Haggai - Commentaries by William Kelly

The Vision: and The Just Shall Live by Faith, Vision: and the Just Shall Live by Faith, The: Part 2

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Again, in Gal. 3 we have a slightly different use of the same scripture. “But that no man is justified by the law in the sight of God [it is] evident; for the just shall live by faith (ver. 11).” Here it is sufficiently plain that the apostle is excluding the thought of justification by law, and the way he disproves it is by the cited passage of Habakkuk. Hence the difference between Rom. 1 and Gal. 3 is this, that in Romans we have the positive statement and in Galatians the negative. There he positively affirms that God's righteousness is revealed “from faith to faith,” supported by this text; whereas the point here is to exclude the law distinctly and peremptorily from playing any part in the justification of a soul. Justification is in no way by law; for “the just shall live by faith:” such is the point in Galatians. Again, it is God's righteousness revealed by faith; for “the just shall live by faith:” such is the point in Romans. The difference therefore is plain.

In Hebrews the passage is used again in a way quite as different by the same apostle Paul. “For yet a little while, and he that shall come will come, and will not tarry. Now the just shall live by faith” (10:37,38). The emphasis here is not on “the just” which is strong in Romans, nor upon “faith” which is strong in Galatians, but on “live” which is as strong here. Thus every word seems to acquire the emphasis according to the object for which it is used in these three places. In the end of Heb. 10 the apostle is guarding the believer from discouragement and turning aside. He quotes once more “the just shall live by faith.” Accordingly we are shown in Heb. 11 the elders or Old Testament saints who obtained testimony in the power of faith. So they all lived in faith, every one whom God counts His worthies. It might be shown by faith in sacrifice, or in a walk of communion with God, or in anticipating judgment coming on the world, and accepting the divine means of escape. It might be in wearing the pilgrim character; or in the exertion of such power as delivered from the foe. But whatever the form, there was living by faith in every case. Hence we have here the most remarkable chapter in the Bible for its comprehensive grasp of the men of old who lived by faith, from the first great witness of its power here below to the blessed One who summed up every quality of faith, which others had manifested now and then: they separately and not without inconsistency, He perfectly and combined in His own person and ways here below, indeed with much more that is deeper and peculiar to Himself alone.

Thus I do not think that it is necessary to vindicate the wisdom of God at greater length. The passage seems most instructive, if it were only to show the fallacy of supposing that each shred of scripture can only warrant a single just application. Not so; though clothed in the language of men, scripture affords in this respect an answer to the infinite nature of God Himself, whose Spirit can unfold and apply it in distinct but compatible ways. Even among men there are not wanting wise words which bear more than one application, yet each true and just. If faith distinguished and secured the righteous in presence of the Chaldean invader, its value is even more pronounced now in the gospel, where it is a question of a soul before God, refusing false grounds of confidence, and walking unmoved in the path of trial among men.

Certainly the word of God is here proved to be susceptible of different uses, weighty and conclusively authoritative. That it is applied by the same apostle Paul makes the case far more remarkable than if it had been differently employed by various writers. Had it been so, I have no doubt that the rationalists would have set each of the different writers against the truth. But they would do well to weigh the fact that it is the same inspired man1 who applies to these different ends the same few words of our prophet. He was right. And yet it is very evident that in its own primary application, in its strict position in the prophecy, God is particularly providing for a state which lay before the Jews in that day; but then the same Spirit who wrote by Habakkuk applies it with divine precision in every one of the three instances in the New Testament. For what is common to all is that the word of God is to be believed, and that he who uses it holily, according to God by faith, lives by it, and is alone just and humble in it, as only this glorifies God withal. But what is true in the case of an Israelite so employing the prophetic word applies at least as fully to all the word of God used by faith, and more particularly to the gospel, wherein is God's mind more than in any word strictly prophetic. Prophecy shows us the character of God more especially in government; but the gospel is the display of God in grace, and this in the person and work of His Son, Jesus Christ. Is it possible to go beyond or even to reach this in depth? A simple Christian may indeed be led far beyond that which is usually proclaimed by preachers; but it is impossible to exaggerate the infinite character of the gospel as God has revealed it. We also learn from the use in Hebrews, as well as the prophet's context, that the vision looks on to the future coming of the Lord for the deliverance of His people. This indeed belongs to the prophetic word generally, and is in no way peculiar to this vision in particular. It is a striking passage—the vision, as setting forth, under the Chaldean the downfall of the hostile Gentile, proud as he might be, though Israel might have to wait for the accomplishment. And that the full force is only to be when the Lord is actually come in person, and in relationship with His ancient people renewed by grace, is the gist of the prophets in general.

But it is important of course to bear in mind that, save in special revelations of the Jewish prophets, the vision of coming deliverance vouchsafed did not discriminate the time between the sufferings of Christ and the glories that should follow. Perhaps we may safely say that none seems to have known beforehand that there would be a long interval between the two events; yet when the interval came we can bring passages from the prophets to prove it. So perfectly did God write the word by them, and so far beyond the very men who were the inspired witnesses of it; for no prophet knew the full extent or depth of his own inspired communications. This was a far better proof that God wrote by them than if all had been known; because whatever might have been the ignorance of Jeremiah or Isaiah, of Daniel or of Habakkuk, the Holy Ghost necessarily knew all from the beginning. Thus what they wrote, going far beyond their own intelligence, rendered His mind who employed them evident. Hence we read in 1 Peter 1:11, of “the Spirit of Christ which was in them;” and the same scripture which indicates the reality of the inspiring Spirit in the prophets just now quoted, shows that they themselves did not enter into all they wrote. They were “searching what, or what manner of time the Spirit of Christ which was in them did signify, when it testified beforehand the sufferings of Christ, and the glories that should follow.” Certainly they did not know, but like others had to learn; and when they searched into it, they were told it was not for themselves, but “unto you they did minister the things that are now reported unto you by them that have preached the gospel unto you by the Holy Ghost sent down from heaven.” It will be observed that the expression, “the Holy Ghost sent down from heaven,” as we know Him now, is in full contrast with the prophetic Spirit who wrought in them and is called “the Spirit of Christ.” The Lord Jesus was

the great object of all the visions; and this it is important to note.

“Spirit of Christ,” in Rom. 8 I think, goes far beyond this. As employed by the apostle there, it means that the Holy Ghost characterizes the Christian with the full possession of his own proper portion as in Christ and Christ in him. The Holy Ghost is the soul of all and dwells in the believer on this ground.

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(Concluded from p. 152).

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The Vision: and The Just Shall Live by Faith, Vision: and the Just Shall Live by Faith, The: Part 1

“JEHOVAH 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” (vers. 2, 3). It is well known that the apostle Paul applies this to the very center of the vision, and of all visions, to Jesus Christ the Lord coming back to glory. In Hebrews 10 we are told that “He that shall come will come, and will not tarry.” Such is the way in which the Spirit displays His admirable use of Old Testament scripture. Already had the Lord Jesus personally come the first time, and been rejected by the Jews to their own ruin. The apostle's use of it gives the words a much more personal force; yet, we can see, not departing from, but only adding to, the evident issue contemplated in Heb. 2:3, which can have no greater fulfillment short of that crowning event.

But then there is another remark to be made here. The prophet lets us know that the vision of God is written so that a man does not require, I know not what, accessories in order to understand it. It was to be made plain on tablets, distinctly set out in large impressive characters. But it is not said, as the common view assumes, that the runner may read, but rather that the reader may run, and thus, it would seem, spread the joyful intelligence one to another. It has been suggested that we should compare Dan. 12:4; but this, I think, carries out the idea of running to and fro, and increasing knowledge thus among such as have an ear to hear. The passage then holds out no premium to the careless reader, but shows how the reader of the vision will be stimulated thereby to earnest spread of the truth he receives.

It is granted, however, that scripture does meet and bless those who take but a scanty draft from the waters of life to which it points in Christ the Lord. At the same time they only enter into its depths who believe in its divine fullness, and have confidence that the Spirit, who made it the word of God in all the emphasis of that expression, delights to lead the believer into the understanding of all the truth.

Thus, while the power of the vision is shown in ver. 2, the sureness of it in ver. 3, whatever may be the delay meanwhile, from ver. 4 we learn another thing, that is, the all importance of faith to make it good for the soul before it comes. The result is not yet come; but this is no reason we should not gather the profit by that faith which is the substance of things hoped for. It cannot be denied that this is an immensely important principle; and more particularly in prophecy. The common notion is that prophecy never does people good unless it treat directly of the times and circumstances in which they themselves are found. There can be no greater fallacy. Abraham got more good from the prophecy about Sodom and Gomorrah, than Lot did; yet it clearly was not because Abraham was there, for he was not in Sodom, while Lot was, who barely escaped and with little honor as we soon sorrowfully learn. But the Spirit teaches us by these two cases in the first book of the Bible His mind as to this question. I grant entirely that when the fulfillment of prophecy in all its details comes, there will be persons to glean the most express directions. But I am persuaded that the deepest value of prophecy is for those who are occupied with Christ, and who will be in heaven along with Christ, just as Abraham was with Jehovah, instead of being like Lot in the midst of the guilty Sodomites. If this be so, the book of Revelation ought to be of far richer blessing to us now who enjoy by grace heavenly associations with Christ, and are members of His body, though we shall be on high when the hour of temptation comes on those that dwell on the earth.

It is freely allowed that the Revelation will be an amazing comfort and help to the saints who may be on the earth during the time of which it speaks. But this is no reason why it should not be a still greater blessing now to those who will be caught up to Christ before that hour. The fact is, that both are true: only it is a higher and more intimate privilege to be with the Lord in the communion of His own love and mind before the things come to pass, though comfort will be given, when they come, to those that are immersed in them. Consequently we see in the Revelation (chaps. 4, 5, 6), already with the Lord the glorified saints of the Old and New Testament who were taken up to meet Him, including those to whom the prophecy was primarily given. Afterward we see the judgments come in gradual succession; but when they take place, there are saints who evidently witness for God on earth, some suffering unto death, others preserved to be a blessed earthly people. To such undoubtedly the prophetic visions will be of value when the actual events arrive; but the most admirable value always is to faith before the events confirm the truth of the word. This is an invariable principle as to the prophetic word and indeed in divine truth generally.

Here we have faith and its ground thus stated: “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” (vers. 3, 4). I suppose the proud soul particularly refers to the Chaldean. He was absolutely blind; but the principle of it is just as true of the unrighteous Jew or of any man who hardens himself against the divine word. For certainly the wrath of God is against all ungodliness, and indeed, if there be any difference, against those most of all who hold the truth ever so fast in unrighteousness. It does not matter how orthodox they may be; but if men cleave to the truth in unrighteousness, so much the worse the sin. The truth in this case only condemns the more peremptorily. They may tenaciously hold the truth; yet truth was never given to make righteousness a light matter, but urgently due to God in the relations that pertain to us.

The object of all truth is to put us in communion with God and in obedience. But the man whose soul is lifted up is not upright, as is plain. The invariable way of God is this, “He that humbleth himself shall be exalted;” and faith alone gives humiliation of self. It may he here observed that there are two forms of it: the happiest of all is to be humble; the next best thing is to be humbled. It is better to be humble than to be humbled, but there is no comparison between being humbled and being lifted up. Humility is the effect of grace; humiliation, rather of God's righteous government where we are not humble. This is what He did with His saints of old and outwardly with His ancient people. It is what is

too often needful for ourselves. The best place of all is to be so realizing what the grace and glory of the Lord are that we are nothing before Him. Humility is the effect not so much of a moral process with ourselves, but of occupation with Him. Humbling is the effect of the Lord dealing with our souls when He sees the need of breaking us down, it may be to use us, certainly for further blessing. We could not so deal with ourselves. Judgment must come instead of humbling, but in every case anything is better than to have our soul lifted up: where is the uprightness there?

“The just,” it is said, “shall live by faith.” This is used repeatedly in the New Testament.

There are three well-known quotations in the Epistles, on which a few words may be desirable before we leave the subject. It is the apostle Paul who uses this text on all these several occasions. In writing to the Roman saints (1:17) he tells them that in the gospel the righteousness of God is “revealed from faith to faith.” Such is the only way and direction of the blessing. The righteousness of God is necessarily outside the reach of any unless it be revealed; but being revealed it is revealed “out of faith” (,) and in no other way, and consequently “unto faith” wherever faith might be. It could not be in the way of law: not even the Jew could suppose this, for the law claims man's righteousness, and does not say a word about the righteousness of God. The fact is that the law simply convicts man of inability to produce the righteousness which it claims; for though it demand it in God's name, there is only the answer of unrighteousness. According to the law a man ought to be righteous; but he is not. This is what the law proves, wherever a man fairly confronts it—that he is not righteous according to the divine requirement.

This state of ruin Christ has met by redemption; and consequently the gospel is entirely a question of God revealing His righteousness, though so many real Christians misunderstand it through their tradition. The meaning of the phrase is that God acts consistently with what is due to Christ, who has in redemption perfectly glorified God. He glorified Him as Father during His life; yet this could not have put away sin. But He glorified Him as God, when it was expressly a question of our sins, by His atoning death on the cross. Thenceforward God reveals His righteousness in view of that all-efficacious sacrifice; not only vindicating His forbearance in past times, but in the present time justifying the believer freely and fully in consequence of that mighty work. The first effect of God's righteousness, though not referred to in the Epistle to the Romans, is that God sets Christ at His own right hand on high. The next result (and this is the one spoken of there) is, that God justifies the believer accordingly. Rom. 1 no doubt treats of His righteousness in the most abstract terms. The manner of it is not described till we come to chapters 3, 4, 5. But even in the first statement we have the broad principle that in the gospel there is the revelation of divine righteousness from faith (not from law), and consequently to faith wherever it be found. Such I believe to be the force of the preposition. Probably the chief difficulty to most minds is the expression “from faith.” It means on that principle, not in the way of obedience to law, which must be the rule of human righteousness. Habits of misinterpretation make the difficulty. Faith alone can be the principle if it be a revelation of divine righteousness; and consequently it is “to faith,” wherever faith may be.

It is purposely put in abstract style, because the Spirit has not yet begun to set out how it can be and is. It would be anticipating the doctrine that He was afterward to expound. For manifestly the work of Christ has not yet been brought in; and hence the consequences could not be explained consistently with any true order. It is mere ignorance to assume that scripture is irregular; for in fact there is the deepest order in what man's haughty spirit presumes thus to censure. It is entirely due to the haste which leads men naturally to admire only the order of man. As to the difficulty of the expression “from faith to faith,” it is quite admitted that the idea is put in a very pithy and compressed form; so that to men who are apt to be wordy in the usual style, of course such compactness does sound peculiar.

This it is that answers to the expression of the prophet, “The just shall live by his faith.” Success had great weight with the Jewish mind. They wondered at the prosperous career of the Gentile. But the prophet is explaining the enigma as Isaiah had done before. He insists that the only righteous man is the believer. It is not the justified but “the just;” and this in order to keep up the link between doctrine and practice, as it seems to me. “The righteous shall live by his faith.” It is the combination of the two points, that faith is inseparable from righteousness, and a righteous man from believing. The Chaldean saw not God, and had no thought of His purpose or His way. The Israelite would find his blessing in subjection to His word and confidence in Himself. “Behold the proud! his soul is not right within him; but the just shall live by his faith.” The expression then does not say the justified, but it is implied; from it. What preachers ordinarily mean is in itself true. We are justified by faith; but we do not require to draw out more than is in the prophecy; nor is justification explicitly developed in Rom. 1 but rather in chapters 3, 5. Let every scripture teach its own appropriate lesson.

(To be continued.)

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