Habakkuk 2:4 (Hugh Henry Snell) 173459

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Psalm 119:96; Hab. 2:4.

“It is written, Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God.” (Matt. 4:4.) On such an authority as this, we are not only warranted, but it is our duty to ponder well “every word” of God. “The words of the Lord are pure words, as silver tried in a furnace of earth, purified seven times.” (Ps. 12:6.) The more they are searched into, the brighter they come forth.

The ancient oracle, “The just shall live by his faith,” is adduced by the apostle Paul as corroborative of the doctrine he was teaching on three different occasions; and with such diversity, that the emphasis is laid on different word on each occasion of his reference to this oracle.

He first refers to it in defining what the Gospel is. (Rom. 1:16.) “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. For therein is the righteousness of God revealed from faith to faith: as it is written, The just shall live by faith.”

The point is righteousness, “How can man be just with God.” Of old the way of righteousness by works had been “revealed,” and the answer to it was not believing in the revelation, but doing the things prescribed in the revelation. Such was the law. But “the ministry of the prophets,” witnessed that none had attained righteousness in that way, and at the same time pointed to righteousness in another way, “righteousness in the way of faith,” and the answer to it was, believing the record that God gave concerning His Son renouncing the one way of righteousness as utterly impossible, and by faith receiving Him who is the righteousness of God, even His unspeakable Gift. In exemplifying his definition of the gospel (Rom. 3:21, 22), the apostle plainly declares that this way of righteousness was witnessed unto by the prophets. “But now the righteousness of God without the law is manifested, being witnessed by the law and the prophets; even the righteousness of God by faith of Jesus Christ, unto all and upon all them that believe.”

The emphatic word in this connection is, “The just,” or the righteous person; and he only is so, who becomes so “by faith.” The righteous in the way of faith shall live, in contradistinction to the law which said the righteous in the way of works shall live. In the context of the prophet, the words are, “Behold his soul which is lifted up is not upright in him.” This doubtlessly primarily refers to Nebuchadnezzar, or indeed any great potentate, who regards men “as the fishes of the sea, as the creeping things that have no ruler over them, which they take up with the angle and catch them in their net,” as though men were given into their hands, for their sport, or riches, or convenience. Thus their hearts become lifted up, on account of their might, and prowess, and grandeur, as the heart of Nebuchadnezzar was when he said, “Is not this great Babylon, that I have built for the house of the kingdom by the might of my power, and for the honour of my majesty?” There was no uprightness here, no righteousness which God could recognize, but he had regard to the lowly, whose trust was in Him, and saw righteousness there, where man could only see poverty and misery. The one who exalted himself must be abased, the one who humbled himself would be exalted. But the context morally is of general application. He who prides himself on his integrity, wisdom, or strength, as commending him to God, or causing him to regard others with contempt, whosoever he be, his heart is not “upright in him.” To be right with God rests on an entirely different ground, even dependence on God Himself, for righteousness, wisdom, and strength. If a man prefer his own claim to give him a standing before God, he thereby forces God to try the validity of his claim, and when God does this, He always finds man wanting and come short of His glory. To this the prophets witnessed. To this the history of Job witnesses. Well may Eliphaz say, “Can a man be profitable unto God, as he that is wise may be profitable unto himself? Is it any pleasure to the Almighty, that thou art righteous? or is it gain to Him that thou makest thy ways perfect?” (Job 22:2, 3.) Or again, Elihu, “If thou be righteous, what givest thou Him? or what receiveth He of thine hand? Thy wickedness may hurt a man as thou art; and thy righteousness may profit the son of man.” (Job 35:7, 8.) But it was one thing to prove Job in the wrong in justifying himself, and another to show how righteousness is of God. To this the prophets witnessed; but what they witnessed is now distinctly revealed in “the glorious gospel of the blessed God.” Yet even to this day, so innate is the thought in the heart of man, that the power be has, whether of intellect, or morals, to benefit his fellowmen, will commend him to God, that he stumbles at the very threshold, and refuses to acknowledge that righteousness must be in the way of faith. It must come from God to man, instead of being rendered by man to God, because man has been proved to be unable to render it; and if it be of God, it must be received by faith, and that which God presents to us is nothing short of His own Son—the very righteousness of God, “THE LORD OUR RIGHTEOUSNESS.” This is the wisdom of the believer, that he receives Christ Jesus, made unto him of God righteousness, sanctification, and redemption. So that he glories only in the Lord. His heart is upright in him.

The second time in which this oracle is quoted is Gal. 3:11, and in this connection the emphasis appears to be laid on the word “live.” The Gelation churches had found “blessedness” in receiving the Apostle’s testimony unto Jesus and His finished work. On believing in Jesus they had received the Holy Spirit of promise, as the Spirit of adoption. But they were in danger of nullifying the grace of God, and the death of Christ, by giving heed to those who taught “that it was needful to circumcise them, and to command them to keep the law of Moses.” (Acts 15:5.) There was, and is something peculiarly fascinating (Gal. 3:1,) in the adoption of a system of ordinances—the flesh can fully recognize such a system. Human intellect will busily occupy itself in finding out hidden meaning in the ordinances, and it quite falls in with the natural feelings to regard religions ordinances as subserving morality, and conducive to order. This is very apparent in our days; but how much more powerful must the inducement to turn to ordinances have been, when those ordinances were originally of divine appointment. In meeting this peculiar fascination, the apostle dwells largely on his own personal history. Saul the Pharisee was an accomplished and strict religionist. His zeal led him by great discernment to persecute the church, as utterly subversive of legal judaism. What power wan it that Wrought so marvelously on him as to cause him to preach that faith which he once destroyed? It was “the revelation of the Son of God in him.” This inward revelation was indeed accompanied by an outward revelation to him; but the outward revelation Would not have produced

such a momentous change; it struck down and terrified, and convinced the potsherd of the folly of contending with his Maker; but the inward revelation presented an object of dependence to the soul, and made known the saving power of that Name which Saul had only known before to blaspheme. When the mighty reality that the crucified One was the Lord of glory burst upon his soul, Saul needed nothing farther: he conferred not with flesh and blood, but immediately preached that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and was emancipated from the law, and fleshly religion. Thus born again by faith in Jesus as the Son of God, he had to begin his religious course anew, serving the God of his fathers now in spirit and in truth; and knowing how entirely foreign to this new life communicated to his soul, was the law of commandments contained in ordinances. Through the law he had become dead to the law, that he might live unto God. A system of ordinances, even those of the law itself, would hinder this; it keeps off from God, instead of bringing to God. How jealous was Saul of being thrown into a distance from God, after having been brought nigh to Him by the blood of Jesus. Nothing but seeing that he had no more to do with law and its ordinances than a dead man, and the conscious possession of another life, which had its paramount object, could help him in realized nearness to God. “I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live; yet not I but Christ liveth in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh, I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave Himself for me.” This new life, a life derived from the risen Jesus, a life which would only have its full scope in glory, when all its interests and affections would be absorbed in one object, Jesus, the Lamb slain, the grand ordinance of heaven, this life could not now be subject to ordinances.. Those ordinances were well adapted for the flesh and for the world, but they were foreign to the spirit and heaven. This life could only be sustained by faith now on that one Object which it would behold by sight in heaven, “the life I now live in the flesh, I live by the faith of the Son of God.” A return to the law and its ordinances would frustrate the grace of God, and nullify the death of Christ, as to any result in blessing to sinners. The doctrine of the cross was imperiled by the attempt to superadd the law to what Christ had done; their danger was great of attempting to be made perfect by the flesh, after having so happily begun in the Spirit. They were in danger of losing the blessing of Abraham, and of bringing themselves under the curse, by thus subjecting themselves to the law; for justification on that ground was impossible; for “the just shall live by faith.” And the law is not of faith. A Christian does not live by what he doeth, but by faith in Christ, and by what Christ has done. He who thinks to add to his security in Christ, by that which he himself doeth, is in danger of getting off from the rock to trust to a moving quicksand. How important is it to the stability of our souls not only to be well assured that redemption alone is to be found in the blood of Christ, even remission of sins, but that the life we have received is only nourished by faith in Him from whom we have received it. Jesus is “the bread of life,” and “the water of life,” and the light of life.” All our springs are in Him. “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.” Jesus lives for us, even as He died for us. Surely “the just shall live by faith.”

The third place in which this oracle is referred to is Heb. 10:38; and in this connection it is more directly in harmony with its context in the prophet, and the emphasis is on the word “faith.” “Now the just shall live by faith: but if any man draw back, my soul shall have no pleasure in him; but we are not of them who draw back unto perdition: but of them that believe to the saving of the soul. Now faith is the substance of things hoped for.”

Dark and dreary was the season when Habakkuk saw his burden. Everything appeared out of course; “the law slacked, and judgment not going forth.” Had God then given up the moral government of the world?—such was his appeal to the Lord Himself. The answer to his appeal was, that more terrible things were in store; a mighty conqueror and oppressor was to be raised up against God’s rebellious people, but “his mind should change and he should offend, imputing this his power unto his god.”

The truth bursts on the prophet, that “the Lord had ordained them for judgment, and established them for correction;” but still there is the difficulty, that “He who is of purer eyes than to behold evil” should allow the wicked to devour the man that is more righteous than himself, and that the wicked should so have it his own way, as if men were fishes for him is catch in his net and do with as he liked. Can the righteous God allow this—allow, as it were, men to deify their own power? (See chap. 1:14-17.) The prophet in reply to his arguing is told to “write the vision, and make it plain upon tables, that he may run that readeth it.” Present circumstances were to be read in the light of the vision of the glory of God. The vision of that glory was “for an appointed time; but at the end it would speak, and not lie.” It would not disappoint those who waited for it. It might tarry, but still the word is, “wait for it; because it will surely come, it will not tarry.” And then follows the announcement: “Behold, his soul which is lifted up is not upright in him; but the just shall live by his faith.” In this connection the emphatic word is faith contradicting appearances, faith the substance of things hoped for. It is faith looking at the things which are unseen. (2 Cor. 4:18.) This faith results in calm composure, holy joy, and peaceful triumph. (Hab. 3:17-19.)

Those addressed in the epistle to the Hebrews had in the early days of their confession of Christ, “dared a great fight of afflictions;” but they had been supported in “holding fast the confidence and the rejoicing of the hope.” (Heb. 3:6.) Things had not changed, the confession of Christ still necessitated the cross, continuous and perhaps increasing trial might endanger relapse, for acquiescence in worldly religion (Judaism) would be deliverance from present trial. Their circumstances were very similar to that of the prophet; righteousness suffering, worldliness triumphing, with a prospect of increasing darkness. The apostle does not say, Write the vision; but, “Cast not away therefore your confidence, which hath great recompence of reward. For ye have need of patience that, after ye have done the will of God, ye might receive the promise.” They were still to suffer on like the prophet; but they too were to look at the present trial in the light of the coming glory. But there is this happy difference, it is no longer a vision to be waited for, but a person; it in not a distant future—though it tarry, wait for it; but, “For yet a little while and He that shall come will come, and will not tarry.” His coming, and His coming alone, would bring the expected deliverance; the place of the church is that of endurance up to the end. His coming would place righteousness in the ascendancy; then a king would reign in righteousness. The coming of the Lord Jesus will solve every question; His manifestation will bring every thing to light. “Now the just shall live by faith,” not by sight; we do not judge according to appearances but we judge righteous judgment; for the Holy Ghost Himself, the Spirit of judgment (Is. 11), enables us to judge of all things with reference to the Lord Jesus Christ. As truth-doers we come to Him as “the light,” and form our judgments accordingly. The blessed hope set before us, even the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ to receive us unto Himself, enables us to see present things in a light in which no other can discern them. How important is faith in this connection, that is, in connection with our hope. But the danger is great of drawing back and subsiding into the religious decorum of the day, forming our standard by the conventional religion or morals of the day, instead of by our hope. Solemn indeed is the word, “If any man draw back, my soul shall have no pleasure in him.” Our God is a jealous God, and is especially jealous of our being turned aside from the honor that cometh from God only, which is Christ in us the hope of glory, to something of present honor. May we join with the apostle in uprightness of heart, saying, as it is our privilege, “We are not of them who draw back unto perdition, but of them who believe (but of faith1), to the saving of the soul. Now faith is the substance of things hoped for.” May we exult with the prophet, “Although the fig-tree shall not blossom, neither shall fruit be in the vines, the labor 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; yet I will rejoice in the Lord, I will joy in the God of my salvation. 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.”

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