

# LESSONS

## The Twentieth Sunday After Pentecost

### The Righteous Will Live by His Faith

#### **Old Testament Lesson: Habakkuk 1:1-5; 2:1-4**

1 The oracle that Habakkuk the prophet received.

2 “How long, O LORD, must I call for help, but you do not listen? Or cry out to you, ‘Violence!’ but you do not save?”

3 “Why do you make me look at injustice? Why do you tolerate wrong? Destruction and violence are before me; there is strife, and conflict abounds.

4 “Therefore the law is paralyzed, and justice never prevails. The wicked hem in the righteous, so that justice is perverted.”

5 “Look at the nations and watch-- and be utterly amazed. For I am going to do something in your days that you would not believe, even if you were told.”

2:1 “I will stand at my watch and station myself on the ramparts; I will look to see what he will say to me, and what answer I am to give to this complaint.”

2 Then the LORD replied: “Write down the revelation and make it plain on tablets so that a herald may run with it.

3 “For the revelation awaits an appointed time; it speaks of the end and will not prove false. Though it lingers, wait for it; it will certainly come and will not delay.

4 “See, he is puffed up; his desires are not upright-- but the righteous will live by his faith.”

#### **Epistle Lesson: 2 Timothy 1:3-14**

3 I thank God, whom I serve, as my forefathers did, with a clear conscience, as night and day I constantly remember you in my prayers.

4 recalling your tears, I long to see you, so that I may be filled with joy.

5 I have been reminded of your sincere faith, which first lived in your grandmother Lois and in your mother Eunice and, I am persuaded, now lives in you also.

6 For this reason I remind you to fan into flame the gift of God, which is in you through the laying on of my hands.

7 For God did not give us a spirit of timidity, but a spirit of power, of love and of self-discipline.

8 So do not be ashamed to testify about our Lord, or ashamed of me his prisoner. But join with me in suffering for the gospel, by the power of God,

9 who has saved us and called us to a holy life--not because of anything we have done but because of his own purpose and grace. This grace was given us in Christ Jesus before the beginning of time,

10 but it has now been revealed through the appearing of our Savior, Christ Jesus, who has destroyed death and has brought life and immortality to light through the gospel.

11 And of this gospel I was appointed a herald and an apostle and a teacher.

12 That is why I am suffering as I am. Yet I am not ashamed, because I know whom I have believed, and am convinced that he is able to guard what I have entrusted to him for that day.

13 What you heard from me, keep as the pattern of sound teaching, with faith and love in Christ Jesus.

14 Guard the good deposit that was entrusted to you--guard it with the help of the Holy Spirit who lives in us.

### **Gospel Lesson: Luke 17:1-10**

- 1 Jesus said to his disciples: "Things that cause people to sin are bound to come, but woe to that person through whom they come.
- 2 "It would be better for him to be thrown into the sea with a millstone tied around his neck than for him to cause one of these little ones to sin.
- 3 "So watch yourselves. If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him.
- 4 "If he sins against you seven times in a day, and seven times comes back to you and says, 'I repent,' forgive him."
- 5 The apostles said to the Lord, "Increase our faith!"
- 6 He replied, "If you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mulberry tree, 'Be uprooted and planted in the sea,' and it will obey you.
- 7 "Suppose one of you had a servant plowing or looking after the sheep. Would he say to the servant when he comes in from the field, 'Come along now and sit down to eat'?
- 8 "Would he not rather say, 'Prepare my supper, get yourself ready and wait on me while I eat and drink; after that you may eat and drink'?
- 9 "Would he thank the servant because he did what he was told to do?
- 10 "So you also, when you have done everything you were told to do, should say, 'We are unworthy servants; we have only done our duty.'"

Dear Fellow Redeemed:

“You won’t believe what I just saw!” “You won’t believe what has happened to me!” “Do you know what I heard? It is beyond belief!” How often do you hear someone in breathless excitement utter words similar to these? We usually hear such words when something unexpected, something totally beyond comprehension, and/or something that we feel is a real blessing to us occurs.

In our text today, we hear similar words. Our text in essence tells us:

**“You Won’t Believe What God Has Done!”**

This is in response to Habakkuk’s plea,

*How long, O Lord, how long? (1:2)*

God’s answer to Habakkuk’s plea, first, is

*Be utterly amazed—for I am going to do something you would not believe. (1:5)*

And he finishes by stating:

*The righteous will live by his faith. (2:4)*

Just a little about Habakkuk. He was a prophet sent to minister to God’s people. No doubt, he became frustrated during his ministry and was at wits end regarding the moral decay in society around him. Hence, Habakkuk’s question to God: “*How long, O LORD, must I call for help, but you do not listen? Or cry out to you, ‘Violence!’ but you do not save? Why do you make me look at injustice? Why do you tolerate wrong? Destruction and violence are before me; there is strife, and conflict abounds. Therefore the law is paralyzed, and justice never prevails. The wicked hem in the righteous, so that justice is perverted.*”

How many times do you and I ask this very same question? How often do we look out at society around us and ask, “How long will the Lord allow this to go on?” We see abortions performed hundreds of times a day, people killing other people, sexual misconduct—even up to the highest levels of government! I am confident that Habakkuk’s question has crossed the mind of each person sitting here at least once or twice in recent times.

Maybe this question isn’t always asked concerning the world at large. Maybe we ask this question when we suffer trials and tribulations. “How long, O Lord, will you afflict me with this illness?” “How long, O Lord, must I suffer from my addictions?” “How long, O Lord, until you give me peace in my life?” Yes, this question we ask of God can get quite personal—and we may curse the day we were born much as Job did (Job 3)! “How long, O Lord?”

The reason this question comes up is simple. We can trace the problems that prompt this question to sin. Sin brought evil into the world. Sin makes us look out for number one. Sin makes us selfish. Sin takes its toll on our lives both because of our own actions and because of the actions of those around us. The reason why it seems that bad things happen to good people is because we are all sinful, each one of us. We daily rebel against God. We try to keep those Ten Commandments, but then Jesus tells us in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7) that even our words and our thoughts condemn us just as equally as our actions. The fact is, as Jesus said, there is no one who is good but God (Matthew 19:17; Mark 10:18).

Once a young man asked Jesus what he must do to be saved. Jesus asked him what the Scriptures say. The young man was able to rattle off all the commandments. Jesus said, “Do this and you will live.” “These I have kept since my youth,” the young man responded. So Jesus challenged him: “Go and sell all you have and give it to the poor.” At this, the young man went away sad—he had much and it had become his god. He stumbled at the very first commandment. (Matthew 19:16-22; Mark 10:17-22)

Habakkuk received an answer from God. It wasn't an answer he was hoping for, but he received an answer nevertheless. God answered Habakkuk first by basically saying, "Sit down, this will come as a shock." As recorded in Scripture, God says to Habakkuk: "*Look at the nations and watch-- and be utterly amazed. For I am going to do something in your days that you would not believe, even if you were told.*"

It would be an understatement to say that Habakkuk *was* amazed. For God said that he would chastise the people of Judah. He was sending the Babylonians to destroy Jerusalem and take the Judeans off into captivity. At this point Habakkuk is saying, "What? But that's *not* what *I* had in mind! Do you know that they are an evil people?" You see, Habakkuk didn't really see the big picture. We often don't either. For in Babylon, God would use His people to bring gentiles to faith—no doubt Nebuchadnezzar was one such convert! It is likely that the Magi from the east were descended from these groups of captives.

What Habakkuk had in mind was the belief that somehow Judah was a superior nation. They had their problems, sure, but they were the chosen race, they were the children of Abraham! What Habakkuk didn't realize was that salvation is not a matter of birth. It is not a matter of how well we might live—the Gospel lesson today tells us that even if we keep the Law perfectly, we are only doing what God expects in the first place! Jesus said: "*So you also, when you have done everything you were told to do, should say, 'We are unworthy servants; we have only done our duty.'*"

Habakkuk was also somewhat presumptuous. He wanted God to do something about all this evil. And Habakkuk wanted the punishment carried the way he thought it should be done. "O Lord, do something about these sinful people, but let it be good people who do it if you don't do it yourself."

God tells us also to sit down. He tells us that He is telling us that we will be amazed, that He will do something that we will not believe—even if He tells us. But He tells us nevertheless.

First, God tells us that we are all sinners. The psalmist tells us that we are sinful from birth, sinful since the moment of our conceptions! We daily sin much. We *think* we are doing the right thing, we *think* we only have to try and God will accept us, we *think* we only have to be better than the next person and we should be in heaven. But God tells us two things: "*There is a way that seems right to a man, but in the end it leads to death.*" (Proverbs 16:25) And God also says: "*Be holy because I, the Lord your God, am holy.*" (Leviticus 19:2) That surprises us. You mean God wants me to be *absolutely* perfect? Yes! You mean that God won't accept me for all the good things I have done? Yes! God wants us to be perfect. That's not what mankind thinks, and it is difficult for our human reason to understand. But that is what God demands.

But, you and I say, I cannot be perfect. I make mistakes everyday. There are some big mistakes that I have made in the past that I cannot seem to make atonement for. There are several skeletons in my closet. There is no way I can be perfect.

But that's exactly what God wants—perfection. In every point of His Law, in thought word and deed. No mistakes, no forgetting to do what we know we should do. Total perfection—that's God's criteria for eternal life. James writes for us: "*Whoever keeps the whole Law, and yet stumbles at just one point, is guilty of breaking all of it.*" (James 2:10) Which brings us to the other message that God says that we will not believe—even if He tells us. He has satisfied the payment for our sins. He has given us His perfection so that we may gain admission to heaven.

You see, the reason Jesus died on the cross was not so that you would have another set of rules to follow. We don't meet here every week so that we learn how to do the right things right. We come so that we can be amazed. We come to hear that, though we were sinners, Christ Jesus died for us. We come week after week to be reminded that God himself died for filthy sinners—each and every one of us here today!

God told Habakkuk that other message that “would amaze him, that he wouldn’t believe even if he was told.” In chapter 2, verse 4, God tells Habakkuk: “*but the righteous will live by his faith.*” Reformation is just two short weeks away. This passage will be heard countless times as we look anew at the events that led Martin Luther to post the 95 theses. Luther himself felt that it was *his own* righteousness that saves. Then he finally saw in Romans 1:17 that it was the righteousness that God gives us through the blood of His Son that saves—and where Paul quotes Habakkuk: “*but the righteous will live by his faith.*” Faith is a gift from God. Our eternal salvation is a gift from God. Our heritage as redeemed children of God, adopted sons and daughters is also a gift from God.

This is also a difficult concept to understand. Certainly this, too, doesn’t fit man’s image of salvation. To natural man, sins need to be paid for. There is no “free lunch” as it were. But, as God said to Habakkuk, “*The righteous will live by his faith.*” Paul continues this thought and explains it further when he wrote to the Corinthians: “*God made him who had sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.*” There’s that word again—righteousness, to be right. Christ’s death paid for all our sin to make us right with God again. Yes, even those really big sins, those sins that we *feel* and *think* God cannot forgive He has forgiven! Isaiah reminds us: “*The LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.*” (Isaiah 53:6) **I** can be sure that God died for **my** sins and **you** can be sure God died for **your** sins because, as Paul tells us: “*This is a trustworthy saying: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the worst.*” Just think about that—the greatest sinner in human history, yet God forgave him and used him to further His eternal Kingdom!

Yet Satan works us over. He continues to accuse us of our sins, saying God cannot forgive us. Satan deceives us into thinking God isn’t good to His Word. Satan plays mind games with us, making us question whether we can be saved—in essence, questioning God’s power and also taking on a role God reserves only for Himself—that of judging ourselves!

“*The righteous will live by His faith.*” We can be sure that we have eternal life with our heavenly Father because he told the same to Habakkuk. Yes, it is incomprehensible. It is something that we can’t believe even when God tells us. But take this assurance home with you: God has paid for each and every sin. When Jesus cried out “*It is finished!*” he said more than his miserable ordeal was over. The Greek word used was the same word used on a bill of sale. It simply means, “PAID IN FULL.” What happens when you make that last payment on a car or home? Not only is the bill marked “Paid in Full,” but also you are given clear title to that piece of property. Eternal life is also ours!

The message that God gives us, both that we must be perfect, then that He fulfilled perfection so that “*the righteous will live by faith,*” is so unbelievable that we cannot help but say, “*You Won’t Believe What God Has Done!*” The world around us may be skeptical, but that joy and surprise can remain with us as we share that unbelievable message from God. The world, under the influence of Satan, may mock us, but we seek to reach out to others with the message. We do this despite objections, for Paul summed it up to Timothy in our Epistle reading earlier:

*So do not be ashamed to testify about our Lord, or ashamed of me his prisoner. But join with me in suffering for the gospel, by the power of God, who has saved us and called us to a holy life—not because of anything we have done but because of his own purpose and grace. This grace was given us in Christ Jesus before the beginning of time, but it has now been revealed through the appearing of our Savior, Christ Jesus, who has destroyed death and has brought life and immortality to light through the gospel.*

Dear brothers and sisters, you won’t believe what God has done! The method won’t be what you might think it should be. But God has done an amazing thing! He came to earth to live a perfect life (what He demanded from us). He died to pay the price we should pay (death for our sins). He rose again so that we, too, would rise and live eternally. You won’t believe what God has done—but believe that the righteous will live by faith.

Amen