

**FAITH AND RIGHTEOUSNESS IN TWO
KEY OLD TESTAMENT TEXTS:
GENESIS 15:6 AND HABAKKUK 2:4**

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The scholars of the Reformation rightly understood both the nature and the importance of the doctrine of justification by grace through faith. Martin Luther found this truth life-changing, and the world was never the same after his personal discovery. John Calvin called it the “hinge of the Reformation,” implying that all biblical doctrine grows out of justification by grace, and that the life and direction of the church depend upon a proper understanding of this doctrine. Since the biblical doctrine of justification by grace is so critical, we may rightly assume that it finds a central place in the message of Scripture—not just through the New Testament, but also in the Old Testament. That is, in fact, the truth of the matter.

The early indication of God’s act of justifying the guilty is found in his covering a couple of dying sinners with animal skins. God takes the initiative, he covers their shameful, and he sets the pattern of substitutionary sacrifice for how sinners may stand before him. A legal imputation is implicit in the sacrifice.

Justification deals with the satisfaction of God’s justice in the redemption of fallen man. It has a negative and positive aspect: to approach God on his terms, a sinner’s sinfulness must be covered, plus his less than perfect life must at once be presentably perfect. These two divine conditions are not attainable through mortal effort, but God, who “does the impossible,” grants salvation in justification that comes through faith.

Genesis 15:6

The earliest statement of this doctrine is in *Genesis 15:6*. Abraham already has been called out of paganism to follow God in the land of promise. He believes in the living God,¹ but after the recent crisis expedition to rescue Lot and after having received divine promises of the land and progeny that now seem distant to him, he wonders if his head servant, Eliezer, will inherit his divine destiny.

God graciously reaffirms his promise to make a great nation of Abraham’s own family,² a family he had not been able to start yet, despite the fact that he already was an octogenarian! Not staggered by God’s renewed promises that must have seemed incredibly fantastic, Abraham laid aside his own ideas to rest in God’s reassurances. “*He believed in the LORD, and he accounted it to him for righteousness*” (Gen 15:6).

This sublime statement is a watershed message of sacred revelation. It reveals that God is interested in personal righteousness, and it makes plain that God’s kind of righteousness comes by trusting the Almighty and believing his promises.

The Hebrew word for “believe” in this text is *he’amin*. We are much more familiar with its noun form, *amen*. The word carries the idea of firmness and faithfulness. As an “amen” to prayer, we are confirming the prayer with “I believe it... may it be established.” The verb form in Gen 15:6 generally means throughout the Bible “to believe, to believe in or trust.”³ Its variant forms mean “to verify,⁴ to make firm, to establish.”

The verb form for “to believe” is used throughout sacred history and is found noticeably in the establishment of the Mosaic covenant and throughout the Psalms and gospel portions of Isaiah. The verb for “believe” is used one time in the book of Habakkuk. Its noun form, however, comes at a pivotal point in this book and in biblical theology.

Habakkuk 2:4

The noun is found in Hab 2:4: “Behold the proud, his soul is not upright in him; but the just shall live by his **faith**.” In this context, “the proud” one is the uncouth Babylonian invader who is about to besiege and pillage Judah with a lusty appetite that is as insatiable as hell itself!⁵ The prophet of tender conscience, who admits that his own nation is sinful,⁶ queries why God will send the worst of peoples to punish God’s wayward people.⁷ The Babylonians, after all, are the historic archetype of everything that is anti-Christian! God’s answer is that the wicked conquerors too will be punished according to their deserts.

Who, then, can stand if the just are persecuted one year by the unjust, and the next year are vanquished by those more unjust? Habakkuk 2:4 gives the simple, though somewhat cryptic answer: “*the just shall live by his faith*.” Keep in mind that the familiar word for the “just” is the same Hebrew word as the persecuted “righteous” of chapter 1:4, 13.

Another important bridge to the first chapter of Habakkuk is a reference to “believing” God who says: “Look among the nations and watch—be utterly astounded! For I will work a work in your days which you would not believe, though it were told you” (1:5). God expects to be believed. When people do respond in faith to his revelation instead of trusting their own judgment, God counts that as true righteousness. Therefore, God answers Habakkuk that there is a future for the righteous: the just *shall* live, and he will do so by his believing God who secures his people’s future through life and death.

There is a subtly different interpretation of Hab 2:4 that understands the word “faith” as “faithfulness.” While the idea of faithfulness must be considered in the light of this passage’s use in Heb 10,⁸ the argument of Habakkuk and the more immediate context indicate that righteousness in God’s eyes comes by believing God, rather than by being faithful to God or to His law. Here are the contextual considerations from the book of Habakkuk:

1. The “just” of 2:4 is set in contrast to the “proud” who worships power as his god (1:11). The “proud” one in Habakkuk is depicted not so much as “faithless” as he is arrogant, unbelieving, and with a rival god.

2. Habakkuk himself is one of the “just.” In response to the prophet’s concerns over theodicy, God introduces the principle of justification with the promise of a coming vision (2:2-3). The prophet must be patient to wait for the realization of the vision. While many commentators are agnostic in attempts to identify the vision, some have made a reasonable connection to the vision of chapter 3.⁹ There God is viewed as on the march, coming from Sinai again, but this time in judgment at the end of the age. The prophet and the rest of the righteous must believe that God will keep his word and that he will come in judgment against the wicked and in ultimate deliverance of the just. This believing will mean their life as they trust only the living God for justice.
3. Finally, there is God’s warning to Habakkuk and his audience that they may not believe what he is about to do. By bringing the wicked Babylonians, God’s people will be tempted to give up on God in the face of immediate judgment by the hands of these infidels. Simple trust in God’s ways is what is called for when we are tempted to question God.

While faith does encompass the concept of faithfulness, the emphasis in Hab 2:4 seems to be upon faith that trusts God even through the valley of the shadow of death. This interpretation comports well with God’s unchanging means for justifying sinners. Those who believe God are counted as righteous.

Paul’s Use of Habakkuk 2:4

The Talmud teaches that all “613 precepts” of God given to Moses are summarized in Habakkuk’s key verse.¹⁰ Much like the young Martin Luther, the Talmudic rabbis grasped the importance of the message but missed the heart of it in terms of personal justification.

From the preceding study of Habakkuk there already has been a hint of an implied connection between Hab 2:4 and Gen 15:6, the first clear revelation of justification through faith. Paul, the exponent of Jesus’ teaching on justification, draws the connection very plainly. In fact, his two key texts in Romans for developing the doctrine of justification are Hab 2:4 and Gen 15:6.

The “just shall live by faith” launches Paul’s opening salvo and general theme for his treatise. After placing Jew and Gentile under condemnation for rebellion against God and his law, Paul argues for justification by faith apart from works. In a running exposition of Gen 15:6, he takes no less than a whole chapter of Romans (ch. 4) to prove that righteousness cannot come through the keeping of the law. Observance of the ceremonial law,¹¹ even in the case of Father Abraham, has no merit since Abraham was justified by faith well before his circumcision (4:9-12). And if that is the case, then even uncircumcised Gentiles may be justified by faith, too, so that the covenant promises to Abraham may be fulfilled (4:11, 12; 3:30) and so that God’s purposes may be established by grace (4:16).

The faith that is reckoned as righteousness is defined by Paul as faith in Jesus (Rom 3:22, 26). This is the Pauline message to the Galatians also: “knowing that a man is not justified by

the works of the law but by faith in Jesus Christ, even we have believed in Christ Jesus, that we might be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the law” (Gal 2:16).

Not surprisingly, the citations of both Hab 2:4 and Gen 15:6 are found within close proximity to each other in Gal 3. These references not only buttress the Pauline doctrine of justification—they also qualify and clarify the meaning of the corresponding OT reference. The parallels of each OT citation are the ideas of (1) “the just; righteousness,” and (2) “faith, believed.” The context of Galatians is clear that being just (having righteousness) comes apart from the law. How so? Not through personal faithfulness, but rather through faith in Jesus. Paul will confess that he wants nothing except to gain Christ. That is possible only if he finds a righteousness not his own, “but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which is from God by faith,” apart from the law.¹² Before true faith Paul had no righteousness, no saving faith, nor even life itself. That is the implication of Hab 2:4. After he believed Jesus, Paul could say, “it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God.”¹³

The Use of Habakkuk 2 in Hebrews 10

The Book of Hebrews’ citation of the Habakkuk theme, “the just shall live by faith,” shows the popularity, if not the centrality, of this OT text in the apostolic church. Hebrews 9:38 is the third mention of Hab 2:4 in the NT canon.

While Paul’s purpose in Romans and Galatians is to hammer home the importance of coming to God on his terms through faith (justification), the context of Heb 10 does emphasize the aspect of persevering in the faith till the end. Persevering in Christ and in the New Covenant is the theme of Hebrews.

The Book of Hebrews quotes from the Septuagint Greek OT that diverges in several ways from the Hebrew text,¹⁴ and it cites a lengthier section of Hab 2 than does Paul:

“For you have need of endurance, so that when you have done the will of God you may receive what is promised. For, ‘Yet a little while, and the coming one will come and will not delay; but my righteous one shall live by faith, and if he shrinks back, my soul has no pleasure in him.’ But we are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who have faith and preserve their souls.”¹⁵

The collection of “those who have faith and preserve their souls,” is illustrated immediately in the next chapter of Hebrews. “By faith Abel ... obtained witness that he was righteous” (11:4); Noah “became heir of the righteousness which is according to faith” (11:7); and there were untold others who embraced God’s promises by faith (11:13). When these people of faith died without having received the promises (11:39-40), they were translated “to the general assembly and church of the firstborn who are registered in heaven”; there the just are recognized as “perfect” (“completed”) in righteousness (12:23).

Conclusion

Anyone without saving faith cannot please God. In fact, according to Heb 11:6 it is impossible to please God without faith. God leaves the “puffed up” soul of Hab 2:4 to save himself, and he promises no grace to the timorous soul of Heb 10:38 who “draws back”¹⁶ instead of venturing his life on the assurances of God Almighty.

Pleasing God requires believing God.¹⁷ Believing God means coming to God on his terms. In his eyes it is more than the “right” thing to do. For Abraham and his children by faith, believing God is counted for “righteousness.”

¹ Gen 12:8.

² Gen 12:2; 13:16.

³ Wicked King Sihon did not “trust” Israel’s assurances (Judg 11:20).

⁴ Gen 42:20.

⁵ Hab 2:5.

⁶ Hab 1:2-4.

⁷ Hab 1:13. This verse is the prophet’s second reference to the righteous. The first reference (1:4) is to the helplessness of the righteous in the face of persecution by ruthless Jews. The 1:13 reference casts righteousness in relative terms in contrast to the ultimately wicked Babylonians. The next reference to the righteous will be “the just” of 2:4.

⁸ Heb 10:38. On the other hand, chapters 1 and 4 of Romans, as well as Gal 3, use Hab 2.4 in the sense of “the just shall live by *believing/trusting*” rather than by being faithful.

⁹ F. F. Bruce in *An Exegetical and Expository Commentary of the Minor Prophets* suggests the promised vision of Hab 2:2-3 is the vision of the theophany that Habakkuk receives in chapter 3. This interpretation, contrary to the critics who say chapter 3 is a later addition, argues incidentally for the unity of the Book of Habakkuk.

¹⁰ *Makkot* 23b, “Moses gave Israel 613 commandments, David reduced them to 10, Isaiah to 2, but Habakkuk to 1: the righteous shall live by his faith.”

¹¹ This Scriptural argument seems to have relevance for refuting modern reconstructions of justification that want to define ritual baptism as the beginning of one’s journey in covenant faithfulness so that their covenant initiation is almost vested with salvific value. To the contrary, Abraham was recognized by God for his believing faith rather than for his moral or ceremonial faithfulness. Thus runs the argument of Rom 4:9-12.

¹² Phil 3:8-9.

¹³ Gal 2:20.

¹⁴ There are at least three key differences in Hab 2:3-4 between the LXX and the MT of the OT Scriptures:

1. The LXX understands God’s admonition for patience (2:3) to wait, not just for the realization of the promised vision, but for him who is the focus of the vision. Thus does the LXX and the Book of Hebrews read, “He who is coming will come.” Rabbinic literature also finds a messianic interpretation for Hab 2:3.
2. Notice the addition of the possessive pronoun “my” in Heb 10:38: “My righteous one will live by faith.” While there is no possessive “my” in the Hebrew of Hab 2:4, there is one in the LXX version that reads, “the just out of my faith will live.” F. F. Bruce says that the transposition of the “my” by the author of Hebrews does not change essentially the force of the statement from the LXX.
3. Finally, the LXX of Hab 2:4 does have oblique reference to the “puffed up soul” of the unrighteous Babylonian invader who thinks he can save himself. The LXX translates and the author of Hebrews follows in inverted order: “and if he shrinks back, my soul has no pleasure in him.”

¹⁵ Heb 10:36-39 (ESV).

¹⁶ This Greek word has the idea of striking a sail or of tucking tail in order to run away.

¹⁷ Heb 11:6.