



Minutes With Messiah

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The New Middle of the Year

Speak unto the children of Israel, saying, In the seventh month, in the first day of the month, shall ye have a sabbath, a memorial of blowing of trumpets, an holy convocation. Ye shall do no servile work therein: but ye shall offer an offering made by fire unto the Lord. (Lev 23:24-25)

And thou shalt number seven sabbaths of years unto thee, seven times seven years; and the space of the seven sabbaths of years shall be unto thee forty and nine years. Then shalt thou cause the trumpet of the jubilee to sound on the tenth day of the seventh month, in the day of atonement shall ye make the trumpet sound throughout all your land. (Lev 25:8-9)

Why is the first day of the *seventh* month of the Jewish calendar called *Rosh HaShana*, the new year? Why isn't the new year two weeks before Pesach (Passover)?

Perhaps the second passage quoted above gives some insight into this matter. The day of

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atonement falls within this seventh month. In one sense, that is enough. The spiritual new year begins when the atonement is made for sin. This passage goes beyond that. The jubilee year, the year when all debts are cancelled and all land goes back to the family having original ownership, lasts from *Yom Kippur* (Day of Atonement) to *Yom Kippur*. Thus,

the year of jubilee and the calendar year don't match.

Those of us who have spent time in government service in the United States are familiar with this phenomenon. We have lived and paid taxes in a calendar year starting in January while spending the government's money in a fiscal year starting in October. In like manner, Israel lives in a calendar year beginning 1 Nissan, but spends God's grace in a spiritual year beginning in the month which begins 1 Tishri.

Beyond this coincidence of years, there is the common element of the blowing of the *shofar*. In Leviticus 23, God does not explain the significance of the blowing of the trumpets from year to year. In Leviticus 25, the year of jubilee is ushered in by blowing the *shofar* on Yom Kippur. The trumpet is to get the attention of the people. At jubilee it is to "proclaim liberty throughout the land." The *shofar* of *Rosh HaShana* may also serve as an attention getter for a proclamation.

"Awake! Arise!" This is the message of the shofar. The day of atonement is at hand. Awake from sleepwalking in sin. Arise and repent. Prepare for the coming new year of liberty from sin throughout the land.

Rosh HaShana falls on September 30 this year. May you be inscribed and sealed for a good year.

Contents

| | |
|----------------------------|---|
| The New Middle of the Year | 1 |
| The Just Shall Live | 2 |
| Reading the Label | 4 |

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The Just Shall I Live

“For the vision is yet for the appointed time, and it hastens toward the end, and shall not lie: though it tarry, wait for it; because it will surely come, it will not delay. Behold, his soul which is lifted up is not upright in him: but the just shall live by his faith. (Hab 2:3-4)

This passage from Habakkuk seems to have been a favorite of Paul the apostle. Assuming that he wrote the book of Hebrews (which many will argue), he used this passage three times in his writings. (I have never heard anyone argue that Paul wrote that book because it quotes this passage, but it wouldn't be a bad argument.) In the New Testament this passage is used in three different, but related ways.

Before looking at how Paul (and the writer of Hebrews?) used God's words to Habakkuk, perhaps we should look at the passage in its original context. The first thing one notices is that the passage is slightly different than the New Testament quotes of it, which were probably taken from the Septuagint, a fairly “recent” translation of the scriptures into Greek. Whereas in the New Testament the quote is “the just shall live by faith,” in Habakkuk it is “the just shall live by **his** faith.”

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Does this make any real difference in the meaning?

Habakkuk was questioning God. Why, he asks, do you punish Judah by bringing an even more wicked nation to conquer her? God's answer is summed up in this verse. Yes, Nebuchadnezzar lifts up his spirit to conquer, but his soul is not upright (a neat little play on words). He will be punished, just as I am now punishing Judah. That unjust man will die by his haughty spirit. On the

other hand, the just man of Judah shall live by his faith. Each man lives or dies on his own. Habakkuk was trying to justify Judah by a comparison with their attackers. God says Judah will be justified only by being faithful, not by being less wicked than someone else, but wicked nonetheless.

Jesus expressed the same idea when he was asked by Peter how John would die in the service of the gospel. “Jesus saith unto him, If I will that he tarry till I come, what is that to thee? follow thou me.” (Jo 21:22) Just because someone appears more wicked or more righteous, what is that to you? It is our responsibility to be faithful, no matter what anyone else does. This is the message God gave to Habakkuk.

Romans 1:17

In what has been called the theme passage of Romans (1:16-17), Paul quotes our verse. “For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ: for it is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believes; 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.” Commentators disagree on what is meant by “from faith to faith,” although it seems that they could understand it if they understand Habakkuk. My understanding of what Paul is saying is that the gospel shows God's righteousness to each individual who is trying to live by faith, whether Jew or Gentile. To the Jews there were several types of people. First were the Jews by birth. Next were the Jews by choice, the proselytes. Then there were the God-fearers, Gentiles like Cornelius who supported Judaism without actually converting. Finally there were the rest of the Gentiles, who had no faith in the God of the Jews. Paul is saying, like God said to Habakkuk, that comparison to others doesn't matter. Whether born, converted, or merely God-fearing, all men of faith in God are saved through the power of the gospel. Paul goes on throughout his letter to the Christians in Rome to show that Gentile believers are no better than Jewish believers. In fact, the Jewish believers have an advantage, but only in that they were better prepared to receive the gospel.

Galatians 3:11

The next time Paul quotes the passage under discussion is when he is telling the Galatians that legalism is of no value for salvation. “But that no man is justified by the law in the sight of God, it is evident: for, The just shall live by faith.” (Gal 3:11)

A couple of observations must be made before seeing what Paul meant in using this passage. First, Paul is obviously using the Greek version, rather than the Hebrew, although as a Pharisee trained by two great Rabbi’s he was familiar with both. In other words, he leaves out the “his” because it is not germane to his intent. Second, Paul is not talking in this chapter about “the Law”, that is the law of Moses. Never in this discussion is the definite article used in the original, although many translators have included it to make the passage say something it doesn’t. That he is talking about justification by keeping of any law is evident from his going back to Abraham for his example, rather than to Moses.

In this text, Paul uses the passage from Habakkuk to point out that under every legal system God has established for man, it is faith that justifies, rather than mere keeping of the law. Even we complain when courts enforce the letter of the law with no regard for the spirit, as they seem to do more often lately when the law even hints that it might touch on religion. This was true in the case of Abraham, as Paul points out here, who was justified by the fact that he obeyed through faith. This was also true under the law of Moses, as is evident from Habakkuk. Mere legalism, while admirable in some ways, is not to be counted on for justification in God’s eyes. No matter how hard you try, you are liable to fail in the keeping of one law, which makes you guilty. Faith in God, on the other hand, coupled with obedience and reliance on the blood of Jesus, brings justification even when you sin inadvertently. Comparison to the law doesn’t matter; faith does.

Hebrews 10:35-39

“Cast not away therefore your confidence, which hath great recompence of reward, for ye have need of patience, that, after ye have done the will of God, ye might receive the promise. `For yet a little while,

and he that shall come will come, and will not tarry. 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. Now faith is assurance of things hoped for, a conviction of things not seen.”

Here the writer quotes not just the one phrase we have been looking at, but the entire context. Again, however, it is from the Greek translation, rather than the original (thus giving some credence to the inspiration of the Greek

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translators). Rather than “it” (the vision) coming, it is now “he” (the Messiah) who is coming back. The next two phrases in Habakkuk are reversed and one is also changed. No longer is it one whose soul is lifted up, but one who shrinks back.

This use of Habakkuk’s prophecy is specifically to encourage those who are being persecuted for their faith. The writer is saying they should persist because of faith in spite of persecution, for he who is justified by faith shall live. Again the faithful are laid up in a comparison. This time, however, the comparison is with those who shrink back and die eternally. Those of faith, on the other hand, will have their souls saved. This verse is the real introduction to Hebrews 11, the “Hall of Fame of Faith.”

Habakkuk was told that each man is justified by his own faith. The New Testament, in each use of the passage, says the same thing. Each of us should examine himself, and not compare his faith, for good or ill, to another. Then we will be just in God’s eyes, and that is what really counts.

Reading the Label

A while ago I heard that someone from one congregation had said that a particular other congregation was “liberal.” The individual was not talking about liberality in giving because it was obviously said in a negative way. This is not the first (nor probably the last) time I have heard such an “accusation.” It bothered me, not because of the congregations involved but because of the statement itself. I don’t know the individual. I do know he was from a congregation many I know would consider “liberal” itself, if they were inclined to apply labels. I do know the congregations, including some very conservative members of the labeled one. I do know the spirit that often motivates such a statement.

There are congregations that choose to label themselves. Generally they call themselves “conservative” churches. I have been a member of some of these congregations, even preached for them, though I did not agree with everything that made them label themselves. (And what made them “conservative” varied from congregation to congregation.) Other than that by taking this label for themselves they are, by implication, labeling all others as “non-conservative,” this is their own choice. They are labeling themselves. If, on the other hand, a member of another congregation were to label them, this would violate the principles of

congregational autonomy and love for the brethren. Labels are always prejudicial and discriminatory.

American history over the past 30 years has been a history of trying to overcome prejudice, or pre-judging. Long before the civil-rights movement, though, Jesus said “Judge not, that you be not judged; for the manner in which you judge is the manner in which you will be judged.” (Matt 7:1-2) Particularly, the individual in question may or may not have had all the facts at his disposal. I can not judge the policies or motivations of a congregation of which I have not been a member for a considerable time. I would not have enough information. I can determine that certain *individuals* in a congregation may do things that are not scriptural, but it would be wrong to characterize a whole congregation by a few individuals, just as it is wrong to characterize an ethnic group or a family on the basis of one or a few individuals.

Discrimination is, by definition, identifying the differences between two things. In itself it is neither bad nor good. The use of loaded words, like “liberal” or “conservative” only emphasizes division, a condemned activity. “Now I beseech you, brethren, mark them which cause divisions and offences contrary to the doctrine which ye have learned; and avoid them.” (Ro 16:17-18)

God’s church must not be divided. May we never be divisive, in deed or in word.

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