

“The Just Shall Live by Faith: A Faith that Works” — Lesson VII (7/14/13): Part I

The Use of Habakkuk 2:4 in Romans 1:17

For the final three weeks of our series, we will examine the three passages in the NT that use Habakkuk 2:4 (Rom. 1; Gal. 3; and Heb. 10). Today, we consider its use in Romans 1:17.

In Part I of this lesson, we will treat the first 48 verses of Romans in this lesson. In Part II, we will examine key related teaching in Romans 14. Doing so, we will discover that Paul’s teaching in Romans correlates directly with key elements of his evangelistic ministry in Athens (Acts 17).

Introductory Aspects of Romans 1:1-2:16

Romans 1:1-2:16 comprises 48 verses that may be considered a unit for two reasons:

- (1) The section begins with explicit teaching about the gospel (Rom. 1:1ff.) and ends with another explicit statement about the gospel (Rom. 2:16). Three other references to the gospel (Rom. 1:9, 15, 16) in this section show that the gospel is a key aspect of this section.
- (2) The section features at least thirteen clear statements about God as judge (Rom. 1:18, 24, 26, 28, 32; 2:2, 3, 5, 6, 11, 12, 13, 16). Of these, 2:16 is particularly relevant for our series.

The extensive focus on both the gospel and God as judge in this section signal to us the need to consider closely how Paul relates these two truths here.

Romans 1:1-7

Paul begins Romans by explaining his calling to minister the gospel of God (Rom. 1:1-5). He declares that God promised the gospel beforehand in His holy Scriptures through His prophets (Rom. 1:1-2).

The gospel message concerns God’s Son (“His Son” [Rom. 1:3a]), which shows that it is a message about the One who is uniquely related to God the Father. Paul then declares two key truths about His Son (Rom. 1:3b-4).

First, God’s Son, Jesus Christ our Lord, “was made of the seed of David according to the flesh” (Rom. 1:3), which specifies that Jesus, who is our Lord, was the promised Christ who would be a descendant of David. Second, His Son was the One who was “declared to be the Son of God with power, according to the spirit of holiness, by the resurrection from the dead” (Rom. 1:4).

The second statement presents a translational and interpretative challenge because the word rendered “declared” here never means “to declare” anywhere else in the Scripture. This verb means “to appoint” (it is rendered correctly as “appointed” in Acts 10:42 and 17:31, two key statements that we examined in previous lessons) and rendering it that way brings out that Paul is declaring

that the gospel concerns God's Son whom He raised and appointed to a position of power that He as the God-Man never had before.

Through that exalted God-Man, Paul and the other apostles "received grace and apostleship, for obedience to the faith among all nations, for his name" (Rom. 1:5). Interpreting Romans 1:1-5 this way brings this key statement about the gospel (Rom. 1:4) into direct alignment with many other key passages, including Matthew 28:18-20.

Paul ends this subsection by saying that the Romans were among the people whom God called to faith among the nations for the sake of His name (Rom. 1:5-6). He then directly addresses the Roman believers to whom he wrote the book: "To all that be in Rome, beloved of God, called to be saints: Grace to you and peace from God our Father, and the Lord Jesus Christ" (Rom. 1:7).

Romans 1:8-15

In this next subsection, Paul conveys how he thanks God for their faith being spoken of throughout the world (Rom. 1:8) and how God is his witness to his unceasing prayerful desire to come to them to minister to them so that both he and they may be mutually comforted through the faith of one another (Rom. 1:9-13). He explains how he often had purposed to come to them so that he might have fruitful ministry among them, but was not able to because he was hindered from doing so (Rom. 1:13).

Finally, in view of his being obligated to all the Gentiles (Rom. 1:14), he communicates that he was wholly prepared to preach the gospel as well to these to whom he was writing to who were in Rome (Rom. 1:15).

Romans 1:16-17

Paul uses the word *for* four times in Romans 1:16-18, making it challenging to interpret how each statement connects with what precedes it and with what follows it. Interpreters differ widely on how to put all the pieces together here.

Paul begins by saying that he was unreservedly ready to preach the gospel to the Romans (Rom. 1:15) because he was not ashamed of the gospel (Rom. 1:16*a*). He was not ashamed of the gospel because "it is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth, to the Jew first, and also to the Greek" (Rom. 1:16*b*).

He explains that the gospel reveals the righteousness of God "from faith to faith" (Rom. 1:17*a*). This statement at least emphasizes the importance of faith in the righteous salvation that God provides for sinners (see Schreiner's commentary on Romans); it has been interpreted in many different ways beyond that basic point.

In further explanation of the same truth, he says, “As it is written, The just shall live by faith” (Rom. 1:17b). Here we finally come to Paul’s use of Habakkuk 2:4. Saying that the revelation of the righteousness of God in the gospel was from faith to faith in correspondence with what God told Habakkuk about the just one who lives by his faith, Paul revealed that Habakkuk was one of the prophets through whom God promised the gospel beforehand in the Scripture (Rom. 1:4).

By faith, Habakkuk had to accept God’s righteousness in His dealings with both the just and the unjust even though the coming of His righteous judgment of both groups tarried (Hab. 2:3). In prayer (Hab. 3:1-2), he expressed his belief that God’s promised judgment would surely come at the appointed time (Hab. 2:3) when the Lord Himself would come to destroy the wicked and save the righteous who have persevered in believing in that future coming to judge (Hab. 3:3-15).

Does Paul’s use of Habakkuk 2:4 in Romans 1:17 to explain the salvation that God provides to all who believe (Rom 1:16) accord with how Habakkuk had to believe in the future judgment of God that would save those who believe and destroy those who do not? A close examination of how Romans 1:18 relates to Romans 1:16-17 is necessary to answer this question.

The Connection between Romans 1:18 and Romans 1:16-17

Because Romans 1:18 begins with *For*, we know that there is a vital logical connection between Romans 1:16-17 and Romans 1:18. How does the revelation of the wrath of God from heaven against all the ungodliness and unrighteousness of the ungodly explain how the righteousness of God is revealed in the gospel?

To answer this question, we consider what Paul means when he says that the wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against the ungodliness of the ungodly. Scripture reveals that Enoch prophesied of that very truth many millennia ago:

Jud 1:14 And Enoch also, the seventh from Adam, prophesied of these, saying, Behold, the Lord cometh with ten thousands of his saints,

¹⁵ To execute judgment upon all, and to convince all that are ungodly among them of all their ungodly deeds which they have ungodly committed, and of all their hard speeches which ungodly sinners have spoken against him.

We thus know with certainty that the wrath of God has been revealed from heaven through the prophetic proclamation of that wrath at least as far back as the time of Enoch!

Recalling what we studied earlier, however, we know that Enoch’s message accorded essentially with what God declared to the serpent when he judged him after the Fall of man (Gen. 3:15). Based on this line of reasoning, we can be confident that the wrath of God has been revealed from heaven through what He has declared to sinners from the beginning of His dealings with sinful humans!

Moreover, what God declared in His judgment of the serpent was the first giving of the gospel. Based on that fact, we see that Romans 1:18 directly relates to Romans 1:16-17 because the gospel has always included the revelation of God's righteous judgment upon the wicked that results in the salvation of the righteous who trust in Him for deliverance from the wicked (Gen. 3:15; cf. Isa. 11:1-4; Hab. 3:13-15)!

Romans 1:18-32

Having established that Romans 1:18 connects directly to Romans 1:16-17, we now consider the next subsection (Rom. 1:18-32) of our passage for today's lesson (Rom. 1:1-2:16). In these 15 verses, Paul explains God's righteous dealings with those who refused to believe the revelation of His saving righteousness and His righteousness in judging the wicked, both of which are revealed in the gospel.

Because wicked men unrighteously have suppressed the truth that they already knew about God through what He has created, they are without excuse (Rom. 1:18-20). Although they knew God, they did not glorify Him as God or give Him thanks (Rom. 1:21).

Because they did so, they became vain in their imaginations and became fools and robbed God of His glory, giving it instead to idols that they crafted as images of created things (Rom. 1:21-23). Instead of being worshipers of God, they thus became worshipers of idols.

God judged them for their wickedness by giving them over to uncleanness through their lustful hearts, so that their bodies would be dishonored (Rom. 1:24). Because they "changed the truth of God into a lie" and did not worship and serve their Creator, but instead worshiped and served the creature, God gave them over to vile affections (Rom. 1:25-27).

Because they did not wish to acknowledge God any longer, He gave them over to reprobate minds to do things that are not proper (Rom. 1:28-31). Although they knew that the improper things that they were doing made them worthy of death, they not only did them, but also took pleasure in others who also do those things (Rom. 1:32).

In this subsection, Paul explained the progressive worsening that takes place in the lives of wicked people who refuse to believe the gospel. This teaching parallels Paul's message at the Areopagus because he also confronted the Athenians about God as the Creator (Acts 17:24) and their wrong thinking about Him that evidences itself in their idolatry (Acts 17:29).

Romans 2:1-16

In the final subsection of today's passage, we see further clear parallels between Paul's teaching in the opening section of Romans and his gospel preaching in Athens (Acts 17:16-31). Turning to direct address, Paul confronted anyone who hypocritically judged others while doing the same things

himself (Rom. 2:1). Paul declared that such people are without excuse because they know that they are as worthy of death as the people that they are judging are (Rom. 2:1-2).

Paul challenged them to consider whether they will escape the judgment of God that is coming on them for doing the same wicked things themselves that they condemn others for doing (Rom. 2:3). He then rhetorically probed them with a question about their despising the wealth of God's abounding mercy to them, not knowing that goodness leads them to repentance (Rom. 2:4).

Speaking of God's mercy that has spared them from His judgment thus far and that it has done so that they might repent, Paul challenged them in the same way that he challenged the Athenians when he said that God overlooked their times of ignorance, but now commands everyone everywhere to repent (Acts 17:30). He then warned them that they were accumulating future wrath from God because of their hard and unrepentant hearts (Rom. 2:5).

He also said that wrath would be theirs in "the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God" (Rom. 2:5). Saying this, Paul challenged them in the very same way that he did the Athenians when he challenge them to repent because God has fixed a day in which He will righteously judge them (Acts 17:30-31a).

Paul then detailed how in that day God would render to each person according to his deeds (Rom. 2:6-10). Those who persevere in doing good would be rewarded with glory, honor, peace, immortality—eternal life, but those who persevere in doing wickedly will receive indignation, wrath, tribulation, and anguish.

He then explained that these would be the respective outcomes for those in each group because God is an impartial Judge (Rom. 2:11). As the impartial Judge, He will righteously judge both those who have the Law and those who do not (Rom. 2:12-14).

He explained further that Gentiles show the work of the Law written in their hearts even though they do not have the Law and that their consciences and thoughts perform a present-day internal judicial function that informs them about the rightness or wrongness of their deeds (Rom. 2:15). He concluded with a remarkable statement about a future day of accountability when God will "judge the secrets of men by Jesus Christ according to [Paul's] gospel" (Rom. 2:16).

With this concluding statement, we see yet another clear parallel between Paul's ministry in Athens and his teaching here. In both places, Paul followed testimony about a day in which God was going to judge with testimony to Jesus as the Judge through whom He would do so (Acts 17:31; Rom. 2:16).

Moreover, Paul says here in Romans that the gospel message that he preached proclaimed this very truth to people—God was going to judge their secrets in His day of judgment through Christ Jesus!

This statement confirms our understanding of how Romans 1:16-17 relates to Romans 1:18 by showing that Paul's gospel message included the proclamation of the day of God's righteous judgment of men through His appointed Judge, Jesus Christ.

In Part II of Lesson VII, we will treat Romans 14 to bring out yet another key parallel between Paul's ministry in Athens and his teaching about the gospel in Romans. Based on our study of Romans 1:1-2:16, we confirm our understanding that Paul did not fail in his gospel ministry in Athens.

Moreover, Romans 2:16 provides us with an excellent statement to use when evangelizing anyone. Everyone has secrets that he thinks that only he knows about. Testifying to him that God will one day judge the secrets of men by Christ Jesus (Rom. 2:16), we confront him with a key gospel truth that the Spirit will use to convict him of judgment to come (John 16:11; Acts 24:25).

From our study of Romans 1:1-2:16, we can be certain that a person who is just by faith lives believing in the future judgment that God will render through Jesus Christ our Lord.