The Books of Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah, Teacher's Guide

Lesson 4: The Righteous Shall Live by His Faith

Habakkuk 2:1–20

Teaching Aim (Teacher Orientation)

This lesson carries the heaviest doctrinal weight of the entire study, because Habakkuk 2:4, 'the just shall live by his faith,' is one of the most theologically loaded sentences in all of Scripture, cited three times in the New Testament (Romans 1:17; Galatians 3:11; Hebrews 10:38). What is doctrinally at stake is the very nature of saving faith. You must present faith biblically: as a living, faithful, persevering trust in God that hears the gospel, believes, repents, confesses Christ, and obeys Him, and that endures over the long haul. Guard carefully against two errors. The first is the reduction of faith to bare intellectual assent, mere agreement that certain things are true, which even the demons have (James 2:19). The second is the doctrine of 'faith only,' the idea that one is saved by an inward act of believing apart from obedient response to the gospel, which James 2:24 directly denies. The faith Habakkuk commends is the faith by which the righteous 'live,' a whole-life trust that keeps believing and keeps obeying.

The lesson is also aiming at deep spiritual formation. Habakkuk had to trust God across a long, dark season of waiting, and 'the just shall live by his faith' is first of all a word for endurance. Your students are not only to understand a doctrine but to actually live by faith: to keep trusting and obeying God when the vision tarries, when the answer is delayed, when self-sufficiency and pride pull the other way. Aim to send them out not merely informed about justification but strengthened to persevere in trusting obedience.

Handle the New Testament citations with care and confidence. Show that Paul uses Habakkuk 2:4 to teach that righteousness is received by faith and not earned by meritorious law-keeping, while James insists that this saving faith is never alone but works through love and obedience. There is no contradiction: Paul opposes faith to self-righteous works of merit; James opposes living faith to dead, barren profession. Keep the whole counsel of God together, consistent with the teaching that we are saved by grace through an obedient faith expressed in believing, repenting, confessing, and being baptized into Christ.

Question 1

Student Question:

After his complaint, Habakkuk says, "I will stand upon my watch… and will watch to see what he will say unto me" (Habakkuk 2:1). What does this posture of expectant waiting teach us about how to seek God after we have brought Him our hard questions, and why is waiting on God an act of faith rather than passivity?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Verse 1 models the posture of faithful seeking: 'I will stand upon my watch, and set me upon the tower, and will watch to see what he will say unto me.' Having complained honestly (chapter 1), Habakkuk does not walk away; he takes up a sentry's post and waits for God to speak.

Help students see the two movements together: honesty and expectancy. Habakkuk was bold enough to ask hard questions and humble enough to wait for God's answer rather than supplying his own. Many of us do one or the other; faith does both.

Teach that waiting on God is active, not passive. The watchman is alert, attentive, looking. Spiritually this means staying in the Word, in prayer, in worship, and in community, watching for how God will answer rather than drifting away in the silence.

Note Habakkuk's readiness to be corrected: 'what I shall answer when I am reproved.' He expects that God's reply might rebuke as well as comfort, and he is willing to receive it. Genuine seeking is open to whatever God says, not only to the answer we want.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Honesty and expectancy held together in seeking God.
- Waiting on God as active attentiveness, not passivity (Psalm 130:5-6).
- Staying in the means of grace during seasons of silence.
- Willingness to be corrected, not only comforted, by God's answer.

Discussion Prompts

- After you bring God a hard question, do you actually wait and watch for His answer?
- What does active, attentive waiting on God look like in practice?
- Are you open to God's answer even if it corrects you?

Question 2

Student Question:

God tells Habakkuk to write the vision and make it plain, "though it tarry, wait for it; because it will surely come" (Habakkuk 2:3). Where are you tempted to give up on a promise of God because it seems delayed, and how does this verse strengthen you to keep waiting?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-examining question grows from verse 3: 'though it tarry, wait for it; because it will surely come, it will not tarry.' God acknowledges the delay ('though it tarry') and commands trust anyway. The vision is fixed for an appointed time.

Help students name where they are tempted to abandon a promise of God because of the delay. Delayed answers test us; we are prone to conclude that 'not yet' means 'never.' God's word here is that His promises are certain even when their timing is hidden.

Draw on the New Testament use of this verse. Hebrews 10:37 applies it to the certainty of Christ's coming: 'he that shall come will come, and will not tarry.' The same principle steadies us regarding every promise of God, including the final one.

Encourage practical perseverance. The way to wait without giving up is to keep the promise in front of us (God told Habakkuk to write it plainly) and to keep obeying in the meantime. Invite each person to identify one promise they are tempted to give up on and one way to keep trusting it.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The certainty of God's promises even when their timing is delayed.
- The temptation to read 'not yet' as 'never.'
- Hebrews 10:37 and the certainty of Christ's coming.
- Keeping the promise before us and obeying in the meantime.

Discussion Prompts

- Which promise of God are you tempted to give up on because it seems delayed?
- How does 'though it tarry, wait for it' steady you?
- What helps you keep trusting a promise you cannot yet see fulfilled?

Question 3

Student Question:

At the center of the chapter stands the great declaration, "the just shall live by his faith" (Habakkuk 2:4). What does it mean that the righteous live by faith, and how does the New Testament show this to be a key gospel truth (Romans 1:17; Galatians 3:11; Hebrews 10:38)? How is saving faith more than mere intellectual agreement, and more than 'faith only'?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is the central doctrinal question of the entire study, so give it your fullest attention. 'The just shall live by his faith' (2:4) is quoted three times in the New Testament (Romans 1:17; Galatians 3:11; Hebrews 10:38), each drawing out a facet of its meaning. Begin in Habakkuk's own setting: in contrast to the proud Babylonian who trusts his own strength, the righteous person lives by trusting God, and keeps living that way through the long wait.

Define saving faith carefully and positively. Biblical faith is a living, active, persevering trust in God. It is not less than believing that certain things are true, but it is far more. It is the trust that leads a person to commit himself wholly to the Lord and to keep trusting and obeying Him over

a lifetime. The verb ‘live’ is crucial: the righteous do not merely begin by faith; they live by it continually.

Now address the two errors directly. First, faith is not mere intellectual assent. James 2:19 says even the demons believe that God is one, and tremble; their accurate belief saves no one. A faith that agrees with facts but does not trust and obey is not the faith Habakkuk means. Second, faith is not ‘faith only’ in the sense that one is saved by an inward act of believing apart from obedient response. James 2:24 states plainly, ‘by works a man is justified, and not by faith only.’ The faith that saves is the faith that works through love (Galatians 5:6).

Show how Paul and James fit together, since students will wonder. Paul (Romans 4; Galatians 3) uses Habakkuk 2:4 to insist that righteousness is received by faith, not earned by meritorious works of law; no one can put God in his debt by law-keeping. James insists that this very faith, if it is real, expresses itself in obedience; a faith that produces nothing is dead. Paul opposes faith to self-righteous merit; James opposes living faith to dead profession. They are complementary, not contradictory.

Bring it home consistent with the gospel as the New Testament presents it. Saving faith hears the word, believes in Jesus as Lord and Christ, repents of sin, confesses Him, and is baptized into Christ for the remission of sins (Acts 2:36-38; Romans 6:3-4, 17; Galatians 3:26-27). This is not earning salvation; it is the God-appointed shape of trusting obedience by which we receive His grace. And then the righteous go on living by that same faith every day.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- ‘The just shall live by his faith’ as a key gospel text, cited in Romans 1:17; Galatians 3:11; Hebrews 10:38.
- Saving faith as living, active, persevering trust, not bare intellectual assent (James 2:19).
- The error of ‘faith only’ directly denied (James 2:24); faith works through love (Galatians 5:6).
- Paul and James reconciled: faith versus self-righteous merit; living faith versus dead profession.
- The shape of trusting obedience: hearing, believing, repenting, confessing, being baptized into Christ (Acts 2:38; Romans 6:3-4).
- The righteous not only begin but continually ‘live’ by faith.

Discussion Prompts

- How is living, saving faith more than agreeing that something is true?
- How do Paul and James fit together rather than contradict?
- What does it mean that the righteous ‘live,’ not just begin, by faith?

Question 4

Student Question:

Habakkuk contrasts the proud, whose "soul is lifted up" and "is not upright," with the righteous who lives by faith (Habakkuk 2:4). Where do you see pride and self-sufficiency competing with humble trust in your own heart, and what would it look like to live more by faith and less by your own strength this week?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-examining question draws the contrast of verse 4 into the heart: the proud whose 'soul is lifted up is not upright,' over against the righteous who lives by faith. Pride and faith are rival principles. One trusts self; the other trusts God.

Help students see how subtle pride is. It is not only arrogance; it is the quiet self-sufficiency that handles life in our own strength, makes our own plans without reference to God, and only prays when our resources run out. The Babylonian trusted his army; we trust our competence, our money, our backup plans.

Teach that living by faith is the daily dethroning of self. It means consciously depending on God, seeking His will, and obeying Him even when self-reliance feels safer. Faith is humility in action.

Make it concrete. Ask each person to identify one area where they are running on self-sufficiency rather than trust, a decision, a worry, a relationship, and one specific way they will deliberately lean on God there this week.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Pride and faith as rival principles: trusting self versus trusting God.
- The subtlety of self-sufficiency that prays only as a last resort.
- Living by faith as the daily dethroning of self.
- Faith as humility in action.

Discussion Prompts

- Where is self-sufficiency competing with trust in your heart?
- What would it look like to lean on God in that area this week?
- How is pride the opposite of living by faith?

Question 5

Student Question:

The five woes of this chapter condemn greed, exploitation, violence, drunkenness, and idolatry (Habakkuk 2:6-19). What do these woes reveal about the kinds of sin God especially opposes, and how do they show that ill-gotten gain and human empire-building ultimately destroy themselves?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Verses 6-19 contain five woes against Babylon, and they form a catalog of the sins God especially opposes: greed and plunder (6-8), unjust gain and self-exaltation (9-11), building by bloodshed and violence (12-14), exploiting others through intoxication and shame (15-17), and idolatry (18-19). Walk students through them briefly so they feel the breadth.

Draw out the principle that runs through the woes: sin is self-destructive. The plunderer will be plundered (verse 8); the stone cries out from the wall against the builder (verse 11); the violent labor only for the fire (verse 13); the drunkard's shame returns on himself (verse 16). God has built a moral structure into the world in which evil ultimately recoils on the evildoer.

Note that these are the very sins of empire, and Babylon is the empire God was using to discipline Judah. So the woes answer Habakkuk's worry directly: the instrument of discipline will itself be held fully accountable. God uses Babylon but does not excuse Babylon.

Apply it to the smaller-scale forms of the same sins in our lives: the greed that justifies cutting corners, the ambition that uses people, the appetites that shame others. The woes are not only about ancient empires; they expose the empire-building impulse in every human heart.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The five woes as a catalog of sins God especially opposes: greed, exploitation, violence, debauchery, idolatry.
- The self-destructive nature of sin: the plunderer plundered, the builder accused by his own stones.
- God using Babylon yet holding Babylon fully accountable.
- The empire-building impulse present in smaller forms in every heart.
- God's moral order built into the world (Galatians 6:7).

Discussion Prompts

- Which of the five woes most exposes a temptation you recognize?
- How have you seen sin recoil on the one who committed it?
- Where does the 'empire-building' impulse show up in your own life?

Question 6

Student Question:

God says that those who built by violence labored only "for the fire," and wearied themselves "for very vanity" (Habakkuk 2:13). Where might you be wearying yourself for things that will not last, and what would it mean to redirect that energy toward what God says endures?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-examining question draws on verse 13: the peoples ‘labour in the very fire, and… weary themselves for very vanity.’ Babylon poured immense effort into building what would only burn. The image exposes wasted labor, energy spent on what cannot last.

Help students examine where their own energy goes. Much of modern life is frantic effort poured into things that will not survive: accumulation, image, status, the endless chase for more. Jesus warned about gaining the world and losing the soul (Mark 8:36).

Distinguish vanity from vocation. The problem is not work itself, which God ordained, but laboring for the wrong treasure. Honest work done for God and others is not vanity; feverish striving for what burns is.

Move toward reinvestment. Verse 14 gives the alternative: the earth being filled with the knowledge of God’s glory. Invite students to name one thing they have been wearying themselves over that will not last, and one way to redirect that energy toward what endures, people, God’s kingdom, their own growth in Christ.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Wasted labor: wearying ourselves for what will not last (verse 13).
- Gaining the world while losing the soul (Mark 8:36).
- The difference between God-ordained work and feverish striving for the wrong treasure.
- Redirecting energy toward what endures.

Discussion Prompts

- What are you wearying yourself over that will not last?
- What is the difference between good work and laboring ‘for the fire’?
- Where could you redirect your energy toward what endures?

Question 7

Student Question:

God promises that “the earth shall be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea” (Habakkuk 2:14). How does this glorious promise reframe the whole chapter, and how is it being fulfilled as the gospel of Christ goes out to fill the earth with the knowledge of God?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Verse 14 is the radiant promise at the center of the woes: ‘the earth shall be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea.’ In the middle of pronouncements of judgment, God lifts our eyes to His ultimate purpose for the whole earth.

Help students see how this reframes everything. Babylon's violence and Judah's suffering are not the end of the story. History is moving toward a goal: the knowledge of God's glory filling the earth as completely as water fills the ocean basin. The empires that seem to dominate are temporary; God's glory is the destination.

Show the fulfillment in Christ and the spread of the gospel. The knowledge of God's glory shines in the face of Jesus Christ (2 Corinthians 4:6), and it is going out to all nations through the gospel as Christ's church carries it to the world (Matthew 28:18-20). Consistent with sound teaching, this is not a future earthly political kingdom but the present and growing reign of Christ as His knowledge fills the earth.

Apply it to perspective and mission. This promise steadies us when evil seems to dominate the headlines, and it enlists us, every believer has a part in filling the earth with the knowledge of God's glory. Invite students to consider their part in that great purpose.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- God's ultimate purpose: the earth filled with the knowledge of His glory (verse 14).
- History moving toward God's goal, not the triumph of empires.
- Fulfillment in Christ and the spread of the gospel (2 Corinthians 4:6; Matthew 28:18-20).
- The present, growing reign of Christ rather than a future earthly political kingdom.
- Every believer enlisted in spreading the knowledge of God.

Discussion Prompts

- How does the promise of verse 14 reframe the bad news around it?
- How is the knowledge of God's glory filling the earth right now?
- What is your part in that great purpose?

Question 8

Student Question:

Twice the woes expose the futility of idols, "a teacher of lies," unable to give breath or guidance (Habakkuk 2:18-19). What 'idols' do you turn to for security or guidance that cannot truly deliver, and how can you replace that misplaced trust with trust in the living God?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

The fifth woe (verses 18-19) exposes the folly of idolatry: the idol is 'a teacher of lies,' a thing of wood and stone overlaid with gold that cannot breathe, cannot speak, cannot guide. The maker trusts the work of his own hands, which is no help at all.

This self-examining question translates ancient idolatry into modern terms. We rarely bow to carved images, but we constantly look to substitutes for what only God can give: money for

security, success for worth, relationships for ultimate meaning, technology or experts for guidance, substances for comfort. Each is a ‘teacher of lies’ that promises and cannot deliver.

Help students diagnose their idols by noticing where they run for security and guidance. Whatever we trust most to keep us safe and tell us who we are functions as a god. The test is not what we say we believe but where we actually turn in fear and need.

Move toward replacement, not just removal. The cure for idolatry is not willpower but turning to the living God who does breathe, speak, and guide. Invite each person to name one idol they have been trusting and one way to turn that trust toward the Lord this week.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The folly of idols: a ‘teacher of lies’ that cannot deliver (verses 18-19).
- Modern idols: money, success, relationships, experts, substances.
- Diagnosing idols by where we run for security and guidance.
- Replacing, not merely removing, idols by turning to the living God.

Discussion Prompts

- What do you turn to for security or guidance that cannot truly deliver?
- How can you tell what functions as a ‘god’ in your life?
- What would it look like to turn that trust toward the living God?

Question 9

Student Question:

The chapter ends, “the Lord is in his holy temple: let all the earth keep silence before him” (Habakkuk 2:20). How does this call to reverent silence answer Habakkuk’s earlier turmoil, and how does it relate to the faith of 2:4, that the righteous live not by understanding everything but by trusting and reverencing the God who reigns? Tie together how saving faith, according to the New Testament, is a living trust that hears, believes, repents, confesses, and obeys the Lord (Acts 2:36-38; Romans 6:17), rather than a mere feeling or a one-time decision.

Commentary and Teaching Notes

The chapter ends in awe: ‘But the Lord is in his holy temple: let all the earth keep silence before him’ (verse 20). After the woes against noisy, self-exalting Babylon, the proper response of all creation is reverent silence before the God who reigns. This is the second-heaviest doctrinal moment of the lesson, so connect it back to 2:4.

Show how this verse answers Habakkuk’s turmoil. He began with loud complaint; he ends being called to silence before the God in His holy temple. Not because his questions were illegitimate, but because the final posture of faith is reverent trust before the God who reigns even when we do not understand. Silence here is not the silence of despair but of worship and submission.

Tie it to living by faith. The righteous live by faith precisely because they cannot see or control everything; faith trusts and reverences the God who is in His holy temple and on His throne. Faith does not require that every question be answered; it requires that God be trusted. The silence of 2:20 and the faith of 2:4 belong together: the just live by trusting the reigning God in reverent dependence.

Now gather the doctrine of faith into one clear statement for your class. According to the New Testament, saving faith is a living trust that hears the gospel, believes in Jesus as Lord and Christ, repents of sin, confesses Him, and obeys from the heart the form of teaching delivered (Acts 2:36-38; Romans 6:17). Peter's hearers at Pentecost did not merely feel something or pray a private prayer; cut to the heart, they asked what to do, and were told to repent and be baptized for the remission of sins. That is faith that lives. Guard your class against reducing 2:4 to 'faith only' or to a one-time feeling.

Close by lifting their eyes to Christ. The God who is in His holy temple has now been revealed in His Son, our great High Priest who has passed into the true holy place (Hebrews 4:14-16). We keep silence before Him in worship, and we live by faith in Him, day after day, until He comes.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Reverent silence before the reigning God as the final posture of faith (verse 20).
- Silence as worship and submission, not despair.
- The link between 2:20 and 2:4: faith trusts and reverences the God it cannot fully understand.
- Saving faith defined: hearing, believing, repenting, confessing, obeying from the heart (Acts 2:36-38; Romans 6:17).
- Guarding against 'faith only' and faith as a mere feeling or one-time decision.
- Christ our High Priest in the true holy place (Hebrews 4:14-16).

Discussion Prompts

- How does the call to silence answer Habakkuk's earlier turmoil?
- How do reverent trust (2:20) and living faith (2:4) belong together?
- How would you now explain to someone what saving faith actually is?

Question 10

Student Question:

Look back across this central chapter. Name one specific way the Lord is calling you, through "the just shall live by his faith," to live by a deeper, more persevering trust in Him, and to become more like Christ, who is Himself the perfectly Faithful One in whom our faith rests.

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This capstone question asks students to look back across this central chapter and respond personally. The aim is that ‘the just shall live by his faith’ would move from a doctrine they understand to a life they live.

Help them locate the call in their own season. For some, living by faith means persevering through a long, dark wait. For some it means dethroning a particular self-sufficiency. For some it means turning from an idol to the living God. For some it means finally responding to the gospel in obedient faith. Meet them where they are.

Point them to Christ as the ground and pattern of faith. Jesus is the perfectly Faithful One, who lived His whole life in trusting obedience to the Father and endured the cross for the joy set before Him (Hebrews 12:2). Our faith does not rest in our own believing but in Him; and to become like Christ is to grow in His kind of persevering, obedient trust.

Invite a concrete commitment: one area to entrust to God, one act of obedience to take, one idol to abandon, one promise to keep waiting on. Encourage each person to write it down and to begin living by faith in it this week.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Moving ‘the just shall live by his faith’ from understood doctrine to lived life.
- Christ as the ground and pattern of faith, the perfectly Faithful One (Hebrews 12:2).
- Becoming like Christ: growing in persevering, obedient trust.
- A concrete step of faith in the student’s own season.

Discussion Prompts

- In what specific area is God calling you to live by faith right now?
- How does resting your faith in Christ, not in your own believing, free you?
- What one step of trusting obedience will you take this week?