

# The Righteous Shall Live by Faith

By [Wayne Jackson](#)

The expression, “The just [righteous] shall live by faith,” is a wonderful affirmation from the Holy Spirit of sacred revelation, brimming with truth and comfort. It occurs four times in Scripture—once in the book of Habakkuk, twice in Paul’s epistles, and finally in the epistle to the Hebrews.

## Habakkuk

The book of Habakkuk was probably composed near the end of the seventh century B.C., perhaps not too long before the coming of the Chaldeans (Babylonians) which resulted in Judah’s captivity for seventy years (Jeremiah 25:12). It records a dialogue between God and Habakkuk concerning a moral issue that troubled the prophet. He was anxious about the corrupt state of the kingdom of Judah. Lawlessness and violence were rampant (1:1-4). **Why** was the Lord tolerating such?

Jehovah replied that he was not ignoring the evil of his people. He intended to raise up the Chaldeans to severely discipline Judah. When he was finished using them as the “instrument” of his wrath (cf. Isaiah 10:5), he would deal with these pagans as well (1:5-11). In chapter two, five indictments (each prefaced with a “woe”) are leveled against the wicked Babylonians. They are obsessed with the acquisition of territory (vv. 5-8); the Chaldeans are consumed with greed and arrogance (vv. 9-11); they are excessively violent (vv. 12-14); they are worldly (vv. 15-17); finally, they are immersed in idolatry (vv. 18-20).

The prophet still was perplexed. He exalted the Lord’s holy nature but wondered if his mode of punishment was consistent with his lofty character. The prophet would wait for the divine answer (1:12-2:2). God responded by a vision, declaring that he was determined to deal with the arrogant and evil Babylonians; by way of contrast, however, “the righteous shall live by his faith” (2:4). A study of this sentence is most illuminating. Let us first note the common meanings of the three major terms of the text—“just” (or “righteous”), “live,” and “by faith.”

### “Righteous”

The term “just” (“righteous”) is used in the Scriptures in various senses. It may be employed in a **relative** way; for example, Joseph, Jesus’ foster father, was a “righteous” man (Matthew 1:19)—not perfect, but relatively righteous. On the other hand, the word also may embody a more **specific** focus.

When Habakkuk declared that the righteous shall live by his faith, he uses the Hebrew term *saddiq*, an adjective found 206 times in the Old Testament. It is rendered “just” (KJV) or “righteous” (ASV, ESV), and, by some “justified.” Mounce suggests the word “describes those who act in such a way that their behavior accords with some standard” (2006, 593). The expression, as employed in the Old Testament, is “bound inseparably to the idea of judicial standing” (Robertson 1990, 175).

### “Live”

The word “live” also has a variety of meanings, depending upon its context. It can be employed in the sense of one’s manner of life, his behavior (Romans 6:2; 2 Corinthians 1:12). In addition, however, it can signify to live in the sense of surviving a crisis. Spiritually it can suggest the idea of deliverance from sin—in a contemporary sense (Romans 6:4). Or it can denote an abiding relationship with God beyond death, in contrast to eternal death (Revelation 20:14), which is a permanent estrangement from the Creator (2 Thessalonians 1:9)—a horrible contemplation indeed!

### “Faith”

“Faith” can convey the idea of an objective body of truth, in which one must place confidence and to which he must submit (Acts 6:7; Jude 3). The term also may suggest one’s personal conviction and his mode of life relative to objective truth (cf. the use of “by faith” so frequently found in Hebrews 11). Note how the language in Habakkuk 2:4b refers to “his” faith or “faithfulness” (ASVfn).

Even that pronoun is a matter of disagreement among Bible scholars. Some refer the pronoun “his” to God, in this way: “The justified will be delivered as a result of the **Lord’s faithfulness** to his covenant promise.” This comes quite near to subtly suggesting the Calvinist theory that justification is a matter of what **God** does; supposedly, then, it is not the

faithfulness of his people.

This is not the manner in which the New Testament writers cite the text to reinforce their points (though we concede the Holy Spirit's flexibility in using his own words in a different context; see Jackson 2009, 189-205). More likely Jehovah's promise to the prophet was this: those who are **faithful** to the Lord's word will be accounted as just, and, as a result, will "live," or be delivered from impending punitive judgment. Certainly that is the thrust of Hebrews 10:38-39 (see later).

## Paul in Romans

The church in Rome may have been planted by some who yielded to the gospel on the day of Pentecost (cf. Acts 2:10). At any rate, the obedient faith of those saints was recognized throughout the empire (Romans 1:8; cf. 16:26). At the commencement of his longest epistle, Paul sets forth this basic proposition.

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

The following thrilling facts are chronicled in this illustrious text:

First, Paul was not ashamed of the gospel because its origin was with God (Mark 1:14). He thus believed it, had embraced it, loved it, proclaimed it, defended it, was persecuted for it, and was so welded to it that, in a sense, he could refer to it as "my gospel" (Romans 2:16). Ultimately, he died for it (2 Timothy 4:6-8).

Second, the nature of the gospel was in the reality of its "good news"—good in content (concerning Christ's atoning death, his resurrection, and glorification), good in regulating earthly conduct, and good for directing one's life heavenward. Moreover, it was powerful in force, divine in essence, and effective in procuring salvation from sin. It was non-discriminating in that it embraced the two major segments of humanity—Jew and Gentile alike.

Third, the blessings of the gospel were conditional. The gospel conveys information about how to access the power of God to save, but this power is efficacious only on behalf of those who believe its message. The verb "believe" is a present tense participle form, which indicates it is an **active** faith that remains sustained (cf. Hebrews 3:12). Belief is not a one-time act that forever saves beyond the possibility of forfeiture and condemnation (later see Hebrews 10:39).

Moreover, belief is not a mere acknowledgement of historical facts, nor simply an emotional disposition to "trust" Christ as Savior; rather, it embraces obedience (John 3:36; Hebrews 5:8-9; see also Jackson 2006, 415-418; Thayer 1958, 511). Even in this letter to Roman Christians the apostle plainly demonstrates that these people were made "free from sin" in consequence of their having been "obedient from the heart" to a specific "form of teaching" (6:17-18; cf. vv. 3-4).

Fourth, within the gospel of Christ (and nowhere else) the "righteousness of God" is revealed. The "righteousness of God" is the divine pattern whereby sinful people may be "credited" (cf. Romans 4:3ff, NIV) as "righteous"—not on the basis of meritorious, humanly-devised works (Titus 3:5a), but by means of the sacrificial death of Jesus, when accessed by obedient faith (Romans 3:21-26; 5:1; 6:3-4).

Fifth, the expression "from faith unto faith" is highly controversial. It certainly does **not** suggest the idea of a salvation that is "solely" by faith (Johnson 1974, 27), if faith is viewed in the sense of an isolated act of believing, divorced from supplementary conditions of redemption. It would be a different matter if "faith unto faith" signified a life of **obedient** faith, as reflected, for example, by the examples of dedication catalogued in Hebrews 11; cf. James 2:14-26). The "faith unto faith" expression may express the idea of faith's growth, for instance, from weak faith to strong faith (Romans 14:1; 15:1; cf. Psalm 84:5-7).

Sixth, the apostolic declaration is undergirded by inspired Old Testament precedent—"as it **stands** written" (Habakkuk 2:4b), a Greek perfect tense form, characteristically used "to express the authority and present validity of what is written ... an appeal to Scripture" (Balz and Schneider 1990, 261). The principle of having "life" by being credited as "just" by means of "faithfulness" spans the ages.

## Paul in Galatians

Paul established the Galatian churches on his first missionary campaign (Acts 13:4-14:26). Perhaps a year or so after that expedition, the apostle learned of a doctrinal problem that had wormed its way into those congregations (Galatians 2:4). Hence, the first four chapters of his letter to the Galatians deal with these matters. Chapters one and two address an obnoxious faction among those churches that questioned the authority of Paul and the validity of his apostleship. Chapters three and four deal with a Jewish-oriented heresy that attempted to amalgamate certain elements of the law of Moses (e.g., circumcision; see Acts 15:1) with the gospel of Christ. Chapters five and six address practical matters concerning Christian living.

Let us focus momentarily on chapter three: (a) The apostle begins by demonstrating that this new “hybrid gospel” is inconsistent with their initial reception of the saving message of Christ. Their original obedience to the Christian message, with supernatural documentation and wonderful blessings, was not bestowed by means of the Mosaic system (vv. 1-5); why should they thus desire to return to the former system? (b) The example of Abraham, father of the Hebrew nation, was introduced. He was “reckoned as righteous,” long before (five centuries) the law was received by Moses (v. 6); hence the Mosaic system was not an exclusive conduit to righteousness. Too, through the great patriarch, God made known the future reality that even the Gentiles would be accepted on the same **principle**, i.e., that of obedient faith (vv. 7-9; cf. Hebrews 11:8ff; James 2:21-24).

Paul continued by highlighting the logical consequence of their heretical position. They were attempting to revert to a law that now was obsolete, and could not provide them with redemption. For one thing, the law demanded perfect obedience (cf. “all things” – v. 10), which none could render. Their adherence to that system, therefore, placed them under a “curse.” Justification could not be obtained by keeping a cancelled law (v. 11a; cf. 2:21; Colossians 2:13-17).

The apostle concludes this particular argument, therefore, by declaring that the principle of justification by faith (3:11) was foreshadowed centuries earlier by the prophet Habakkuk, (citing 2:4b).

In the subsequent context, the apostle contends that being under Moses’ law was like being in prison (v. 23), yet waiting for “the faith” (the Christian system), which was to be revealed in due time. Another illustration emphasized that the Old Testament was like a slave who escorted a young child to school; once the child has been deposited at his destination, the slave’s job was completed. The point is, since the gospel system has arrived, the law has forfeited its formal role (vv. 24-25).

Paul then demonstrated how one comes into a saving relationship with Christ—which is the equivalent of being “justified,” or declared “righteous,” by faith. He says, “You [Christians] all are the children of God, through **the** faith [the article is in the Greek text], in Christ Jesus. For [a conjunction setting forth a conclusion] as many of you as were immersed into Christ did put on Christ” (vv. 26-27). Thus the inspired apostle explains his own use of the expression, “the righteous shall live by faith.” It is not a “faith only”; it is a submissive faith. One that yields to the revealed conditions of redemption.

## Hebrews 10:38a

The book of Hebrews has much in common with Galatians. Both deal with an early attempt to influence Christians to gravitate back toward Judaism. In Galatians there was an effort to blend the two systems; in Hebrews there was a strong force that sought to persuade Christians to abandon their faith altogether, revert to Judaism, and await the “real” Messiah.

The book may be summarized as follows: (1) an opening argument for the superiority of Christ over angels—by whom Moses’ law was relayed (1:1-2:18); (2) the supremacy of Jesus, God’s “Son,” over Moses, God’s “servant” (3:1-4:13); (3) the Aaronic priesthood was replaced by that of Christ, our high priest (4:14-10:18); (4) practical exhortations to faithfulness (10:19-13:25). Our present focus will be on Chapter ten.

The inspired writer first argues that the animal sacrifices of the Old Testament regime could not effectively deal with the sin problem: (1) They were unable to “make perfect” the sinful Hebrew people; they had to be offered repetitiously; it was impossible for animal offerings to fully atone for sins (10:1-4). (2) Christ was the perfect sacrifice to remedy the sin problem. The incarnation of Jesus was designed to facilitate this desperate human need. Thus, the first covenant was taken away and the second was established, through which sanctification could be achieved. Jesus’ offering was a once-for-all event (vv. 5-10). (3) The abiding effect of the new covenant provided a new economy by which the “one sacrifice for sins forever” became available. This was accentuated by the fact that our high priest, after his offering, “sat

down” at the right hand of the Father, henceforth reigning until all his enemies are vanquished (vv. 11-14; 1 Corinthians 15:25). (4) The prophetic testimony of the Holy Spirit, through Jeremiah (31:31-34), proclaimed this reality centuries earlier (vv. 15-18).

In view of this glorious redemptive plan, the Christians were encouraged to draw near to their Lord in fullness of faith, hold fast their confession of hope, and be faithful in their duties. This was in view of “the day” (almost certainly the destruction of Jerusalem) that progressively could be **seen** (discerned) on the prophetic horizon (vv. 19-25; cf. Matthew 24:1-34). Note the three hortatory injunctions “let us” (vv. 22-24). A stern warning was issued against abandoning Christ and returning to a life of habitual, willful sin, in anticipation of some false messiah pledged by the Jewish detractors. What a “fearful thing” that would be (vv. 19-31).

The sacred writer urges these brothers to reflect on their earlier days of persecution as followers of Jesus. Certainly they had lost possessions, but they were to contemplate the better possession that would abide forever. They are encouraged to charge up their spiritual batteries, for in a “little while” one would “come” who “shall not tarry” (v. 37).

Two questions arise: (1) Who is the coming one? (2) What is the significance of “little while”? It is generally agreed that the coming one is Christ.

A few expositors believe that this coming indicates the Lord’s coming in **providential judgment** upon the city of Jerusalem by the hand of the Roman armies (Matthew 24:30; 22:7; see Kik 1948, 78-85). Both Barnes (1955, 247) and Milligan (1956, 29-293) contend for this view. This would harmonize with v. 25, “as you **see** the day approaching.”

On the other hand, most scholars see it as a reference to the second coming of the Lord (Guthrie 2007, 982). If such is the case, the “little while” could signify a brief period compared to the eternal ages to follow. Prophetic events frequently are framed in a relative-time fashion for dramatic effect (cf. James 5:8; Revelation 2:16; 3:11; 22:7, 12, 20).

Finally, the writer appeals to Habakkuk’s text, but with some alteration since he substantially is following the Greek (Septuagint [LXX]) version. As noted earlier, in the original setting, Habakkuk seems to make application to the deliverance of Judah’s “righteous” ones from the judgment of the captivity, while the writer of Hebrews sees the ultimate fulfillment in the faithful being rescued from the judgment to be imposed by the return of Jesus.

But a word of caution is packaged within an expression of confidence: “But we are not of them that shrink back unto perdition; but of them that have faith unto the saving of the soul.” He will illustrate the quality of this latter class by the fifteen Old Testament heroes he catalogs in the following chapter.

Those who “shrink back” are set in contrast to those who remain “faithful.” To shrink back is to be overcome by fear. Guthrie says it represents one who has a “crooked soul,” over against the “righteous person, who lives by faith.” The grammar indicates that both are in the same general category—the Christian community (982-983). This is a devastating demolition of the Augustine-Calvin notion that: (1) salvation is unconditional; and (2) a child of God can never be lost.


“Perdition” derives from the Greek term *apoleia* (found eighteen times in the New Testament), rendered in the KJV by such terms as “damnable,” “damnation,” “destruction,” “perdition” (eight times), “pernicious way,” and “waste.” It does not suggest annihilation, but instead the “loss of well-being” (Vine 1991, 212). It is a synonym for hell. The expression clearly shows that even a true believer can apostatize and be lost.

## Conclusion

Thus concludes our study of the inspired phrase, “The righteous shall live by faith,” and the various applications of it employed by biblical writers, both in the original Old Testament context, and in the uses made of it by the New Testament writers. How rich and thrilling it is. It embodies a principle of faithful submission to God that issues ultimately in eternal life. Thanks be to our Heavenly Father for his mercy and grace. May we be exhorted to fidelity all our earthly days.

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Jeremiah 25:12; Isaiah 10:5; Matthew 1:19; Romans 6:2; 2 Corinthians 1:12; Romans 6:4; Revelation 20:14; 2 Thessalonians 1:9; Acts 6:7; Jude 3; Hebrews 11; Habakkuk 2:4; Hebrews 10:38-39; Acts 2:10; Romans 1:8; Mark 1:14; Romans 2:16; 2 Timothy 4:6-8; Hebrews 3:12; Hebrews 10:39; John 3:36; Hebrews 5:8-9; Romans 4:3; Titus 3:5; Romans 3:21-26, 5:1, 6:3-4; James 2:14-26; Romans 14:1, 15:1; Psalm 84:5-7; Acts 13:4-14:26; Galatians 2:4; Acts 15:1; Hebrews 11:8; James 2:21-24; Colossians 2:13-17; Hebrews 10:38; 1 Corinthians 15:25; Matthew 24:1-34; Matthew 24:30, 22:7; James 5:8; Revelation 2:16, 3:11, 22:7, 12, 20

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