live by his faith."

Yet, what does this mean, to live by one's faith? God's Word shows us it means more than simply believing. To live by one's faith is *to see God's hand and his holiness in all calamities and shaking*: "The Lord is known by the judgment which he executeth" (Psalm 9:16).

"When thy hand is lifted up, (the wicked) will not see" (Isaiah 26:11). The world doesn't see God lifting his hand to bring chastening. But those who live by faith readily acknowledge, "What we are seeing is

God's hand at work. This is his holiness being established. He is keeping his Word."

If we are to live by faith, we must have a reverential fear of God's power. And it is impossible not to see his awesome might at work in the world today. Think of it: Scripture says, "The rich man's wealth is his strong city" (Proverbs 18:11). Yet in just two weeks' time God shook the whole earth by shutting down its once mighty financial credit system.

What else but the power of God could cause men to lose confidence in their amassed fortunes by causing trillions to dissolve in a matter of weeks? His judgment is clearly at work. Yet what mercy he also shows by exposing the fraud taking place in worldwide financial institutions. What righteousness he establishes by cutting off the deceptions of mortgage companies who have defrauded the poor.

We know God does not delight in chastening. Scripture says it gives him no pleasure. Yet his Word says all gold and silver will be devoured by moles (see Isaiah 2:20). It will happen "for fear of the Lord, and for the glory of his majesty, when he ariseth to shake terribly the earth" (2:19). It is all meant to bring the awesome fear of God to all nations.

These two sides of God's nature — righteous judgment and merciful love — require we live by faith. The same God who wields his mighty power to "shake all things terribly" is the same loving Father who acts as our shield and keeper. Consider: on one hand Isaiah tells us, "[Sinners] declare their sin as Sodom, they hide it not. Woe unto their soul! For they have rewarded evil unto themselves" (3:9). Yet the very next verse tells us, "Say ye to the righteous, that it shall be well with him: for they shall eat the fruit of their doings" (3:10). Despite all the terrible shaking, those who live by faith will be kept safe and well.

Right now, I believe the church needs a refresher course on God's majesty and power, such as Job was given. The Lord said to Job, in essence, "What is all this dark, hopeless talk I hear from you? Stand up and listen to me:

"I laid the foundation of the earth. I made the light and the darkness. I created the rain, snow, ice and wind. I gave wings to birds and I feed the beasts of the field. I control all of nature. Tell me, Job, who can thunder with a voice like mine? Who can look into every man's heart and see its condition? Who is able to identify the arrogant, locate them and bring them low?"

Beloved, the same God who knows the name and address of every proud person also knows your name, your address, your condition. And he will keep you in his heart all of your days, through every calamity. To accept this is to live by faith.

If I live by faith, I will not fear for the future of God's church in calamitous times. "Upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it" (Matthew 16:18). This pledge from Jesus has emboldened the faith of generations. And it is meant to sustain us now in our present global calamity.

We also have this warning: "In the latter times some shall depart from the faith" (1 Timothy 4:1). In perilous times such as ours, leaders will arise "having a form of godliness, but denying the power thereof" (2 Timothy 3:5). Under the influence of these false leaders, the love of many believers will grow cold or lukewarm. Others will lose their faith altogether and fall away from Christ.

Yet, according to Joel, at the very same time God is going to pour out his Spirit on all flesh (see Joel

2:28–29). The Psalmist writes, “Thou sendest forth thy Spirit...and thou renewest the face of the earth” (Psalm 104:30). God’s Spirit has never been depleted. He can pour out as he pleases. And whenever this happens, “Ten men shall take hold... of the skirt of him that is [a believer], saying, We will go with you: for we have heard that God is with you” (Zechariah 8:23).

Are you getting the picture? In the midst of calamitous times there will be a great harvest. The unsaved are going to turn to believers crying, “God is clearly with you. Tell me, how can I know this peace?”

If I am to live by my faith, I must do as Noah did and build an ark to ride out the storm. “By faith Noah...moved with fear, prepared an ark to the saving of his house” (Hebrews 11:7). The ark that Noah built represents Jesus Christ. There is no other safe place on earth. When Isaiah prophesied of a king coming to reign in righteousness, he was clearly describing Christ: “A man shall be as a hiding place from the wind, and a covert from the tempest; as rivers of water in a dry place, as the shadow of a great rock in a weary land” (Isaiah 32:2).

All over the world people are desperately searching for a safe place to hide their money. Multitudes are buying guns to protect their families for what they believe will be a dark time of “every man for himself.” These include Bible-believing Christians.

Yet there is no place of guaranteed safety on earth, except to abide in Jesus. I don’t state this as some empty theology that Christians often say thoughtlessly. For over two thousand years, those who have trusted in Jesus for safety have proven God’s Word faithful. “The name of the Lord is a strong tower: the righteous run into it, and is safe” (Proverbs 18:10).

We also know that through the centuries those who have trusted in Jesus have suffered much. Since the time of the cross they have been martyred, some viciously. New Testament believers lost their houses and lands and lived in caves. Since then multitudes have lost jobs and homes in times of calamity. Many others have died in wars and from natural disasters.

Beloved, no true preacher of God’s Word will ever promise that you won’t suffer, that you won’t lose property, that your lifestyle will be protected. But there is a great cloud of witnesses in heaven who would say to all of us who love Jesus: “It is true that in Christ we were safe — *eternally safe*. His grace was sufficient for every crisis. Yes, there were seasons of pain, suffering and hard times. But no trial can ever take you out of Christ, the Ark of safety.”

I leave you with this wonderful promise from 1 Peter 1:3–9:

“According to his abundant mercy (he) hath begotten us again unto a lively hope by the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to an inheritance incorruptible, and undefiled, and that fadeth not away, reserved in heaven for you, who are kept by the power of God through faith unto salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.

“Wherein ye greatly rejoice, though now for a season, if need be, ye are in heaviness through manifold temptations: that the trial of your faith being much more precious than of gold that perisheth, though it be tried with fire, might be found unto praise and honour and glory at the appearing of Jesus Christ: whom having not seen, ye love; in whom, though now ye see him not, yet believing, ye rejoice with joy unspeakable and full of glory; receiving the end of your faith, even the salvation of your souls.”