

Sola Fide (Faith Alone!): What the Prophet Saw

Habakkuk 1:1-4, 2:1-4

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“In the year that King Uzziah died, I SAW the Lord, sitting on a throne, high and lofty...” (Is 6:1)

“The word of the Lord came to me, ‘What do you SEE, Jeremiah?’ (Jer 1:11)

John: “After this I looked, and there in heaven a door stood open!” (Rev 4:1)

The prophet is one who sees. But what does the prophet see?
Often the prophet will tell us what he or she sees:

John gives us a vision. “Then I saw between the throne and the four living creatures and among the elders a Lamb standing as if it had been slaughtered” (Rev. 5:6)

Jeremiah tells us what he sees. “I see the branch of an almond tree...” and God says “Okay, good, that’s right...”

Isaiah tries to describe the glory that he sees: “...and the train of his robe filled the temple, and at the sound of the Seraphim the whole place shook to its foundations and was filled with smoke...”

But Habakkuk starts with a complaint: “ ... O LORD, how long shall I cry for help and you will not listen? Or cry to you ‘Violence!’ and you will not save?”

The oracle that the prophet Habakkuk SAW begins as a complaint:

“How long?”

“Why?”

It’s possible from this text that Habakkuk didn’t get a vision. In chapter 2, Habakkuk says, “I’m gonna wait. I’m gonna stand here and wait to see what God will say.” And God says, “...there is a vision, if it seems to tarry, wait for it; it will surely come.” It’s possible that Habakkuk is simply waiting for his vision and hasn’t gotten it yet.

(But you can probably tell that I’m setting you up). At least I don’t think Habakkuk is waiting for a vision. I think Habakkuk has SEEN the glory. I think he’s tasted the beauty and rightness of the vision. I think he knows the goodness of what IS, and he can’t stand the reality of *what seems to be*.

Pessimists like me and Habakkuk, we see something beautiful and good and we think, “Why isn’t that the case?” “Why don’t we see more of *that*?”

We eat dark, fine, Swiss chocolate and we think, “I can never eat a Hershey’s bar again.” We are given the cup of goodness and beauty and we say, “Oghhh... it’s only half full.”

I don't think Habakkuk is waiting for his vision. I think he sees TWO visions. And the one is so good, so right, so beautiful, so REAL... And the other is so, disappointing. So violent, so destructive, so LESS than what should be—"the wicked surround the righteous – therefore judgment comes forth perverted!" And so he cries out, "Oghhh! How long, O LORD, until these visions converge and the lesser one is consumed by the greater?"

Habakkuk doesn't give us a clear vision of what he sees, but we do get glimmerings. He tells us, "But the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the LORD, as the waters cover the sea." (2:14) Mmmh! That's it!

We get glimpses of what the prophet saw, and I want to suggest it's the same vision. The prophets all see the same vision. Each prophet expresses it differently, uniquely, but it all speaks of God's presence filling the earth, as the waters cover the sea...we just don't know it! We can't see it! But the *Presence* is here. It is the unseen that is sitting next to us, all around us.

If you had the chance to sit down with Habakkuk and a cup of tea, and you asked him, "What was it that you saw?" I wonder if he wouldn't say, "Let me tell you a story..." (2 Kings 6:8-23)

"But the earth will be filled with the *knowledge* of the glory of the LORD, all around us, as the waters cover the sea."

Now, up until this point, we have been in the Old Testament, and some of you careful followers of the liturgical year are asking yourselves, "Is he ever going to make it to the Reformation? It is Reformation Sunday after all, and we still have such a long way to go from Habakkuk to Romans or Luther and Calvin..." Not So.

The distance between Habakkuk and the Reformers is a manageable hop, because Habakkuk lays down this principle foundational to Reformation theology: "The one who is righteous will live by faith." *Sola Fide*. Faith alone.

In the spirit of Martin Luther, let's be bold this morning—if we sin, we will sin boldly; but let's be black and white. Let's say there are two visions of what we call reality—the two visions Habakkuk saw. There is a "right" vision, and there is a "wrong" vision.

The right vision is by faith. The right vision knows that the glory of the LORD's presence is in us, with us, and supporting us, all around us – THAT is reality, though we cannot see it.

The wrong vision is by works. The wrong vision sees only options we think to be possible in our own power. Think of the servant and Elisha. The servant sees by works or deeds: If we are to be saved, we have to do it in our power. "O my Lord, what are we going to do?"

Elisha sees by faith. “Don’t be afraid. Those who are with us are much greater, more abundant, more real, than those who are with them.” And he prays, “if only he could SEE reality...”

The Right One—the one with the right vision—will live by faith, because it is faithfulness to that vision that makes one right.

Living by the wrong vision, by works or deeds, leads us down either of two paths – despair or pride.

On one hand we say with Elisha’s servant, “What are we going to do? This is a hopeless situation!”

What I see is that my marriage is done. We’ve tried so many things, and still there’s a cold distance between us. We tolerate each other, and it’s draining the life out of me. This relationship is hopeless.

What I see is that I lost my job. I worked for 18 years, the strongest years of my life, and now how can I find something new? I’m feeling old, I’m tired, and I don’t have the right skills anymore. It’s hopeless. Despair.

On the other hand, the wrong vision—a vision filled with works and deeds—leads to pride.

Look what I have done! I have made so much of myself: I have money, prestige, important friends, security, influence...

I just nailed that sermon! I’m sure the pastor down the street could preach a sermon with as much eloquence if he’d also gone to the same schools or applied himself to get a few more degrees.

Despair or pride is no way to find life.

“Look at the proud! Their spirit is not RIGHT within them,” says Habakkuk, “But the right-one, the tzaddik, by his or her faithfulness, will live.”

Faithfulness to what? To reality...to the vision. The vision the prophets saw. By faith. The vision that was written down on tablets so that even runners could read it...

And because of the Reformation, this vision has been made plain to us, in our language, in myriad editions. (I’m sure if we looked we could even find a “Runner’s Bible”). The prophet’s vision has been made plain to us; all that is left is to believe it and to live it. Abraham Heschel says, “In the Bible the realness of God [comes] first, and the task [is] how to live in a way compatible with His presence.”

We are surrounded by the glory and power of God’s presence. Sola Fide, Faith alone! May we live in THAT reality – the really REAL—and find life.