

Title: **HABAKKUK**
 “In Wrath Remember Mercy”

Text: Habakkuk 2:4

Subject: *Clinging to The Lord*

Date: Tuesday Evening—December 23, 2004

Tape # X-96a

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Introduction:

There is an appointed day of wrath and judgment.

(Heb 9:27) "And as it is appointed unto men once to die, but after this the judgment:"

(Acts 17:31) "Because he hath appointed a day, in the which he will judge the world in righteousness by *that* man whom he hath ordained; *whereof* he hath given assurance unto all *men*, in that he hath raised him from the dead."

If you do not live in the conscious awareness that fact, in the conscious awareness of the fact that you must soon stand before the holy Lord God in judgment, in the conscious anticipation of eternity, you are living in a fantasy of unreality. You are living as a fool, in a dream world, refusing to face the facts of reality. Soon, you and I must stand before that august bar of divine judgment called "*The Great White Throne.*"

(2 Cor 5:10-11) "For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ; that every one may receive the

things *done* in *his* body, according to that he hath done, whether *it be* good or bad. {11} Knowing therefore the terror of the Lord, we persuade men; but we are made manifest unto God; and I trust also are made manifest in your consciences."

To live in unbelief, to live in contempt of and rebellion against Christ is to store up for yourself wrath against the day of wrath and the righteous judgment of God (Rom. 2:5). In that day, there will only be two groups of people, the just and the damned, the justified and the unjustified, the righteous and the wicked.

If ever you come to face that fact, if ever you come to grips with reality, you will be forced to ask a question. You will be compelled to ask, "How can I live before God? How can I escape the wrath and judgment of God in that great day when he consumes the world in his holy terror? How can I be just with God?" If you are not asking yourself that question, you live in utter naivety, with your head in the sand. If that question has become a matter of concern to you, if you would know how to escape righteous judgment of God and the fury of his unmitigated wrath in hell, read the Book of Habakkuk.

FAITH

There is a statement found in Habakkuk 2:4 that is quoted three times in the New Testament. — "*The just shall live by his faith.*"

(Rom 1:16-17) "For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ: for it is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth; to the Jew first, and also to the Greek. {17} For therein is the righteousness of God revealed from faith to faith: as it is written, The just shall live by faith."

- The emphasis here is on righteousness, the righteousness of God that we receive by faith in Christ.

(Gal 3:10-11) "For as many as are of the works of the law are under the curse: for it is written, Cursed *is* every one that continueth not in all things which are written in the book of the law to do them. {11} But that no man is justified by the law in the sight of God, *it is* evident: for, The just shall live by faith."

- The emphasis here is on faith. Paul is declaring that believers do not obtain righteousness by their own works but by faith in Christ alone.

(Heb 10:38-39) "Now the just shall live by faith: but if *any man* draw back, my soul shall have no pleasure in him. {39} But we are not of them who draw back unto perdition; but of them that believe to the saving of the soul."

- The emphasis here is on life, on living by faith. The Holy Spirit here declares that those who have been made righteous, receiving the righteousness

of God in Christ by faith in Christ, live throughout their days on this earth by that same faith, trusting Christ.

Habakkuk seems to have all three of these ideas in mind. He tells us that sinners obtain righteousness and life by faith in Christ and that, being made righteous, God's people live by faith in Christ. We know that that is Habakkuk's message because he sings praise to Christ our Savior in the prophetic song of chapter 3 (v. 13; compare Matt. :21).

(Hab 3:13) "Thou wentest forth for the salvation of thy people, *even* for salvation with thine anointed; thou woundedst the head out of the house of the wicked, by discovering the foundation unto the neck. Selah."

(Mat 1:21) "And she shall bring forth a son, and thou shalt call his name JESUS: for he shall save his people from their sins."

THE MESSAGE

In a word, Habakkuk's message is this. — **There is only one way to live, clinging to Christ the Lord!** Indeed, Habakkuk's name means, "embrace, or cling," and his message is just that. If we would live, we must live by clinging to Christ.

- In chapter 1 the prophet prays for Judah, against whom the Lord God was determined to send the Chaldeans in judgment.
- In chapter 2 we see the watchman upon his watchtower, receiving God's answer to his prayer.
- In chapter 3 we have Habakkuk's prayer of praise and faith, in the form of a psalm to be sung in the worship of God.

The meaning of the word "*Shigionoth*" is doubtful. Some suggest that it means "ignorance." Others think it means "stringed instrument." Perhaps it is best to give it both meanings. Certainly, it is best to do so here. Habakkuk is here declaring, "Though I am ignorant before him, I will bow to my God, worship him, and sing praise to him upon my stringed instruments." His song begins with a prayer, ends with a determined contentment of faith, and everything between is praise. Look at the prayer with which Habakkuk begins his song (3:2).

(Hab 3:2) "O LORD, I have heard thy speech, *and* was afraid: O LORD, revive thy work in the midst of the years, in the midst of the years make known; in wrath remember mercy."

- He heard God's pronouncement of wrath, and was afraid, not for himself, but for those the Lord was determined to punish in his holy indignation.

- Then he prays for God's church and kingdom. — (1.) He prays for the Lord to revive, that is to preserve his work in the midst of his judgment. The (2.) he prays for the Lord to make himself known in the midst of the years of darkness and desolation, in the midst of his judgment. And (3.) he calls for the Lord God, in wrath, to remember mercy.

That is my prayer to God in this day. — *"O LORD, I have heard thy speech, and was afraid: O LORD, revive thy work in the midst of the years, in the midst of the years make known; in wrath remember mercy."*

THE SITUATION

Here is the situation Habakkuk was in. Judah was going to be invaded by the Chaldeans (Babylonians). The invasion took place at the end of the sixth century B.C., when Jerusalem fell to Nebuchadnezzar in 586 B.C. The Lord revealed this to his prophets long before it actually took place. He told them plainly that Judah was going to be punished for her sin, and that the instrument he would use to punish Judah would be Babylon. Unlike Joel, Zephaniah, and Amos, Habakkuk does not mention the possibility that judgment might be averted. He does not call for national repentance. It is too late for that. Instead, he predicts the destruction of Judah and beyond that the doom of the Chaldeans themselves.

Yet, he declares that the only way to escape the coming wrath and judgment is by faith, by believing God.

Though judgment is certain, he declares that those who believe shall live.

CHAPTER 1

Carrying the heavy, heavy burden the Lord God had put upon him, Habakkuk cries out in 1:2-4 that Judah is full of violence, strife, and contention, that the nation had utterly cast aside God's holy law. "*Therefore,*" he says, "*judgment proceedeth.*"

In verses 5-11, the prophet faithfully declares the precise method by which the Lord God would destroy the nation. He was raising up the pagan, idolatrous, ungodly, barbarian Chaldeans, a vile, immoral, wretched people, to execute his wrath against a people who professed to be his people and appeared to be far more righteous than those who would destroy them. It was a prophecy so contrary to nature and reason, that when it came to pass the people would deny that God did it, though he had plainly told them he was going to do it (1:5).

(Hab 1:5) "Behold ye among the heathen, and regard, and wonder marvellously: for *I* will work a work in your days, *which* ye will not believe, though it be told *you*."

ASSURANCE OF LIFE

Now, look at verse 12. Here the prophet of God speaks with absolute confidence, assuring God's true saints, the true believers, among those who professed faith in him,

that God's judgment by which he would destroy the rest would not destroy them.

(Hab 1:12) "*Art thou not from everlasting, O LORD my God, mine Holy One? we shall not die. O LORD, thou hast ordained them for judgment; and, O mighty God, thou hast established them for correction.*"

QUESTIONS

In verses 2 and 3 the prophet cried beneath the heavy weight of his burden. "*O LORD, how long shall I cry, and thou wilt not hear!... Why dost thou show me iniquity and cause me to behold grievance?*" Then, at the end of the chapter (1:13-17) he asked the Lord to explain himself to him, to explain to him why he would choose to use the Chaldeans to punish Judah? His question is, — "How is it you, O Lord, God who is of purer eyes than to behold iniquity, will execute your wrath upon Judah by a people even worse than they?"

These were not the questions of a rebel, or a reprobate unbeliever, but the questions of a faithful man perplexed by God's providential works. We might not be honest enough to put them into verbal expressions; but they are questions that frequently disturb us too. Are they not? These questions remind me of David's great struggle in Psalm 73.

(Psa 73:1-3) "Truly God *is* good to Israel, *even* to such as are of a clean heart. {2} But as for me, my feet were

almost gone; my steps had well nigh slipped. {3} For I was envious at the foolish, *when* I saw the prosperity of the wicked."

(Psa 73:12-28) "Behold, these *are* the ungodly, who prosper in the world; they increase *in* riches. {13} Verily I have cleansed my heart *in* vain, and washed my hands in innocency. {14} For all the day long have I been plagued, and chastened every morning. {15} If I say, I will speak thus; behold, I should offend *against* the generation of thy children. {16} When I thought to know this, it *was* too painful for me; {17} Until I went into the sanctuary of God; *then* understood I their end. {18} Surely thou didst set them in slippery places: thou castedst them down into destruction. {19} How are they *brought* into desolation, as in a moment! they are utterly consumed with terrors. {20} As a dream when *one* awaketh; *so*, O Lord, when thou awakest, thou shalt despise their image. {21} Thus my heart was grieved, and I was pricked in my reins. {22} So foolish *was* I, and ignorant: I was *as* a beast before thee. {23} Nevertheless I *am* continually with thee: thou hast holden *me* by my right hand. {24} Thou shalt guide me with thy counsel, and afterward receive me *to* glory. {25} Whom have I in heaven *but* thee? and *there is* none upon earth *that* I desire beside thee. {26} My flesh and my heart faileth: *but* God *is* the strength of my heart, and my portion for ever. {27} For, lo, they that are far from thee shall perish: thou hast destroyed all them that go a whoring from thee. {28} But *it is* good for me to draw near to

God: I have put my trust in the Lord GOD, that I may declare all thy works."

GOD'S ANSWER

We must admit that we have struggled with the same questions. The earth is filled with glaring inequity. The wicked do seem to prosper while the righteous suffer. After raising the questions, Habakkuk resolves to wait for God's answer. We would be wise to do the same, and to lay the answer to heart.

CHAPTER 2

In chapter 2 Habakkuk stands upon his watchtower to await God's answer, and the Lord gave it to him in a vision. He does not tell us what he saw, but it must be assumed that the rest of his prophecy is the result of the vision God gave him. I say that because God commanded him to write out the vision and make it plain (Vv. 2-3).

(Hab 2:1-3) "I will stand upon my watch, and set me upon the tower, and will watch to see what he will say unto me, and what I shall answer when I am reprov'd. {2} And the LORD answered me, and said, Write the vision, and make *it* plain upon tables, that he may run that readeth it. {3} For the vision *is* yet for an appointed time, but at the end it shall speak, and not lie: though it tarry, wait for it; because it will surely come, it will not tarry."

And the declaration of God's vision was first and foremost a word of instruction, reproof, and assurance to Habakkuk and to us (v. 4). **Let us hear the instruction, bear the reproof, and rejoice in the assurance.**

(Hab 2:4) "Behold, his soul *which* is lifted up is not upright in him: but the just shall live by his faith."

The first thing we learn is that **God is running things on schedule** (2:3). Our time and God's time are not measured by the same clock. Israel offered sacrifices for centuries, in anticipation of Christ, the coming Sacrifice by whom sin would be put away. The Jews, in unbelief, fell into idolatry and were cast off by God, because, they refused to live by faith. They stumbled over the Stumbling-Stone. Going about to establish their own righteousness, they refused to submit to the righteousness of God, never realizing that "*Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone that believeth.*" "*The just shall live by his faith.*" But they refused to believe and perished.

Yet, "*when the fullness of the time was come, God sent forth his Son, made of a woman, made under the law, to redeem them that were under the law*" (Gal. 4:4-5). You can count on it — not a single promise will fail! A thousand years are as a day in God's sight.

This is God's answer to all Habakkuk's questions and his answer our own questions as well. — **"The just shall live by his faith"** (Hab 2:4).

As I showed you at the beginning of my message, this great statement made by God to Habakkuk is repeated three times in the New Testament. Each place describes a specific aspect of Christ's all-sufficient and infallibly effectual work on behalf of his people, as our Surety and Substitute.

1. Romans 1:17

The first New Testament quotation is found in Romans 1:17. It follows Paul's declaration, *"For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ: for it is the power of God unto salvation to everyone that believeth"* (Rom 1:16). Then he says, *"For therein is the righteousness of God revealed from faith to faith; as it is written, The just shall live by faith"* (Rom 1:17).

In Romans 1, Paul is standing on the threshold of the great Epistle on Justification, in which he shows us how sinners are made righteous and just before God, not by works, but by grace. In this Book, the Book of God, God has left us a record of his wondrous work of redemption by Christ, a record of redemption accomplished by the righteousness and blood of his darling Son. Faith believes God's witness, says "Amen," to the testimony of God concerning his Son, and believing the record God has given concerning his Son, believing God, we

receive righteousness, free, unconditional, irrevocable and eternal justification.

(Rom 5:9-11) "Much more then, being now justified by his blood, we shall be saved from wrath through him. {10} For if, when we were enemies, we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, being reconciled, we shall be saved by his life. {11} And not only *so*, but we also joy in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom we have now received the atonement."

Like our brother, Abel, believing God, offering God the blood of his own Son, we obtain witness that we are righteous (Heb. 11:4).

2. Galatians 3:11

The second quote is in Galatians 3:11 — "*But that no man is justified by the law in the sight of God, it is evident; for, The just shall live by faith.*"

Here, Paul is saying much the same thing as he wrote in Colossians 2:6. — "*As ye have received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk ye in him.*" The Galatians were being tempted by false preachers, Judaizing legalists, that having been saved by grace, justified by grace, they must now keep themselves and make themselves perfect, that they must sanctify themselves by their own works.

Paul is not confusing justification and sanctification, but clarifying them. In the context (3:1-10) he is clearly

addressing the matter of sanctification. He is telling us that both are found in Christ, that both are received by trusting Christ, that both are works of grace received by faith. He is saying, “If you could make yourself perfect by works, you could justify yourself by your works. But that is evidently impossible, *“for the just shall live by faith!”*”

In Galatians 3:11 Paul is talking about the believer’s walk in this world. Just as we are saved by faith, we continue in life by faith.

3. Hebrews 10:38

We see Habakkuk’s words again in Hebrews 10:38. Here the Holy Spirit is talking about perseverance and the assurance of it.

(Heb 10:38-39) "Now the just shall live by faith: but if *any man* draw back, my soul shall have no pleasure in him. {39} But we are not of them who draw back unto perdition; but of them that believe to the saving of the soul."

When the night is darkest, faith pierces the darkness and, seeing the light of God’s promise and grace in Christ, refuses to quit. Faith, like Habakkuk’s name implies, “embraces and clings to Christ.”

Illustration: “*Tie a knot and hang on!*”

Now, let's go back to Habakkuk. Judgment is coming. Every proud rebel shall be destroyed. But, even in the midst of the providential calamities of divine judgment in time, and when the great and final day of wrath shall come, those who live by faith have their eyes on One who is the Anchor of their souls, knowing that he is in his holy temple (2:14, 20).

(Hab 2:14) "For the earth shall be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the LORD, as the waters cover the sea."

- Certainly, this is talking about that last day, when judgment is over and God makes all things new.
- It is equally certain that this is talking about this gospel age, in which the gospel of God's free, sovereign, saving, grace and glory in Christ is spread over all the earth, even as God destroys the nations by the great whore of false religion, Babylon.
- Still, there is more. If you have a marginal translation, you will see that the words of verse 14 might be translated, "the earth shall be filled by knowing the glory of the LORD." That is to say, "We who believe God, who live by faith, knowing the glory of God in Christ, see the fulness of God's purpose in all things through all the earth" (Rom. 8:28-39; John 11:40).

HABAKKUK'S PRAYER

CHAPTER 3

The Book of Habakkuk closes with Habakkuk's great prayer of praise and faith. He gives us a great description of God's majesty. He declares the wondrous history of God's dealings with his people in bringing them into Canaan, which portrayed the far greater blessedness that is ours in Christ, as we behold him who is the brightness of the Father's glory (Heb. 1:3).

Three times in this prayer, Habakkuk uses the exclamation "*Selah*," a word found nowhere else in the Bible except in the Psalms. This word is a call for us to pause, be silent, and consider. Someone suggested, it means, "listen to the divine illumining, to the divine light." How we need this silence of soul before the Lord God in these days! Let us pause and listen to the divine light.

As it was upon Mt. Sinai, that the whole earth was full of the glory of God (vv. 3-4), **so it is now**. If only we had eyes to see it, the whole earth is full of God's praise. One day soon, all things shall show forth his praise.

Even when God marches through the earth in wrath, with his glittering sword drawn, he is riding upon his "*chariots of salvation*" (v. 8), and goes forth for the salvation of his people by Christ, his anointed (vv. 12-13).

(Hab 3:12-13) "Thou didst march through the land in indignation, thou didst thresh the heathen in anger. {13} Thou wentest forth for the salvation of thy people, *even*

for salvation with thine anointed; thou woundedst the head out of the house of the wicked, by discovering the foundation unto the neck. Selah."

We are justified by faith; we walk by faith; we will be delivered by faith. This is the vision God gave the prophet of old. Habakkuk declares, "God is working out his eternal purpose of grace for the salvation of his people. In wrath, he does remember mercy, he is making himself known he is preserving his church and kingdom. Blessed be his holy name!"

HABAKKUK'S FAITH

Knowing this, the troubled, heavy-hearted prophet closes his song and his prophecy with a marvelous declaration of determined faith, bowing to the wisdom, goodness and grace of God's adorable providence, even when it appears dark and difficult (vv. 17-19).

(Hab 3:17-19) "Although the fig tree shall not blossom, neither *shall* fruit *be* in the vines; the labour of the olive shall fail, and the fields shall yield no meat; the flock shall be cut off from the fold, and *there shall be* no herd in the stalls: {18} Yet I will rejoice in the LORD, I will joy in the God of my salvation. {19} The LORD God *is* my strength, and he will make my feet like hinds' *feet*, and he will make me to walk upon mine high places. To the chief singer on my stringed instruments."

“God moves in a mysterious way

His wonders to perform.
He plants His footsteps in the sea,
And rides upon the storm.”

Deep, in unfathomable mines
Of never failing skill,
He treasures up His bright designs,
And works His sovereign will.

Ye fearful saints, fresh courage take,
The clouds you so much dread
Are big with mercy and will break
In blessings on your head.

Judge not the Lord by feeble sense,
But trust Him for His grace.
Behind the frowning providence
He hides a smiling face.

His purposes will ripen fast,
Unfolding every hour.
The bud may have a bitter taste,
But sweet will be the flower!

William Cowper