

# "THE JUST SHALL LIVE BY FAITH"

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"The just shall live by his faith" (Hab. 2:4).  
"The just shall live by faith" (Gal. 3:11).  
"The just shall live by faith" (Rom. 1:17).  
"Now the just shall live by faith" (Heb. 10:38).

VF GOD says something in the Scriptures just one time, we should heed it. If He says the same thing two or three times, it's probably pretty important. If He says it four times, that might be an indication that it's something He really wants us to understand.

This statement, "the just shall live by faith," first appears in Habakkuk and consists of just three Hebrew words: *tsadik be'emunato yich'yeh*. The first word, *tsadik*, means a righteous person. If a rabbi is especially pious and well-respected, the Jewish community will refer to such a man as a *tsadik*. The second word, *be'emunato*, is the word for faith (*emunah*) plus the prefix *be-* fin" or "by") and the suffix *-to* (which makes it possessive, "his"). The third word, *yich'yeh*, means "he will live." So, literally translated, the statement says "a righteous person will live by his faith."

What does it mean? Ask most Christians what "the just shall live by faith" means, and they will probably say it means that we are justified by faith, and that our salvation is the result of our faith and not of works. The reason most Christians of the Protestant tradition understand the verse this way is because of its impact on Martin Luther and what he wrote about it. Luther was a devout Roman Catholic monk who slavishly followed all the vain rituals of the Catholic Church. One day as Luther was reading Romans, he read "the just shall live by faith." It was through these words that Luther received a revelation that a sinner is saved by faith, and not by works. Luther understood that an unjust man becomes justified by faith, not by acts of penance prescribed by a priest. Of his revelation, Luther wrote: "Thereupon I felt myself to be reborn and to have gone through open doors

into Paradise."

Because of the well-known story of Luther's experience with Romans 1:17, many Christians understand "the just shall live by faith" to mean that an unjust person becomes justified by his faith, and not by his works. Even if Christians do not know the story of Luther's experience, their pastors and preachers know it, and their preaching and teaching on faith and justification and works reflects this idea. But is this all that the verse meant to Luther and the other Reformers, that an unjust person is justified by faith? I am not familiar enough with all the writings of the Reformers to presume to answer for them. However, the important thing is not how Luther and the Reformers understood it. The important thing is how God means for it to be understood. Does it mean that an unjust person is justified by faith, or does it mean something else?

Let us look at the statement again: *tsadik be'emunato yich'yeh*, "a righteous [or, 'just'] person will live by his faith." What does this statement say about the unjust or the unrighteous? Nothing. It does not even mention the unrighteous. It simply says that a *tsadik* will live by his faith. It is a statement about a person who is *already a tsadik*. It is not a set of instructions telling sinners how to be saved.

Let me be quick to affirm that an unjust person is indeed justified by his faith. Paul inferred that truth when he quoted Habakkuk in Galatians 3:11. However, that truth is incidental to the statement in every other place where it appears. In Habakkuk, in Romans, and in Hebrews, the context is not about "how to get justified." It is about how a *tsadik* is to live his life *after* he has been justified. This will become evident as we look at each place where Habakkuk's statement appears in the New Testament.

GALATIANS 3:11 The Galatians were non-Jewish believers who had been justified by their faith in Israel's Messiah. From the content of Paul's letter we can see that the Galatians were being told by false teachers that they needed to be

"circumcised" (a word which meant not just the physical removal of the foreskin, but a full-fledged, formal conversion to Judaism) *in order to be justified*.

The fact that the means of justification was the main issue in Paul's letter to the Galatians is apparent by the frequent number of times we see words such as *just, justify, justified, justification, righteous, righteousness*, etc. (Take a cheap spare Bible and circle these words every time they appear in the text, and you will see what I mean.) The issue was not about whether or not the Torah should be obeyed by disciples of the Messiah. Yeshua had already made that clear in Matthew 5:17-19. The issue was about whether justification is obtained by faith or by a formal religious circumcision ceremony that turned Gentiles into Jews. To say that Gentiles need to become Jews in order to be justified is to say that God is the God of the Jews only, and not of the Gentiles. Paul corrected this misconception in Romans 3:29f when he wrote, "Is He the God of the Jews only? Is He not also of the Gentiles? Yes, of the Gentiles also: Seeing it is one God, which shall justify the circumcision by faith, and the uncircumcision through faith."

Paul's letter to the Galatians is often misused and misquoted to falsely accuse Sabbath-keeping Christians of legalism. We may get so weary of hearing the tired old charges of legal-ism that we forget that there is such a thing as genuine legalism. To say that Gentiles need to formally convert to Judaism in order to be justified is one form of legalism. To say that a justified man can become "more justified" or "less justified" on the basis of how strictly he keeps the rules of the Torah is another form of legalism. A man is either fully justified or he isn't justified at all. He cannot be "more justified" or "less justified." Being justified is like being pregnant. A man is either pregnant or he isn't. (And in the case of a man, I guarantee he isn't!)

The Galatians were falling into both of these forms of legalism, which is why Paul used Habakkuk's statement to show them that "no man is justified by the law in the sight of God" (Gal. 3:11). A *tsadik* lives by his faith, Paul

said, not by a set of rules. He does obey God's Law (See Rom. 3:31). but he knows that it is not his upholding of the Torah that justifies him. Rather, it is his faith-generated justification which causes him to obey the Torah. The same faith which justifies the *tsadik* also produces an inward desire to obey the Torah, because the Torah is written on the fleshly tablets of his heart. This is how a *tsadik* lives by his faith.

#### ROMANS 1:17

When Paul quotes Habakkuk's statement in Romans, the context is not about how an unjust person becomes justified. Paul is not dealing with the *means* of justification here, but rather with the *results* of justification, i.e., that the righteousness of God is revealed to both Jew and non-Jew, even as the wrath of God is revealed against the unrighteous. The verses immediately before and after Romans 1:17 make this clear. Therefore Paul's reason for quoting "the just shall live by faith" in Romans is to tell us that when we live by our faith, we reveal the righteousness of God.

This should make us ask ourselves: What do people see when they look at how we live? What impression do we give to people who see our way of life? Do they see the righteousness of God? When a *tsadik* lives by his faith, it should cause both Jew and non-Jew to see a manifestation of the righteousness of God, and make them want to possess this righteousness.

There are some people who profess to be among the just who live by faith, but their lives do not manifest the righteousness of God. When unbelievers look at some of these people, they do not see a righteous person manifesting the righteousness of God. On the contrary, they see what appears to be an unrighteous person who makes excuses for his sins by saying, "We're all sinners; we all have to sin once in a while." Or, on the other end of the spectrum, they see a smug, self-righteous hypocrite who strains at gnats and neglects the weightier matters of the Torah, viz., justice, mercy, and faith.

Years ago I knew a young Christian who was very strict and austere and

never cut anyone any slack. He gave people the impression that being a disciple of Jesus meant submitting oneself to a cruel, harsh taskmaster who demanded that his servants be involved in either prayer, fasting, study, worship, or evangelism every waking minute of the day. This Christian had been trying for quite some time to convince his brother to get saved. Finally his brother said to him, "Why should I want to get 'saved' and be like you? Look at yourself. You're never happy, you never smile, you can't even laugh. You're miserable. Why should I want to be like you?"

If we are justified by faith, what are we living by? By our faith or by a set of rules? The rules of the Torah are meant to be obeyed, but what are we tapping into as the source of our spiritual life? A *tsadik* will live by his faith, not by the law. He will obey the Torah, but his obedience will be the spontaneous outcome of the faith by which he lives.

#### HEBREWS 10:38

"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" (Heb. 10:38f).

In Hebrews, Habakkuk's statement is put in the context of a warning to not draw back. From what are we to not draw back? We are not to draw back from living by faith. This is a warning, then, to make it a life-long habit to live by our faith. Faith is not just a one-time event that we experience when we initially put our faith in the sacrifice of the Son of God and trust God to forgive our sins. That is where faith begins, but living by faith does not end there.

Some Christians think of their faith only in the past tense. "I put my faith in Jesus twenty years ago." That's wonderful, but are you still living by your faith? If your faith is alive, it will not just be an event that transpired twenty years ago. It will be the means by which you daily live and thereby show the righteousness of God.

Some people draw back from living by faith when they give up and quit trying to resist sin. They quit living by

faith and yield to temptation. Others draw back from living by faith when they start trusting in their own good works. They start thinking that their obedience to the Torah has something to do with the reason God accepts them. Or they think that their Torah obedience is the means by which they maintain their status as a child of God. In short, they quit living by faith and try to live by the law. A *tsadik* will obey the Torah, but the Torah is not a substitute for faith. Faith, not Torah, is the source of spiritual life for a *tsadik*.

Immediately after these verses at the end of Hebrews chapter 10, the writer goes on to write the famous "faith chapter" of Hebrews 11. We are told that the *tsadikim* of Hebrews 11 accomplished their exploits by their faith. "By faith Abel... By faith Enoch... By faith Noah..." and on and on it continues. Finally, the writer sums it all up by referring to all these *tsadikim* as "so great a cloud of witnesses." He then likens them to an audience watching athletes running in a race, and urges us to "lay aside every weight, and the sin which doth so easily beset us, and let us run with patience the race that is set before us."

How do we do this? By our faith. Faith must have an object, and the object of our faith is stated in the next verse: "Looking unto Yeshua, the author and finisher of our faith; who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is set down at the right hand of the throne of God" (Heb. 12:1f).

A *tsadik* lives by his faith. He obeys the Torah, but he does not draw his spiritual life and strength from the written code. He draws his spiritual life and strength from his faith in the Living Torah, Yeshua of Nazareth. Just as the children of Israel fixed their gaze on the brass serpent in the wilderness and received their healing, so the *tsadik* fixes his gaze on the crucified Messiah and receives spiritual life.

When a *tsadik* lives by his faith, he manifests the righteousness of God. That is the hope of the world, and we who are disciples of the Messiah are the ones called to manifest the righteousness of God to both Jew and non-Jew, a