

BY HIS FAITH

Five days ago, Anne van der Bijl went to be with the Lord. Also known as Brother Andrew, van der Bijl gained notoriety as ‘God’s Smuggler,’ because he secretly brought Bibles and Christian literature into communist countries where they were contraband. He founded Open Doors, a ministry with the mission of “Strengthening Christians wherever they’re in danger for their faith in Jesus.” Open Doors notes that, “Today, more than three-hundred and sixty million Christians experience extreme persecution and discrimination for their faith.” For example, Open Doors has brought attention to the plight of six Iranian Christians who have been sentenced to prison for attending house churches in Iran. Joseph Shabazian, Mina Khajavi, Malihe Nazari, Homayoun Zhaveh, his wife, Sara Ahmadi, and Anooshavan Avedian. Zahra is an Iranian Christian who was imprisoned for her faith. She was beaten, and placed in solitary confinement. When an interrogator asked her if she would continue in faith, knowing that she would lose everything, she said that she would. After she was released from prison, she told Open Doors, “When you are inside the jail, you know you are no longer in control. No one can help you. While in prison, I thought to myself, ‘There are people who love me and cry for my pain and suffering— and, most importantly, pray for me.’ Because without God’s power, you cannot tolerate [prison] and keep going.” Many Christians suffer hardship and persecution in this life. It is difficult to suffer wrongdoing, but it is also difficult to know that innocent people are treated unjustly. Sometimes it seems as though there is no justice. Yet, Christians endure, trusting in the Lord, believing that He is just. They know that the Scriptures say, “The just shall live by his faith.” (Habakkuk 2:4)

In the days of the divided monarchy of Judah and Israel, the people were exceedingly wicked, and they flouted the Lord. The Lord sent Assyria to conquer the northern kingdom of Israel, and carry the people away in captivity. The southern kingdom of Judah ought to have learned from this, but they did not. They were so obstinate and hard of heart that they continued to break their covenant with the Lord. Not all in Judah were unrighteous, however. Habakkuk the prophet was a righteous man, and his righteous soul was every day afflicted by the injustices he observed. The book that bears the prophet’s name opens with, “The burden which Habakkuk did see.” (Habakkuk 1:1) Habakkuk said:

O LORD, how long shall I cry, and thou wilt not hear! even cry out unto thee of violence, and thou wilt not save! Why dost thou shew me iniquity, and cause me to behold grievance? for spoiling and violence are before me: and there are that raise up strife and contention. Therefore the law is slacked, and judgment doth never go forth: for the wicked doth compass about the righteous; therefore wrong judgment proceedeth. (Habakkuk 1:2–4)

There was in Judah great contention and strife. They loved the things of the world, and they would do anything to get them. Men preyed on each other. They lied, cheated, stole, and killed. The prophet was a just man, and he was sorely grieved, not only because he saw evil, but also because he saw no justice. Men committed evil acts with impunity. Because the Lord did not punish evil men, those were emboldened to continue their evil ways, and others were emboldened to do the same. Justice was perverted. It is one thing for men to do evil; it is another thing altogether for God to do nothing. Such was Habakkuk’s cry to the Lord. The prophet could not understand why the Lord allowed evil to continue. He knew that God hates those that do evil. David wrote in the book of Psalms, “The foolish shall not stand in thy sight: thou hatest all workers of iniquity;” and, “The LORD trieth the righteous: but the wicked and him that loveth violence his soul hateth;” and, “God judgeth the righteous, and God is angry with the wicked every day.” (Psalm 5:5; 7:11; 11:5) The Lord heard the prophet’s

complaint, and answered it. The people of Judah loved violence, so the Lord would give them violence. As he sent the wicked Assyrians to the northern kingdom, so he would send the wicked Babylonians to the southern. The Babylonians would conquer the southern kingdom of Judah, and carry the people away into captivity in Babylon. (Habakkuk 1:5–11)

God's answer posed for Habakkuk another problem. How can God, who is righteous, punish a wicked people by the hand of a people even more wicked than themselves? Habakkuk appealed to God on the ground of His justice, saying, "Thou art of purer eyes than to behold evil, and canst not look on iniquity: wherefore lookest thou upon them that deal treacherously, and holdest thy tongue when the wicked devoureth the man that is more righteous than he?" (Habakkuk 1:13) Habakkuk knew that the Lord is righteous, and cannot leave sin unpunished. The Lord would repay Judah according to their works. He would use Babylonians to punish them.

What, then, of the wicked Babylonians? What would become of them? Habakkuk waited for the Lord to answer. He said:

I will stand upon my watch, and set me upon the tower, and will watch to see what he will say unto me, and what I shall answer when I am reproved. And the LORD answered me, and said, Write the vision, and make it plain upon tables, that he may run that readeth it. For the vision is yet for an appointed time, but at the end it shall speak, and not lie: though it tarry, wait for it; because it will surely come, it will not tarry. Behold, his soul which is lifted up is not upright in him: but the just shall live by his faith. (Habakkuk 2:1–4)

Habakkuk had lodged a complaint with the Lord, and he, like a watchman on a tower, would look for the Lord's answer. The Lord did answer him. He would show the prophet what He would do about his complaint, and He asked the prophet to commit it to writing, and to do so plainly so that anyone might without difficulty read and understand. The vision would reveal God's justice in the end, and it would not prove false. It may take time, but its fulfillment was certain, and so Habakkuk must wait patiently. The unrighteous Babylonians were arrogant, and trusted themselves and their might. In defiance of the living God, they would presume to invade the holy land, and attack the people of God. So, the Lord would humble them. They would, in the end, die. The righteous of Judah, however, live, not proudly trusting in themselves, but humbly trusting in the Lord. They believe His word, and they patiently wait on Him to vindicate them. As it says in the Book of Proverbs, "As the whirlwind passeth, so is the wicked no more: but the righteous is an everlasting foundation." (Proverbs 10:25) As the Lord would punish the Israelites for their sins, so He would punish the Babylonians for theirs. The Babylonians loved violence, and so the Lord would send an army to conquer them. Daniel the prophet, a righteous man of faith, was one of the Jews taken alive into Babylon. While He was there, the Lord revealed to him that Babylon would be overthrown by another nation. Daniel responded by praising the Lord, saying, "Blessed be the name of God forever and ever, For wisdom and might are His. And He changes the times and the seasons; He removes kings and raises up kings." (Daniel 2:20, 21) A righteous man believes God, trusts God, and God does not disappoint him. God said through Isaiah the prophet, "He that believeth shall not make haste," which means, as Saint Paul and Saint Peter explain it, "Whosoever believeth on him shall not be ashamed." (Isaiah 28:16; Romans 9:33; 10:11; 1 Peter 2:6)

Jesus taught His disciples about the power of faith. After warning the Pharisees concerning their love of money and honor, and teaching His disciples that they must be willing to give up all to follow Him, He gave a final warning to anyone who would sin against another. He said:

It is impossible but that offences will come: but woe unto him, through whom they come! It were better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck, and he cast into the sea, than that he should offend one of these little ones. Take heed to yourselves: If thy brother trespass against thee, rebuke him; and if he repent, forgive him. And if he trespass against thee seven times in a day, and seven times in a day turn again to thee, saying, I repent; thou shalt forgive him. (Luke 17:1–4)

In this world, there are sinful men, and sinful men will sin against others. They will gain wealth by stealing from others; then they will use their wealth to gain positions of honor and privilege; then they will use their high positions to gain more wealth, and more honor. Tax collectors, like Zacchaeus, took from the people more tax than they had any right to. Soldiers extorted money from people. (Luke 3:12-14; Luke 19:8) The Pharisees were so low that they, by their power and influence, took widows' property from them. (Luke 20:47) In this wicked world, such sins are inevitable. But woe to men who commit such sins. Jesus, in His manner of teaching by hyperbole, said that such men would do better to kill themselves, than to sin against one of His children. At the same time, He exhorted His disciples to be ready to forgive, and to beware of having an unforgiving heart. If a man's Christian brother sins against him, then he must rebuke that man for his sin. If his brother repents, then he must forgive his brother, and he must forgive him every time he repents.

After Jesus said these things, His apostles said to Him, "Increase our faith." (Luke 17:5) Although all men are sinners, and readily receive forgiveness, they are not so ready to forgive. To forgive takes great faith. A man must have faith that God is righteous, and that His law is righteous. He must have faith that God has condemned him as a wretched sinner. He must have faith that God has in Christ forgiven him, as God has promised to do. (1 John 1:9) A man must have faith that God has forgiven the man that sinned against him. He must have faith that God will not forgive him, if he does not forgive the man that sinned against him. (Matthew 6:14, 15) He must have faith that does good works through love, love for God and love for man. (Galatians 5:6) He must have faith that God is just, and gives to every man what he deserves. (Psalm 62:12) He must have such faith that he fully surrenders himself to God and to His will.

Jesus met His apostles' request with this statement about the power of faith: "If ye had faith as a grain of mustard seed, ye might say unto this sycamine tree, Be thou plucked up by the root, and be thou planted in the sea; and it should obey you." (Luke 17:6) The mustard seed was the smallest seed known to Jesus and His apostles, and Jesus, again speaking in hyperbole, meant that a faith so small can accomplish great things. Of course, faith is not a power in itself. A man may not believe whatever he likes and so cause it to come into being. Yet, if a man have faith, however small, then he can believe whatever God promises, and do whatever God requires. If he have faith, then he can, as God commands him to do, forgive the man who sinned against him, and he can do so not once, not twice, but as many times as that man repents.

The just shall live by his faith, the Lord said through Habbakuk. Yet, if a man believes God, then he will obey God. If God tells a man to leave his family and his homeland for a land God will show him, then the faithful man does as God commands. If God tells a man that he will be the father of many nations, then the faithful man believes God. If God tells that same man to sacrifice his only son as a burnt offering, then that man does as God commands, believing that God will fulfill His promise. Faith is not static, but dynamic. Faith works through love for God. As Saint Paul wrote to the Galatians, "For in Jesus Christ neither circumcision availeth any thing, nor uncircumcision; but faith which worketh by love." (Galatians 5:6) Faith is not dead, but alive. Saint James wrote, "Even so faith, if it hath not works, is dead, being alone... For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also." (James 2:17, 26) Faith is active, and not inert.

The just shall live by his faith. The righteous man lives his life trusting God, and God saves the man that trusts in Him. Saint Paul wrote to the Romans, “For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ: for it is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth; to the Jew first, and also to the Greek. For therein is the righteousness of God revealed from faith to faith: as it is written, The just shall live by faith.” (Romans 1:16, 17) To the Galatians he wrote, “But that no man is justified by the law in the sight of God, it is evident: for, The just shall live by faith.” (Galatians 3:11) To the Hebrews, he wrote, “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.” (Hebrews 10:38, 39) The man who believes God is right with God.

Jesus told His apostles this parable:

But which of you, having a servant plowing or feeding cattle, will say unto him by and by, when he is come from the field, Go and sit down to meat? And will not rather say unto him, Make ready wherewith I may sup, and gird thyself, and serve me, till I have eaten and drunken; and afterward thou shalt eat and drink? Doth he thank that servant because he did the things that were commanded him? I trow not. So likewise ye, when ye shall have done all those things which are commanded you, say, We are unprofitable servants: we have done that which was our duty to do. (Luke 17:7–10)

If a man has a servant who works in the field, and that servant comes in the house, the man will not, before he himself has eaten, tell his servant to sit down to eat. He will rather tell his servant to make food for him, and serve him, and then, after he has finished his dinner, his servant may eat. When the servant has done what he has told him to do, he does not thank his servant for his service. So, Jesus told His apostles, it is the same for them in their relation to God. Men are but servants of the Lord, and, as such, they are bound to do as He commands them. If they do as God commands, there is no merit in what they have done; they have only done their duty. They have only done what God has required of them, and so God does not thank them for their service. The just man lives by his faith. He lives his life by faith in the Lord. Because he has faith in the Lord, he obeys the Lord. Because he has faith, the Lord counts him as righteous, as he counted Abraham as righteous because he believed. As the Scripture says, “And he believed in the LORD; and he counted it to him for righteousness.” (Genesis 15:6) When a man does good works, there is no merit to them; he only does his duty.

Saint Paul wrote to Saint Timothy:

Be not thou therefore ashamed of the testimony of our Lord, nor of me his prisoner: but be thou partaker of the afflictions of the gospel according to the power of God; Who hath saved us, and called us with an holy calling, not according to our works, but according to his own purpose and grace, which was given us in Christ Jesus before the world began, But is now made manifest by the appearing of our Saviour Jesus Christ, who hath abolished death, and hath brought life and immortality to light through the gospel: Whereunto I am appointed a preacher, and an apostle, and a teacher of the Gentiles. For the which cause I also suffer these things: nevertheless I am not ashamed: for I know whom I have believed, and am persuaded that he is able to keep that which I have committed unto him against that day. (2 Timothy 1:8–12)

When Saint Paul wrote this, he was in prison in Rome, an enemy of the state, awaiting execution. He suffered for preaching the gospel. He was not ashamed, however, and he encouraged Saint Timothy not to be ashamed,

but to suffer with him for the cause of Christ. God had saved both him, and Timothy, not because of the merit of their works, but because of God's own purpose and grace. They belonged to Christ, the Savior of the world, the one who came into the world to save it by abolishing death, and bringing life, even eternal life. Saint Paul, imprisoned and waiting to die because he was a Christian, was not ashamed of this gospel, this good news, and he was not afraid to die, because he entrusted his soul to the gracious and mighty Lord Jesus Christ.

Let us live by faith. Let us understand that the faithful Christian obeys the Lord.

Now unto Him that is able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that worketh in us; unto Him be glory in the Church by Christ Jesus, throughout all ages, world without end.

Amen.