

The Rule of Faith

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

You frequently see this verse cited by various Reformed teachers as an explanation of the basis on which God saves people. The typical explanation links this verse with Abraham's faith (Ge 15:6). This interpretation misses the primary language of the passage. It does not say that an unjust man, by exercising faith in God, shall become a just man. Rather it describes the rule by which a just (justified) man orders his conduct, by the rule of faith. That is faith guides his conduct and decisions in life.

Before making the point regarding faith, the prophet sets a contrast between the lifted up soul and the faith soul. A man who exalts himself and magnifies his personal importance is the lifted up man, but the prophet reminds us that such a man is not an upright man. The Christian life is not "all about me," despite the dominance of that attitude among contemporary professing Christians. "Me-centered" Christianity fails the first test that Jesus assigns to authentic discipleship, self-denial. The typical self-centered profession of Christianity in our time actually denies Christ in favor of self. Jesus emphatically stated that no man can serve two masters. To the extent that we focus our faith on self, we precisely measure our spiritual distance from Christ and New Testament discipleship. Paul makes the same point in Ro 6:16. In fact most of Romans 6 deals with the true role of the faithful believer as a servant. A servant doesn't live in constant self-assertion. The servant's whole identity appears in his/her master, not in self. Jesus taught a number of parables that dealt with the self-assertive and self-serving servant. In all of these parables the master returned and called the selfish servant to account for his failure. Inevitably the self-serving servant ended up in rejection and failure.

Habakkuk introduces the lifted-up soul in contrast to the soul whose conduct is characterized by faith. Faith draws us out of self and into the One whom we trust, the One in whom our faith rests. Paul will remind us of this point in terms of our preaching. "For we preach not ourselves, but Christ Jesus the Lord; and ourselves your servants for Jesus' sake" (2Co 4:5). Paul draws precisely the same contrast as Habakkuk, an exalted self versus the servant who preaches and walks by faith.

Early Christians often referred to the guiding principle that governed their life as "the rule of faith." In *First Apology* Justin Martyr wrote his defense of Christianity to the Roman emperor. Rome viewed established religions in conquered cultures with rather benign neutrality, but she fiercely stamped out any new religion. The Jews opposed Christianity on the basis that it was a new religion. Justin made dual assertions in his apology. First he asserted that Christianity is not a new break-away from Judaism, but Judaism's ultimate fulfillment. Secondly, he asserted that Christianity is the full expression of the philosophy of many of the ancient Greek philosophers and poets.

The distinction that Christianity brought to its Judaistic roots was that it replaced a near endless list of rules and regulations with the simple "rule of faith."

Roy Zuck views the contrast of this verse in its historical setting as referring to proud Babylon.

"As an introduction to the woeful taunt-songs Habakkuk was instructed to record, God gave His summary condemnation of the conceited character of the Babylonian: **He is puffed up**. Like a bloated toad, these arrogant people hopped along toward destruction. They were swollen (the Heb. verb 'ap_al is used only here in the OT) with evil passions. Their **desires were not upright**.

"Yahweh then declared that a **righteous** person, by stark contrast, **will live by his faith** (emûnâh, "steadfastness or faithfulness"). A righteous Israelite who remained loyal to God's moral precepts and was humble before the Lord enjoyed God's abundant life. To "live" meant to experience God's blessing by enjoying a life of security, protection, and fullness. Conversely, an apparently victorious but proud

and perverse Babylonian would die. Faithfulness (NIV marg.) **and faith are related. One who trusts in the Lord is one who relies on Him and is faithful to Him.**”[1]

Notice Zuck’s interpretation of the phrase “live by his faith,” to “experience God’s blessings by enjoying a life of security, protection, and fullness.” Given that the Babylonians were rapidly ascending and would soon defeat Judah, Habakkuk’s theme is the question of why God would allow an evil nation to ascend while His own people suffered. In a few short years many thousands of Jews would be captured and taken against their wills to Babylon for seventy years of slavery. Yet, the faithful among them would enjoy “security, protection, and fullness.” This truth harmonizes with our study verse in the last chapter from Hab 3:17-19. Faith in God is not contingent on external success and comforts.

Our human nature loves to see everything in vivid contrasts. We love blacks and whites, but life often forces us to look at a steady parade of mixed hues. At the time of Jesus’ Incarnation the Jewish culture had become hopelessly steeped in legalism. From God’s simple Ten Commandments, they continuously added interpretations and extraneous rules till the number of binding rules exceed a thousand. Imagine having to filter each decision and life choice through the maze of over a thousand different rules. You would need to be a trained lawyer to make any reasonable effort to comply with all these rules!

Christians often draw their own neatly defined contrasts between legalism and antinomianism, rejection of all Biblical rules for personal conduct (“God loves me too much to expect me to obey all those rules and regulations.”). Sadly both of these lifestyles miss the mark that God set in our study verse. The verse rejects both views as faulty and deficient. It denies the legalist’s view of pleasing God by adding just one more rule that will make everything right, and it equally rejects the antinomian denial of any rule of personal conduct.

For the subjective, emotion-based contemporary professing Christian, faith is little more than a vague, never clearly defined concept that deals with how “I feel” about God. Do you see the dominance of the self-centeredness in this attitude? For this person faith has almost nothing to do with God and everything to do with the way the individual wants to look at life. Zuck correctly elevates faith above the subjective emotionalism of our time and defines it as faithfulness. Biblical faith does not deal with our individual emotional “feelings” about God and life. It deals with the degree to which we grow out of, and above, self and live life according to God’s way, not our own. God’s way appears in the clear moral and ethical teachings of Scripture, not subject to how anyone feels. In the Ten Commandments, a timeless reflection of God’s moral character and His expectation of His people, there is not a single word about any of the commandments applying only if we “feel” like obeying them. You may feel wonderful or dreadful; those principles equally reveal God’s fixed moral code.

The “rule of faith” for the just man is not how he feels, but how God views conduct. God’s way rules over our individual preferences. And God’s way is revealed in Scripture, not in the individual’s subjective “feelings.” When our granddaughter was just beginning to talk, she had rather sensitive feelings about how others treated her. Often she would cry and complain that someone “hurt my feelers.” This childish attitude sadly characterizes far too many professing Christians of our time. Faith is not all about our “feelers,” but about what God teaches us to do in Scripture. James is not dealing with salvation, but with discipleship when he writes that faith without works “is dead, being alone.” Scripture consistently affirms that our God is trustworthy. The only faithful response is to walk by faith according to His teaching, not our own preferences. Do you want those whom you love and respect to see you as a truly faithful Christian? Follow Habakkuk’s teaching. Avoid Babylon-like pride in yourself, and walk by faith. The more faithfully you follow the teachings of Scripture the more you walk by “the rule of faith.”

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