

THE PILLAR OF CHRISTIAN CHARACTER

Second Olivet Missionary Baptist Church

November 29, 2017

Pastor Cyrus L. Thornton

1

The Starting Point

Genuine Faith

In a commonplace way, faith or trust underlies how everyone lives. We drink water for various reasons and trust that it has been safely processed. We trust that the food we purchase at the supermarket or that we eat at a restaurant is uncontaminated. We routinely cash or deposit checks, even though the paper they're written on has no intrinsic value. We put our trust in the reliability of the company or person who issues the check. We sometimes submit to the surgeon's scalpel, even though we don't have any expertise in medical procedures. Every day we exercise an innate faith in someone or something.

WHAT IS SPIRITUAL FAITH?

In a similar way, when you have spiritual faith you willingly accept basic ideas and act on many things you don't understand. However, your spiritual faith does not operate innately, as natural faith does. Natural trust accompanies natural birth, and spiritual trust is a direct result of spiritual birth. Paul's familiar words in [Ephesians 2:8](#) remind us, "For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God."

A modern-language version of one of the older church confessions (closely patterned after the Westminster Confession) provides this clear, doctrinal description of practical faith for the believer:

By faith a Christian believes everything to be true that is made known in the Word, in which God speaks authoritatively. He also perceives in the Word a degree of excellence superior

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to all other writings, indeed to all things that the world contains. The Word shows the glory of God as seen in His various attributes, the excellence of Christ in His nature and in the offices, He bears, and the power and perfection of the Holy Spirit in all the works in which He is engaged. In this way the Christian is enabled to trust himself implicitly to the truth thus believed, and to render service according to the different requirements of the various parts of Scripture. To the commands he yields obedience; when he hears threatening's he trembles; as for the divine promises concerning this life and that which is to come, he embraces them. But the principal acts of saving faith relate in the first instance to Christ as the believer accepts, receives and rests upon Him alone for justification, sanctification, and eternal life; and all by virtue of ... grace. (A Faith to Confess: The Baptist Confession of Faith of 1689 [Sussex, England: Carey Publications, 1975], 37)

So, the first foundational pillar God's people must have is spiritual faith, or trust in God. And that attitude will not grow and develop unless individual believers come to know God better and better. That truth is exemplified throughout Scripture. Here are just a few prominent examples:

- *Moses* — “The Lord is my strength and song, and He has become my salvation; this is my God, and I will praise Him; my father's God, and I will extol Him” ([Exod. 15:2](#)).
- *David* — “I love Thee, O Lord, my strength. The Lord is my rock and my fortress and my deliverer, my God, my rock, in whom I take refuge; my shield and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold. I call upon the Lord, who is worthy to be praised, and I am saved from my enemies” ([Ps. 18:1-3](#)).
- *Jeremiah* — “‘The Lord is my portion,’ says my soul, ‘therefore I have hope in Him’” ([Lam. 3:24](#)).
- *Paul* — “For it is for this we labor and strive, because we have fixed our hope on the living God, who is the Savior of all men, especially of believers” ([1 Tim. 4:10](#)).

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- *John* — “Whoever confesses that Jesus is the Son of God, God abides in him, and he in God. And we have come to know and have believed the love which God has for us” ([1 John 4:15–16](#)).

HABAKKUK’S EXAMPLE OF FAITH

For a more in–depth look at how biblical saints exemplified the attitude of faith, let’s consider the case of the prophet Habakkuk. He ministered in the late seventh century B.C., during the last days of Assyria’s power and the beginning days of Babylon’s rule (about 625 B.C. to 600 B.C.). The situation in Habakkuk’s day was similar to what Amos and Micah faced. Justice and faithfulness had basically disappeared from Judah, and there was much unchecked wickedness and violence throughout the land.

Why No Answer, God?

The opening of Habakkuk’s prophecy, or sermon, reveals his frustration and lack of understanding of why God did not intervene in Judah’s affairs and dramatically set things right:

How long, O *LORD*, will I call for help, and Thou wilt not hear? I cry out to Thee, “Violence!” Yet Thou dost not save. Why dost Thou make me see iniquity, and cause me to look on wickedness? Yes, destruction and violence are before me; strife exists, and contention arises. Therefore, the law is ignored, and justice is never upheld. For the wicked surround the righteous; therefore, justice comes out perverted.

—[Hab. 1:2–4](#)

The prophet faced a real dilemma. He probably had already petitioned the Lord to either bring about a spiritual revival, so all Judah would repent, or to judge the people for all their wickedness, violence, perversion of justice, and inattention to His law. But God was not doing either, and Habakkuk could not understand how He could observe the magnitude of Judah’s evil and not act.

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Why the Chaldeans?

But in the next passage God gives Habakkuk a most startling and unexpected answer:

“Look among the nations! Observe! Be astonished! Wonder! Because I am doing something in your days—you would not believe if you were told. For behold, I am raising up the Chaldeans, that fierce and impetuous people who march throughout the earth to seize dwelling places which are not theirs. They are dreaded and feared. Their justice and authority originate with themselves. Their horses are swifter than leopards and keener than wolves in the evening. Their horsemen come galloping, their horsemen come from afar; they fly like an eagle swooping down to devour. All of them come for violence. Their horde of faces moves forward. They collect captives like sand. They mock at kings, and rulers are a laughing matter to them. They laugh at every fortress, and heap up rubble to capture it. Then they will sweep through like the wind and pass on. But they will be held guilty, they whose strength is their god.”

—[Hab. 1:5–11](#)

God’s revelation only intensified Habakkuk’s bewilderment, because it was not what Habakkuk expected or wanted to hear. How could the Lord possibly use the Chaldeans, a pagan people who were much greater sinners than the Jews, to judge and punish His covenant people?

After all, throughout their history the Chaldeans were notorious for being a militaristic, aggressive people. They originated from the mountains of Kurdistan and Armenia, north of Iraq, and later established their own small territory in southern Babylonia at the head of the Persian Gulf. From the earliest days of Assyria’s rule over the Babylonians, the Chaldeans were a source of opposition and irritation to the Assyrian kings. Eventually, the Chaldeans had a key role in overthrowing Assyria and establishing and expanding the new Babylonian Empire.

The Chaldeans worshiped nothing but their military prowess and were certainly ready to “heap up rubble” to capture Jerusalem. (In the ancient Middle East, the stone walls of a city or fort were scaled once invading troops piled rubble against the walls. That rubble formed a ramp upon which

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the soldiers could march up and into the city.) The Chaldeans were sinful, self-centered, and ruthless, and Habakkuk could not understand how God could choose a far worse people than Judah to be the agents for chastening His people.

Solving the Dilemma

Habakkuk's puzzling dilemma definitely could not be solved with human wisdom. Because he did not understand God's plan, the prophet looked to his theology: "Art Thou not from everlasting, O LORD, my God, my Holy One? We will not die. Thou, O LORD, hast appointed them to judge; and Thou, O Rock, hast established them to correct" ([1:12](#)).

At the height of his confusion, as he was sinking into the quicksand of his dilemma and realizing that he could not answer his questions alone, Habakkuk wisely reached out for what he knew to be true about God. First, he recognized that God is eternal and has existed from eternity past and will exist into eternity future. Habakkuk was reminding himself that the troubles he and the nation faced were really just part of a short period in world history. The Lord was far greater than any small moment in time, problems and all, and He knew all along how everything fit into His eternal plan.

The prophet underscored his opening words by addressing God as "O LORD, my God, my Holy One." The term for *Lord* here is the Hebrew *adoni*, which means "sovereign ruler." Habakkuk knew that God was and is in charge of all circumstances—He is omnipotent, and nothing ever gets beyond His control. Furthermore, Habakkuk acknowledged that God is holy—He does not make mistakes, and He perfectly carries out His program.

Habakkuk needed to find a secure spiritual footing in his understanding of who God is and what He does. Therefore he could reassure himself that "We will not die." He knew God would remain faithful and not destroy Judah, since He had to fulfill the promised covenant He made with Abraham, which guaranteed a kingdom, a future, and a salvation.

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Habakkuk saw God's faithfulness and His person in the closing words of verse [12](#), "Thou, O LORD, hast appointed them [the Chaldeans] to judge; and Thou, O Rock, hast established them to correct." He now accepted the fact that God was too pure to approve or excuse evil and that His eyes could not favorably observe wickedness. Therefore, He had determined to punish the people of Judah, and He had sovereignly chosen the Chaldeans to mete out that punishment. Even though Habakkuk would not have chosen that method of judgment, he could now say with much greater assurance of faith than before, "I see and accept what's going on."

Faith Summarized and Applied

The essence of Habakkuk's grappling with faith's definition was determined when God told him, "Behold, as for the proud one, his soul is not right within him; but the righteous will live by his faith" ([2:4](#)). The final phrase of this verse is one of the most important statements in all of Scripture because it succinctly expresses the foundational doctrine of justification by faith. For that reason it eventually became—in its *King James* form, "The just shall live by faith"—one of the great Reformation mottoes.

Nineteenth-century Reformation historian J. H. Merle D'Aubigne describes Martin Luther's discovery of the crucial truth of [Habakkuk 2:4](#) in this way:

He [Luther] began his course by explaining the Psalms, and thence passed to the Epistle to the Romans. It was more particularly while meditating on this portion of Scripture that the light of truth penetrated his heart. In the retirement of his quiet cell, he used to consecrate whole hours to the study of the divine Word, this epistle of the apostle Paul lying open before him. On one occasion, having reached the seventeenth verse of the first chapter, he read this passage from the prophet Habakkuk, "The just shall live by faith." This precept struck him. There is then for the just a life different from that of other men: and this life is the gift of faith. This promise, which he received into his heart as if God Himself had placed it there, unveiled to him the mystery of the Christian life and increased this life in him. Years after, in the midst of numerous occupations, he imagined he still

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November 29, 2017

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heard these words: “The just shall live by faith.” (The Life and Times of Martin Luther [1846; Chicago: Moody, 1978 edition], 46)

That occurred while Luther was a young professor teaching biblical theology at the University of Wittenberg in Germany in the early 1500s. The insight affected him so profoundly that a few years later he was prompted to compose the famous Ninety-five Theses and post them on the church door in Wittenberg. Those statements challenged the Roman Catholic Church to be more scriptural in some of its doctrines and practices. Notably, Luther took issue with the church’s selling of indulgences to grant forgiveness of sins. He pointed out that such remission is granted freely and graciously by God, but only to those who come to Him in genuine repentance and faith. That soon led to a fuller development of the biblical doctrine of justification by faith and to the spread of the Protestant Reformation throughout much of Europe.

God’s declaration to Habakkuk is also used in key passages in the New Testament. In addition to its pivotal usage in [Romans 1:17](#), it is quoted two other times in the epistles: “Now that no one is justified by the Law before God is evident; for, ‘The righteous man shall live by faith’” ([Gal. 3:11](#)); “But My righteous one shall live by faith; and if he shrinks back, My soul has no pleasure in him” ([Heb. 10:38](#)).

The prophet Habakkuk did not relegate the attitude of faith to the theological realm only. He gives it a wonderful expression of practicality in the final three verses of his prophecy:

Though the fig tree should not blossom, and there be no fruit on the vines, though the yield of the olive should fail, and the fields produce no food, though the flock should be cut off from the fold, and there be no cattle in the stalls, yet I will exult in the LORD, I will rejoice in the God of my salvation. The LORD God is my strength, and He has made my feet like hinds’ feet, and makes me walk on my high places.

—[Hab. 3:17–19](#)

That language was very meaningful and familiar to the agricultural society of Habakkuk’s audience. They knew the fig trees always blossomed, the grape vines seemed never to fail, and the olive trees were so sturdy and long-lasting that they would always produce a good crop. It was inconceivable to them that the fields would stop producing food and the livestock would cease having lambs and calves.

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The prophet is saying that even if the routine, ordinary, dependable parts of daily life quit functioning—if the whole world were turned upside-down and backwards—he would still rejoice in God and keep trusting in Him. Even when he didn't understand the circumstances, he still understood the person and work of God.

Habakkuk concludes by comparing his stability to that which the Lord gives the mountain goat (the hind). As I've had the opportunity to fly close to mountains in Alaska, I've seen how mountain goats behave. They will stand on the rugged, rocky edge of steep cliffs, calm and confident, knowing that their hooves are safely and securely anchored to the path. That's the kind of confidence God gave Habakkuk and that He will give all believers. Even though we might be on the precipice, completely puzzled in the face of an unsolvable dilemma or an inescapable difficulty, the Lord can make us like spiritual mountain goats who walk surefootedly over the high places without fear of falling. None of life's precipices is too overwhelming if we have the proper attitude of trust in God, as Habakkuk did.

FAITH POSSIBLE THROUGH CHRIST

In [Galatians 2:20](#), the apostle Paul gives this testimony to the life of faith: "I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me, and delivered Himself up for me." Paul is simply saying that he and all other genuine believers in Christ live their lives constantly trusting in the Savior. The apostle also said, "We walk by faith, not by sight" ([2 Cor. 5:7](#)). That means the Christian does not ultimately evaluate life through his natural senses, but through the eyes of faith. How could Paul be so confident that the Christian life could operate that way? Because of what he told the Philippians: "My God shall supply all your needs according to His riches in glory in Christ Jesus" ([4:19](#)). The real key to living a life of faith is the divine means supplied by the indwelling, powerful, ever-present Savior and Lord, Jesus Christ.

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It's clear, then, that the first great Christian attitude, faith, begins at salvation and will characterize your entire Christian life. It is the foundational pillar on which to build your life, if you claim to love Jesus Christ. That was Paul's point in [Romans 5:1–10](#):

Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom also we have obtained our introduction by faith into this grace in which we stand; and we exult in hope of the glory of God. And not only this, but we also exult in our tribulations, knowing that tribulation brings about perseverance; and perseverance, proven character; and proven character, hope; and hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out within our hearts through the Holy Spirit who was given to us. For while we were still helpless, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. For one will hardly die for a righteous man; though perhaps for the good man someone would dare even to die. But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. Much more then, having been justified by His blood, we shall be saved from the wrath of God through Him. For if while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son, much more, having been reconciled, we shall be saved by His life.

