

What does a person of faith look like, I wonder? Is a faith-filled person someone who exudes a serene confidence, a calmed and hushed and unperturbed spirit? Or is a faith-filled individual the active and always-in-motion kingdom worker who is mostly a sort of holy blur of volunteerism? Is faith a set of convictions that could be cross-stitched and hung on a wall or is faith seen best only when it is put into practice out in the nitty-gritty existence of the real world?

In the Bible, Abraham is the father of all faith, and his life is mostly a series of journeys that involve *trust*. By faith Abraham packed up everything he owned one day and set off on a long trip toward an as-yet-unknown-far-off country. God said, “Go” and Abraham went. God said, “Go to the land I will show you,” but Abraham did not reply, “Well, if I’m going to go, could you at least give me a hint, a general direction, or an approximation of the place on the map?” No, Abraham just went—no map, no final destination. Just a wing and a prayer, a dream of starry skies and sandy seashores and a country to call home out there...somewhere.

What does a person of faith look like? Is he an easy-chair person who ponders all the right theology in his mind or is she a holy blur of ministry who practices faith through the work of her hands more than she ponders it in her head? A person of faith is, of course, both. A person of faith knows something all right. A person of faith knows the truth of the Word: That Jesus came to this earth because God is love; that Jesus came to embody that love and even to go to hell and back to convince us of that love. A person of faith knows of the Logos, that one gospel Word, a joyous announcement from God.

But a person of faith also knows the many words of Jesus and is driven by Jesus’ command to love one another. So, this person can’t only sit still, can’t only recline in faith’s easy chair to think about theology. The glorious truths that we ponder through doctrines of the church force us to get moving, too. Faith is an active journey, often a perilous journey at that, in a world that is still as mixed-up and confused as ever. We are called to do the Abraham-like thing of stepping out in faith, pressing forward in ministry, even though we can’t always see the road ahead as clearly as we think we should. We even press on knowing that there are potholes and dangers on the road up ahead.

As most every Bible commentator would tell you, the way Paul uses Habakkuk 2:4 (“the righteous live by their faith”) in Romans and Galatians seems to be a bit different from how those words function in Habakkuk 2. Habakkuk spent most of his prophecy up to this point *complaining* to God about how the evil and the greedy and the wretched people of

the earth keep getting away with their crimes. God, in turn, replies to Habakkuk to say to him that he had to be patient. In the long run, God was going to save his people through a most surprising means. Meanwhile, evil would seem to prevail for a time.

In the second chapter, the famous line that caught the Apostle Paul's eye (and later Martin Luther's eye) is, oddly enough, a kind of parenthetical statement within Habakkuk 2:4. In fact, where the Lectionary stops this reading (at verse 4) is strange because the sentence actually continues into verse 5. But the description of the enemy who is proud in verse 5 gets a little weird, so I'm happy to go with the Lectionary personally. What we know God is telling the prophet is that a great revelation is coming but it might take a while. Those who are puffed up with pride—greedy and arrogant people—may seem to have the upper hand. Despite that, the righteous will be able to go on through their faith and their belief that new things of God are coming. This is what will help them carry on even in those times when evil seems destined to win the day.

But that steadfast ability to rely on God's promises—the ability of one's faith in God's faithfulness to function as a stronghold for one's life even while the wicked seem to prosper—is a little different from how Paul later uses it. In the context of defending the gospel of salvation by grace alone in Romans and then again in Galatians, Paul seems to use "faith" as a gift imparted to believers by God, and by his grace. Contained in the faith granted to us by the Holy Spirit is all the salvation of God that we need. The gift of faith is salvation per se and so it is literally true in a gospel context that the righteous live by faith: All of the resurrection life of Jesus comes to us in a gift that God alone can give. Righteousness is not an accomplishment, but a gift. As Paul says in Galatians 3 just before quoting Habakkuk 2:4, no one gets saved by the law (by being perfect in one's own strength or by virtue of one's own morality) but only by the righteousness of Christ that is given to us as our justification in him.

But perhaps there is some kind of connection between Habakkuk and these New Testament epistles of Paul after all. Because in the context of Habakkuk, people needed faith in God's faithfulness in order to persevere and live with hope. But if that truly was an inspirational source of energy for God's people then, how much more strength should we have, now that we have come to understand and to see that God already has been faithful to his every promise through Jesus—in whom God's every promise finds its "Yes?" If faith in God's faithfulness is a source of strength, how much greater is faith which is a gift that already comes because of God's faithfulness to an astonishing degree?

God said that his revelation would come and that it would be really something once it arrived. Well, isn't that most certainly true? Who could have seen the gospel coming, with

the shock of the incarnation and the scandal of the cross? The faith that is our life has come to us as a sheer gift of grace, through the death and resurrection of no less than God's one and only Son.

Have you ever heard this helpful definition of the word "misunderstanding"? Here it is: "A misunderstanding is when I'm right and you don't know it yet." In a way God is telling Habakkuk that God is right, even righteous, and will not let evil have the last word. The last word belongs to God. The ultimate revelation of his Word did of course come to the earth, as God always said it would. If living with faith that such a revelation would come was a source of strength once upon a time for God's prophet, we know today that faith as the gift of God is not just a reason to hope: It is life itself.

The Hebrew word for "faith" as used in Habakkuk 2 is a cognate of the word "Amen." So when we hear the gospel in the reminder that the righteous indeed live by their faith, we cannot help but shout a loud and enthusiastic "Amen!" Faith itself is rooted in the gracious action of God and shared with us mere mortals. God's faithfulness always outlasts our faithfulness. If we can claim any credit, it is only the credit of genuinely receiving God's gift by not trying to pawn it off, exchange it, or trade it for lesser treasures.

So again, I ask, What does a person of faith look like? He or she looks like Jesus, the One who so often sat down to teach but then always got up again to do loving deeds.

A person of faith looks like Jesus, our comfort and joy and the ever-in-motion Son of God who knew better than anyone how much work there is yet to be done.

A person of faith looks like Jesus, who after his resurrection was not sitting around but did as he said: "*But after I have risen, I will go ahead of you into Galilee*" (Mark 14:28). He's always out there ahead of us.

A person of faith who remains in God's Word is always eager to believe, to trust, and to follow Jesus.

To be clear, Habakkuk taught that the only thing that could save us is faith. "Faith in what?" we may ask. Faith in God's *mercy*. If we turn ahead to chapter 3 of Habakkuk to verse 2 he is praying, "*O Lord, I have heard of your renown, and I stand in awe, O Lord, of your work. In our own time revive it; in our own time make it known; in wrath may you remember mercy.*"

Habakkuk couldn't see ahead to how God would preserve both his holy hatred for human sin and his mercy that forgives even the worst of sinners. But God revealed it, so

Habakkuk proclaimed it. Faith is the key. The proud see no need for it, so they reject it. The righteous, however, embrace it and live their lives as people of faith. Habakkuk knew that by calling them “righteous,” they weren’t sinless people, nor are we. What he meant is that those who are right with God, in spite of their sin; those who trust God for his mercy and have a right spirit within, are righteous. Still, how can a holy God, who hates sin, show endless mercy to unholy sinners who have nothing to offer except their faith? God didn’t really explain all of that to Habakkuk. What we do hear from Habakkuk is that God is holy, that God does care, and that God will act as he sees fit, in his own time.

It seems that God gave more of an explanation to the apostle Paul, and the answer that he gave is not just his divine perspective on the problem, but a once for all solution to the problem: the death of Christ. In Romans 3 Paul said it like this: *“Since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a sacrifice of atonement by his blood, effective through faith”* (3:23–24).

Let me try to translate that into our lives today. When we put our trust in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord, when we give up trying to control our own lives and establish our own worth, and instead surrender our lives to Christ and bank on Christ for our future, three things happen: 1) Our sin receives its deserved *condemnation*. 2) God’s righteousness receives its deserved *glorification*. And 3) We receive our undeserved *justification*.

Habakkuk shows us that whenever judgment comes, the righteous will live by their faith. And when the seedling of faith comes to its full bloom in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus our Lord, we will see that the reason the righteous live by their faith is that the righteous are justified and made righteous by the Savior of the world. Again, as Paul puts it, in his explanation and invitation, *“They are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a sacrifice of atonement by his blood, effective through faith”* (Romans 3:24).

That, dear friends, in one sentence, is the glorious, good news of the gospel!

And that is the sole reason the righteous do indeed live by their faith. Amen.