

# "HABAKKUK AND THE VERSE THAT CHANGES EVERYTHING."

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First Christian Reformed Church, Lynden, WA

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Text for Sermon: Habakkuk 1:1-5; 2:2-4, 20; Romans 1:16-17

## Introduction.

In our evening services here at First CRC I am preaching through the 66 books of the Bible one book at a time. In the glorious and divine providence of God we just happen to come to the book of Habakkuk tonight which turns out to have a key connection to the Reformation and so it is fitting for tonight's service. I love when God does cool providential things. Which of course He is doing all the time, and sometimes we notice.

## Habakkuk.

Habakkuk is unique among the prophetic books. Habakkuk contains no direct message from God to God's people.

The prophecy of Habakkuk reads like a prayer journal. It is a Q and A session with God. Habakkuk looks at the problems of his day, the problems of his nation and his people, the struggles of life and he writes his questions, his prayers, his urgent pleadings with God and God's answers. God and he are the only two characters in the book.

Habakkuk doesn't just speak his prophecy, he lives it. This is personal and real for him. Babylon is looming over Jerusalem and Judah, destruction is imminent. Habakkuk cries out in despair over the fate of the righteous.

Habakkuk is our brother, he's one of us. He lives in troubling times and pleads with God for understanding. Secular forces are at work, threatening to undo them. What can the righteous do?

## Habakkuk 2:4

If the verses of the Bible were a mountain range, some would be foothills, some would be mountains reaching several thousand feet, and some would stretch far above the tree line into the rare air, snow covered and glistening in the bright sun full of glory and truth.

Habakkuk 2:4 is one of those tall mountain text that stands out and commands our attention. It makes us stop and look and think long and hard. It challenges preconceived notions and human ways of thinking of things. It's one of those verses that changes everything.

**Habakkuk 2:4b** "...the righteous shall live by his faith."

This is the *second* most quoted OT verse in the NT (only Psalm 110 is quoted more frequently).

The Apostle Paul takes it as his grand theme for the book of Romans. Romans 1:16-17 have a fair claim to be the most important verses in the most important book in the Bible. Why do I make such a bold claim?

"We would not be Reformed Christians today without Romans 1:16-17, these verses changed Martin Luther. Without Luther's transformation, there would have been no John Calvin. And if there had been no John Calvin, then there would have been no Reformation in Holland. And if there had been no Reformation in Holland, there would have been no Dutch Reformed immigrants to the United States. In a way, we can well say that these two verses are our origins. They are the reason why we are Reformed" (Lane Keister).

So Habakkuk can be called the great-grandfather of the Reformation.

One way to see how important a verse is, is to see how it impacts and changes history.

### **Protestant Reformation.**

These six words rocked the spiritual universe in the sixteenth century. This verse was the shot heard around the world and it turned the religious world upside down. From this one seed grew the Protestant Reformation and our Reformed faith.

The beginning of the sixteenth century was one of the darkest times of the Christian faith. The light of the glory of the gospel was nearly smothered out by centuries of works righteousness dust.

In one city in Germany there was student who was earnestly and desperately trying to find God and get right with God. He joined a monastery, he strictly observed the harshest holy orders, he relentlessly prayed, went to confession, read, studied, meditated. He fasted for days, slept without a blanket in the winter.

He was driven by a constant nagging sense of God's great holiness and his own sinfulness. How could a sinner satisfy God, how could a sinner get right with God, what could a sinner possibly do to earn God's favor?

The young monk's name, of course, was Martin Luther. He was captive to his oppressive religion of righteousness by good works, by rituals and prayers and confession and service and sacrifice. He was obsessed with trying to please God but every effort only left him more distant from God and more despondent toward God.

In April of 1515 Luther began teaching the book of Romans at the University in Wittenburg, Germany. As he was working his way through chapter one he got stuck on Romans 1:17 which contains a quote of Habakkuk 2:4.

**Romans 1:16-17** For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. <sup>17</sup> For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, *“The righteous shall live by faith.”*

This verse crushed him. He had been so conditioned by the teaching of the day he thought the verse meant the Gospel showed us how righteous God was and how righteous we had to be.

“Night and day I pondered until I saw the connection between the justice of God and the statement that ‘the just shall live by faith.’ Then I grasped that the justice of God is that righteousness by which *through grace and sheer mercy* God justifies us through faith. Thereupon I felt myself to be reborn and to have gone through open doors into paradise. The whole of Scripture took on a new meaning, and whereas before the ‘justice of God’ had filled me with hate, now it became to me inexpressibly sweet in great love. This passage of Paul became to me a gate to heaven.” (Martin Luther).

God opened Luther's eyes to understand what Paul was saying. Luther understood the Gospel for the first time. The only righteousness that God accepts is His righteousness. Only those who by faith trust in Jesus are able to be righteous with Jesus' righteousness.

When Luther came to understand this, he tells us that it was as if the very gates of heaven itself had opened up to him. He went and reread the whole Bible with this in mind, and everything was different. It changed everything for Luther.

This insight into justification by faith triggered the Protestant Reformation in 1517.

***There are basically only two religions in the world.***

If we stick with our mountain analogy Habakkuk 2:4 is a watershed verses, a continental divide. All of us are on one side or the other and it's a matter of life and death which side you are on.

All the religions of the world can be put into ***two categories***, those where we work our way to heaven and those where heaven is a gift given by the grace of a loving and merciful God. Only Christianity is in the second category, in a class by itself.

The first says, "If you will do such and such, then God will bless you or save you or deliver you or whatever." The only difference between all of those religions is what the such and such is. Bathe in this river, kiss that rock, go to that city, do this work, perform that ritual, or even, if you will just say a prayer and give your heart to Jesus" (John Reisinger).

The second says, "God makes us willing and able to be saved and to put our faith in Him." God does the work of saving us.

This is the continental divide. This is the crossing of the Rubicon. This is line in the sand.

Two kinds of people, people of pride and people of faith. Those who trust in self-righteousness and those who trust in Christ's righteousness. Those whose souls are puffed up and those whose souls are bowed down in faith.

Martin Luther fired the shot that was heard around the world. The biblical/theological truth that he brought to light created so great an outcry that it split the Christian world in half. The central question was how are we justified, by works or by faith?

### **For in the Gospel the righteousness of God is revealed**

In the Gospel we see our problem, the holy wrath of God is against all unrighteousness and sin. How can our wickedness and God's holiness be reconciled? How can we be made right with God when our unrighteousness is what separates us from God?

In the prophecy of Habakkuk reveals the solution. The incompatibility of our sin and God's holiness will ultimately be dealt with in Christ. Habakkuk is the great-grandfather of the Reformation.

**II Corinthians 5:21** For our sake [God] made [Christ] to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

It is God's righteousness that rescues us from our unrighteousness, by giving us the righteousness we don't have.

The righteousness of God does what all human righteousness can't do, what human righteousness is powerless to do. In fact worse, human righteousness makes us hostile to God, an enemy opposed to God. When we stand before the righteous Judge in the judgment, if we bring with us our human self-righteousness before the righteous Judge of the universe, God will simply ask, "Why did you reject my Son, why did you not believe in the Gospel I offered you for your eternal salvation?"

You remember Paul thought he was the most righteous man alive, and you know what, he may have come as close as anyone ever did. What conclusion did Paul come to?

**Philippians 3:8-9** I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith.

Do you know who has the most trouble believing the Gospel? Good people, respectable people, intelligent, hard working, upright model citizens. They don't need it, they are good enough. They aren't like those other poor sinners who need a crutch.

“I have got this, I am good, I don't need to depend on someone else. I don't need to pray, I don't need to confess anything, my righteousness is good enough, certainly better than a lot of other people I know, certainly better than those hypocrites who go to church.”

Who are you trusting in, yourself, your goodness, your righteousness, or the righteousness revealed by God and given to us through faith in the righteousness of Jesus Christ?

*There are two aspects to Christ's work.* On the cross, He secured our redemption by sacrificing His blood as the atonement for our sins. He appeased and satisfied the just wrath of God for our sin. Since the righteousness demands of God are fully met.

Christ's work enabled God to keep His moral integrity and not compromise His holy character. He could forgive us and justify us without condoning our sin in any way, and without being impeached.

Without this miracle of redemptive righteousness there would be no other way for us to be saved.

*The other aspect of Christ's work* is that He perfectly kept all the righteous requirements of the Law. He was the perfect law-keeper.

**Romans 5:19** As by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous.”

There are two things going on here, a *double cure*. There is a subtraction and an addition. Our sins are subtracted, they are forgiven. But we are not just forgiven. A pardoned criminal doesn't have to bear the penalty, but he is still guilty, he still has the stigma of his offense.

A justified sinner not only faces no penalty, he is made righteous. This is the addition. The perfection of Christ has been imputed to us. God looks at us through Christ-colored glasses.

We are made as righteous before God as Christ is. Nothing we do adds to or takes away from what Christ did.

Christ not only became our curse and condemnation under the law but Christ also fully and perfectly kept the law and He becomes the law-keeper for us. So not only is our law-breaking imputed to Christ but His law-keeping is imputed to us.

This is why Paul can say:

**Romans 8:1-2** There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.

This is the wonder of the glorious doctrine of justification where our sins are exchanged for Christ's obedience and righteousness. Rock of Ages calls that the double cure.

Rock of Ages, cleft for me, let me hide myself in thee;  
let the water and the blood, from thy wounded side which flowed,  
be of sin *the double cure*; save from wrath and make me pure.

**As it is written: "The righteous shall live by faith."**

As it is written, the Gospel is not some new, novel thing. It is not a first century invention. Habakkuk preached the Gospel, the righteous will live by faith.

Just as our DNA is written into all our cells, so the Gospel is written into every verse in the Bible. The DNA of the Bible is the good news of the Gospel.

### **Implications and application.**

When God opened Luther's eyes to this he said, "I felt myself to be reborn and to have gone through open doors into paradise ... This passage of Paul became to me a gateway into heaven."

Are you that free, as if you are living in paradise? Free from self-righteousness, free from appearances, free from pride, free from works, striving, trying harder to do better and be better?

Are you free the way Habakkuk found freedom? God answers the troubled prophet's prayers and quieted his soul with two statements.

**Habakkuk 2:4** The righteous shall live by faith.

**Habakkuk 2:20** The Lord is in his holy temple; let all the earth keep silence before him.

When you live by faith in the righteousness of God revealed and given to us in Christ Jesus, it changes everything and it gives you a new song to sing. Even when everything is bad, you can rejoice in hope, confident by faith that God is good.

**Habakkuk 3:17-19** Though the fig tree should not blossom, nor fruit be on the vines, the produce of the olive fail and the fields yield no food, the flock be cut off from the fold and there be no herd in the stalls,  
18 yet I will rejoice in the Lord; I will take joy in the God of my salvation.  
19 God, the Lord, is my strength; he makes my feet like the deer's; he makes me tread on my high places.

May the verse that changed Martin Luther, change us as well. May you never be ashamed of the Gospel, may you know the power of the Gospel in your daily life.

May you know and trust the power of the Gospel to give you victory over temptation and pride, greed and lust, over every obstacle to your joy. Whatever it costs, without shame stand for the Gospel, cling to it, believe on it, feed on it, fight the good fight of faith, and its power will save you and refresh you.

May you feed your faith by preaching this Gospel to yourself each day and being reminded of the truth of Romans 8:32: "He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?"

The righteous shall live by faith.