



“THE JUST SHALL LIVE BY FAITH”

Kevin Presley

It's good to be here and to be with you for a few minutes to investigate the word of God together. Thanks for joining me. If you have never seen Let the Bible Speak before, we welcome you and hope you make it a point to join us from week to week. Our purpose here is simple: to study the bible in view of knowing God and finding and doing His will. You will never hear us ask for money. We never appeal for money from our viewers here on the air, by mail, or any other way. This program is presented by the church of Christ in the sole interest of spreading the gospel and teaching the truth. So, I'm glad you're here and hope you'll join me, God willing, from week to week.

Our scripture reading today comes from the Old Testament prophecy of Habakkuk. Habakkuk 2:4 says: "Behold the proud, His soul is not upright in him; But the just shall live by his faith." If that last phrase, "the just shall live by his faith" only appeared here in the book of Habakkuk, we might pass over it and not realize its significance. However, it is quoted three times in the New Testament and applied to the greatest subject of all. We want to look at this statement as it is quoted by the apostles and learn what it means: THE JUST SHALL LIVE BY FAITH.

The prophet Habakkuk lived in a troubled time for the nation of Judah. The people were living in sin and Habakkuk wondered how long God would tolerate it. It was a test of his patience to be sure. In chapter one of his short prophecy, he remonstrates with the Lord about the situation and God answered him in chapter two. God was going to raise the Chaldeans to punish his sinful people, and he admonishes Habakkuk to be patient and not lose confidence in Him. He says in chapter 2, verse 4, "Behold the proud, His soul is not upright in him; (speaking of the enemies of God who were the source of the trouble Habakkuk was concerned about) But the just shall live by his faith." The immediate meaning of this statement pertained to the need for God's faithful people to remain steadfast and wait for God to execute His plan in due time. Six-hundred years later, the apostle Paul expanded the scope of this passage in his writings. It is quoted and appropriated three times in the New Testament with an even

more spiritual emphasis. Paul quoted it in Romans and Galatians, and he, or whichever apostle wrote the letter to the Hebrews, quoted it there as well. It was a needful reminder to Habakkuk, but it becomes an ever-greater theological statement when it is used in the New Testament. It's quite interesting to note the contexts of these three New Testament usages and how each one highlights or emphasizes a separate part of this important phrase. In Romans, Paul shows us what it means to be just; in Galatians, he shows us what it means to LIVE by our faith, and in Hebrews, the writer powerfully illustrates the kind of faith the just are to live by.

The first time we come to this statement in the New Testament is in the Book of Romans. Paul quotes it in Romans, the first chapter. While Habakkuk used the term "just" to refer to the faithful ones in Judah Paul's usage has a more legal and theological meaning. The Roman letter is Paul's great treatise about justification which means God's means of declaring sinners as just or innocent. So, when Paul appropriates this ancient statement of Habakkuk, he is doing so to make a point about how men and women are justified before God. The 'just' refers to those who are forgiven of their sins and are seen as righteous in God's eyes. It refers to the saved and those in a right relationship with God. It's important that we understand the idea of justification; what it means to be justified; and how we are justified. Again, quoting Habakkuk, Paul says that "the just shall live by their faith". Let's read the passage in its context. He says in Romans 1:15-17 "So, as much as is in me, I am ready to preach the gospel to you who are in Rome also. 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. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith; as it is written, 'THE JUST SHALL LIVE BY FAITH.'" The 'good news' of Jesus Christ is God's power to save the sinner, says Paul. Notice, it is the same gospel first preached to the Jew that was later preached to the Gentile, and the things contained in that message are what saves both. No man can be saved without hearing and responding to the gospel. Why? Because "in it the righteousness of God is revealed..." Now, when Paul speaks of the righteousness of God, he isn't really referring to the God's personal attribute of righteousness, but rather he is speaking of God's plan or God's means of making US righteous.

First, we need to understand the requirement of righteousness to be in a RIGHT relationship with God. We will never begin to understand the concept of salvation until we first understand the holiness of God. 1 John 1:5 says: "This is the message which we have heard from Him and declare to you, that God is light and in Him is no darkness at all." The creatures that Isaiah beheld before the Lord's throne in that spectacular vision recorded in Isaiah chapter six cry out before the Lord, "holy, holy, holy..." The word holy means removed or set apart from sin. God is not only NOT like us, but our sin separates us FROM Him according to Isaiah 59:1-2. No sinful thing can enter the presence of God. Psalms 24:3-4 "Who may ascend into the hill of the LORD? Or who may stand in His holy place? He who has clean hands and a pure heart, Who has not lifted up his soul to an idol, Nor sworn deceitfully." That leaves us in a bad place for Paul quotes the Psalmist David in Romans 3:10 saying "THERE IS NONE RIGHTEOUS, NO, NOT ONE", and he goes on to say unequivocally in verse 23 that "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." So, if God is holy and thus, completely removed from sin, and only the 'just' or 'innocent' can be accepted by Him, then as the Psalmist asked, 'Who CAN stand in His holy place?' How can we be innocent or just before God if we have all sinned? And we have! Paul explains in Romans chapters three thru five that we must be declared or accounted as righteous. Look in chapter four, verses four through six. He writes, "Now to him who works, the wages are not counted as grace but as debt. But to him who does not work but believes on Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is accounted for righteousness, just as David also describes the blessedness of the man to whom God imputes righteousness apart from works..." Now the works Paul is talking about is not the conditions of the obedience that comes with faith in Christ for that would contradict other scriptures, but it IS talking about man working his way into

God's favor. Paul is countering the notion that man could ever earn a good standing before God or achieve, through himself, the sinlessness that would allow him to stand innocent before God. If we have a thousand lifetimes not one of us could ever do that. The only way any man or woman could, in and of themselves, be innocent in God's eyes would be if they never sinned. Just one sin would disqualify and render us guilty before a perfectly righteous and holy God. Rather, Paul says that God "imputes righteousness apart from works." In other words, the "just" are just or innocent before God not because they have kept the law and never sinned – but because God imputes that righteousness.

Now, the word imputed doesn't mean to transfer one's personal righteousness to another person which many believe to be the case. But it's simply an accounting term that means to reckon or 'put to one's account.' The records of those who are justified or innocent before God are clean and spotless, not because we have earned such a standing because we haven't, and we can't. Rather God treats the sinner as though he had never sinned even those he has. In the very next verse Paul explains what he means by imputing righteousness to the believer by quoting David. Verses 6-8: "just as David also describes the blessedness of the man to whom God imputes righteousness apart from works" What is David talking about? Listen to him, now. "BLESSED ARE THOSE WHOSE LAWLESS DEEDS ARE FORGIVEN, AND WHOSE SINS ARE COVERED; BLESSED IS THE MAN TO WHOM THE LORD SHALL NOT IMPUTE SIN." God either sees us IN our sins or free from sin. He either declares us guilty or He declares us as innocent and that verdict will determine where you and I spend eternity! Now, someone may ask, "if He loves us and it's a matter of God declaring us as innocent, why doesn't God just declare that? If He's God, why can't He just overlook our sin and say, 'not guilty' and that be that? Well, that's just the point: He can't do that BECAUSE He's God! He wouldn't be holy if He did so. Rather, God had to have a means of absolving the sinner of guilt without compromising His own holiness and His divine law. So, how does He do that? Look back at chapter 3, verses 24-25. "...being justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God set forth as a propitiation by His blood..." The required payment for sin was made through the shedding of the blood of Christ. The sacrifice of Christ Jesus satisfied the demands of God's holiness and justice – while at the same time setting the sinner free from the eternal penalty. We were guilty but He declared us innocent. Those in Christ have been 'justified' through Christ and as others have said, a good description of 'justification' is to be 'as if I had never sinned'. Through God's great wisdom and grace, the sacrifice of the perfect Christ allowed justice to be satisfied but at the same time mercy to be shown. As Paul said in chapter 3, verse 26: "to demonstrate at the present time His righteousness, that He might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus." So, that is what Paul means when he appropriates Habakkuk's statement to substantiate his great argument about the salvation that comes through the gospel of Christ. 'The JUST shall live by faith' -- the JUST being those who are justified by the grace of God through faith in Christ who made atonement for our sin and took our guilt away. And if guilt is removed, we are of necessity innocent before God. Thanks be to God for His grace! Thanks be to God for Christ's love and His willingness to come to earth and go to Calvary! Thanks be to God for the gospel plan of salvation without which we would be hopelessly doomed and with no good standing before God! Friend, without Jesus, you're lost. Period.

But then, Paul again quotes Habakkuk when he writes to the troubled Galatian church. This time, Paul will emphasize what it means for the just to LIVE by faith. Read Galatians 3:10-12. He says, "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." But that no one is justified by the law in the sight of God is evident, for "THE JUST SHALL LIVE BY FAITH." Yet the law is not of faith, but "THE MAN WHO DOES THEM SHALL LIVE BY THEM." Paul is referring to those who tried to be justified by keeping the Law of Moses, and by extension, any person, who again,

believes they can spiritually live by their own merit. The church at Galatia was under the sway of some false, Judaizing teachers who were corrupting the gospel by adding tenets of the Law of Moses to it. These teachers failed to recognize that the Law of Moses had served its purpose in showing that man was a sinner and in need of a Savior and pointing the people of God to that Savior Christ Jesus. With its rites and ceremonies fulfilled in Christ, those things were removed by the cross. But these men were telling new believers that while they needed to obey the gospel of Christ, they also needed to obey Moses and be circumcised according to the Old Law. Paul does not mince words in telling the Galatians that if they attempted to live by that law, they would instead die by it because if they did not perfectly keep it, it merely condemned them as sinners.

Paul, in no wise means that people in the New Testament age are not expected to obey Christ in accordance with their faith in Him. He is rather, again, showing that Christ provided what the law of Moses did not and what man could achieve for himself and that is freedom from sin and sin's condemnation. Rather, he says those who are JUST live by their faith. He is not saying, by the way, in verse 12 that it did not take faith to serve God in the Old Testament, but he is saying that if a person believes they can so keep the law that they can be saved of their own merit instead of what Christ has provided for them, then they should know that their faith is foolishly and futilely in something they can never realize instead of the One who provides the Way to God. A man can only LIVE by the law if he DOES the law without any failing whatsoever. Well, that means death. Paul fears this will be the end of the Galatians if they don't realize their error and trust in Christ alone. Galatians 2:19-20 "For I through the law died to the law that I might live to God. I have been crucified with Christ; 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, who loved me and gave Himself for me."

And then, the third time we find this grand statement repeated is by the writer of the book of Hebrews. Here, the inspired author illustrates the FAITH that the 'just' live by. If you concluded from the first two words that the being justified by faith means that God does not require any action of faith or the obedience of faith on our part, then you need to turn to this third reference for here the Holy Spirit shows us what faith is and what faith looks like. He says in Hebrews 10:35-38, "Therefore do not cast away your confidence, which has great reward. For you have need of endurance, so that after you have done the will of God, you may receive the promise: 'FOR YET A LITTLE WHILE, AND HE WHO IS COMING WILL COME AND WILL NOT TARRY. NOW THE JUST SHALL LIVE BY FAITH; BUT IF ANYONE DRAWS BACK, MY SOUL HAS NO PLEASURE IN HIM.'" Here, the New Testament quotes the words recorded in Habakkuk more closely in their original meaning. The Hebrew letter is addressed to Christians tempted to abandon Christ and return to the Old Covenant because of hardship and persecution. They wondered if the Christian faith was valid after all and if it was worth it to remain faithful to it. So, the writer admonishes them to hold on and continue faithfully serving Christ because "the just live by faith", he says. What kind of faith is he talking about? Faith is a trust in God based upon what He has said. But such faith does not end at just believing. Faith does not mean that one agrees to a set of facts and that's all there is to it. The next chapter clearly shows that's not the case. He begins chapter 11 by telling us that faith is the substance of things not seen and then in verse 2 he says that "by faith" the elders (the just) obtained a good report. What did their faith consist of? Well, take the time to read the entire eleventh chapter of Hebrews and what is sometimes called "faith's hall of fame." Example after example is given of those who did not just sit back believing but acted upon their faith by obeying what God told them to do. They were flawed and imperfect men and women and therefore could stand as just before God because of their merit or perfection – but they were faithful and sought to act upon God's commands. He cites Abel who in faith offered the sacrifice God required. He cites Enoch who in faith walked with God. He cites Noah who was saved through the flood by grace according to Genesis 6:8, yet

“moved with fear” and built the ark God commanded him to build. He cites Abraham who got up and left Ur at the calling of God, believing God, and went to the land of promise. And he says this in verse 8: By faith Abraham obeyed...” And on and on the chapter goes. Not one of those people EARNED the forgiveness of their sins but every one of them believed and acted upon what God said and were considered faithful in that belief and action.

Yes, friend, the just live by faith. God’s grace justifies us through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, but that faith is manifest in obedience to the commands of the gospel. Jesus said and the apostles then preached: ‘He who believes and is baptized will be saved’ (Mark 16:16). Jesus said and the apostles recorded “Be thou faithful until death and I will give thee a crown of life” (Revelation 2:10) The just do not live by their merit for they have none – but they no live by their faithfulness to Christ which means committing ourselves to do His bidding to the very best of our ability.

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