“The Just shall Live by His Faith”

Habakkuk 2v4

Context

The book of Habakkuk was written around 609 BC and is a conversation between the prophet Habakkuk and God where God teaches him valuable lessons and answers his burning questions. Initially, he is vexed by the wicked state of the nation at the time of King Jehoiakim but when God tells him that His solution is to send the Chaldeans to conquer Judah, Habakkuk is affronted. He asks God why “the wicked devoureth the man that is more righteous than he?” It wasn’t in His character! God’s answer to this is the book’s central lesson and so important that it should be published so even “he may run that readeth it.” God says, “Behold, his soul which is lifted up is not upright in him: but the just shall live by his faith.”

Audience

The book was originally a conversation between Habakkuk and God as he struggled to understand aspects of God’s plan but since Habakkuk wrote it down it can be assumed he shared these messages with the nation of Israel. He would have wanted to try and encourage them to be just and have faith in God so they could be blessed with life instead of the coming judgment God had prophesied.

Purpose

The message came to Habakkuk to help him understand God’s view of the nation so he could encourage Israel to be part of the faithful that would be given life instead of those whose faith wains and they “draw back”. This vision could stimulate and strengthen the faith of the just and Habakkuk was inspired to record it to encourage those of all ages since many people could feel that “the wicked doth compass about the righteous.” But Habakkuk was given the answer. The just would eventually be blessed with life eternal while the wicked were punished with death.

Interpretation of quote in context

Habakkuk thinks it is wrong that the ‘righteous’ nation of Judah should be attacked by ‘wicked’ Gentiles. But God teaches him that being defined as ‘just’ does not depend on one’s nationality but on their faith. This is seen in the start of the quote which the Septuagint renders, “If he shall draw back, My soul shall have no pleasure in him.” This is a warning of the consequence to those who draw back through lack of faith. Habakkuk has to learn that it is about the individual and we need to have our own personal faith to be blessed with eternal life as the verse continues, “the just shall live by HIS faith.”

Romans 1v17

Context

Paul the apostle wrote the book of Romans around AD 52 on his second missionary journey. At this time, Christianity was put on the imperial list of "illicit" sects and Roman Emperor Claudius expelled all Jews from Rome. This led to the Roman ecclesia, to which this letter is addressed, being a mainly Gentile audience who needed encouragement from Paul to stay firm to the truth despite the suspicion with which they were regarded. So, he sent them a letter with doctrinal information to follow so they could be counted as ‘just’. Then even if they were faced with persecution and death they would have the sure hope that Paul reminds them of, “the just shall LIVE by his faith.”

Audience

The letter was written to mainly Gentiles and some Jewish saints in the Roman ecclesia to encourage them to stay in their beliefs even if they are punished for being faithful to God. Gentiles need more encouragement because they aren’t used to strict discipline and don’t have the benefit of background knowledge as the Jews did. Therefore, it was vital that they strengthen their faith to endure the trials they faced.

Purpose

The book of Romans was written to provide direction, encouragement and guidance to a community of believers. Paul understood the situation and wrote this letter to the Roman ecclesia in order to persuade them to build up a peaceful and close relationship in their community. This would have been great encouragement since they would have needed assurance and Paul had never been able to visit them directly. The letter can also help believers throughout time since it contains important doctrinal truths and clear arguments which validate our faith, thereby encouraging us to share it with others.

Interpretation of quote in context

The Habakkuk reference in chapter one of Romans perfectly fits with the context. This is because before the quote Paul is talking about how the gospel has the “power of God unto salvation to everyone that believeth” which ties in well with “the just shall live by faith.” But then, like in Habakkuk, Paul includes a warning. He goes on to speak of unrighteous people who do wicked things and comments at the end of the chapter that, “they which commit such things are worthy of death.”

Conclusion – Why did Paul use this quote?

Paul used the Habakkuk quote, “the just shall live by faith” in his letter to the Romans because he knew they would relate to the Old Testament context and message. The Roman ecclesia was facing trials from the Emperors and would have felt uncertain where their lives were heading since Christianity was put as an ‘illegal sect’. So, Paul wanted to show the ecclesia the way of truth which would hopefully encourage them to stand firm in their faith despite their context as social outcasts. He turns their attention to the context of the book of Habakkuk. In it, God tells Israel that though he cares about them, if they do wrong they will be punished but those with deep personal faith, whether Jew or Gentile, would live. He emphasises this point by sending a Gentile nation to punish Israel. God promises that His purpose is to save people who are “just” and “live by faith” whatever nationally or background they had. Paul used this quote since it would have encouraged the mainly Gentile audience to be reminded that God’s salvation is open for everyone. He tells them their faith is widely known therefore, even if the ecclesia is persecuted and killed, they would be blessed with eternal life.

*Word count: 999 words*