

Habakkuk 2:1-4 – An Exegetical-Homiletical Study

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Preaching a sermon for the 500th anniversary of Luther's birth is a once-in-many-a-lifetime experience. It is deserving, therefore, of a preacher's best efforts. He will want to take advantage of the opportunity to praise and thank a gracious God for the blessings of the Reformation. The sermon will focus then not on the person of Luther, but on his message. That message is aptly summarized in the words of the prophet Habakkuk, "The righteous will live by his faith" (2:4).

While there are many texts that might well serve as the basis for a Christ-centered anniversary sermon, the first four verses of the second chapter of Habakkuk are especially well suited for this purpose because of the role they played in the Reformation.

The key words of verse 4 are quoted three times in the New Testament. The first quotation is in the famous passage in Romans 1 in which Paul explains why he has complete confidence in the Gospel, namely, "because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile" (1:16). Then he adds the reason why the Gospel has such wondrous, saving power: "For in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is from faith to faith (ἐκ πίστεως εἰς πίστιν) just as it is written: 'The righteous will live by faith'" (1:17). To establish the truth of his assertion Paul summons the Old Testament prophet Habakkuk to the witness stand. The way to eternal life in the New Testament is the same as in the Old Testament. That way is faith, faith in God's promise, faith in God's assurance that for Christ's sake he has forgiven the sins of every man, woman, and child.

The second quotation is in Galatians 3:11. Contrasting the Judaizers' pseudo-gospel with the saving Gospel of God's free grace in Christ, Paul writes, "Clearly no one is justified before God by the law, because, 'The righteous will live by faith.'"

The third time this passage is quoted is in Hebrews 10. There the holy writer encourages the Hebrew Christians to persevere in their faith and holds out to them the promise of a gracious reward. Then he adds, "For in just a very little while, He who is coming will come and will not delay. But my righteous one will live by faith. And if he shrinks back, I will not be pleased with him" (vv. 37,38).

Justification by faith, not by works, was the key issue in the Reformation. This doctrine is the very heart of the Gospel. It is the *articulus stantis et cadentis ecclesiae*. Not only did Paul have to contend against the subversion of this doctrine by the Judaizers of his day, not only did Luther have to battle against the pernicious Roman system of work-righteousness, but this is a struggle that must be waged anew by every generation, yes, by every individual Christian as long as he lives. The *opinio legis* is the theology of natural man; it is the theology therefore also of the Christian's Old Adam. Rooting it out is a never-ending battle. There is need, therefore, in a sense of an on-going Reformation.

The Background of the Text

In his sermon preparation the preacher will want to refresh his memory on the life and work of the prophet Habakkuk. This can best be done by first of all reading the prophet's entire book. It consists of only three short chapters.

The only information we have about Habakkuk is what he himself tells us. He calls himself a prophet (1:1; 3:1). The meaning of his name is not clear. Some have connected it with a similar sounding word in Assyrian (*hambakuku*), which is the name of a flower, others with the Hebrew word אֲבָקָה, which means "embrace." Habakkuk's prayer in chapter three has the subscription, "For the director of music. On my stringed instruments." The reference to the director of music indicates that at this time regular worship with liturgical

singing was being held. The remark about “my stringed instruments” suggests that Habakkuk belonged to the temple musicians and was perhaps therefore a Levite.

A date for Habakkuk’s ministry can be established only in a general way. He denounces the wickedness of the people of his day (1:2-4) and warns that God’s judgment is imminent. The instrument of God’s wrath will be the Chaldeans or Babylonians, whom God was raising to the status of a world power at that time (1:6). The impending doom will come upon Judah “in your days,” within their lifetime, he tells his hearers. The first attack on Judah by the cruel and ruthless Babylonians under their great king, the proud and powerful Nebuchadnezzar, came in 606 BC. Habakkuk probably lived, therefore, during the days of pious King Josiah (640-609 BC), who carried out a religious reformation and reinstated regular worship of the Lord in the temple (2 Chr 34:8-33). Since Habakkuk speaks of the rise of the Babylonians as something surprising and unbelievable (1:5), his prophecy must antedate the overthrow of Assyria and the fall of Nineveh in 612 BC. Habakkuk was therefore a contemporary of Zephaniah (Zph 1:1) and Jeremiah (Jr 1:2), whose writings bear a marked similarity to his (compare Hab 2:20 with Zph 1:7; and Hab 1:8 with Jr 4:13 and 5:6).

Habakkuk’s book has a unique literary form. It is a dialog between the prophet and the Lord. In chapter one the Lord announces the terrible judgment that He will bring upon Judah at the hands of the Chaldeans. Chapter two contains a message of comfort for the remnant of true believers and five woes pronounced on the Chaldeans because of their pride, injustice, greed, cruelty, and idolatry. The third chapter is a prayer in which Habakkuk describes a wonderful theophany that he was privileged to experience. He pleads with God to remember His mercy and expresses his great joy in God, his Savior.

Ludwig Fuerbringer appropriately entitled his fine commentary on Habakkuk *The Eternal Why* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1947). Why does God permit evil? It is a timeless question. Asaph asked: Why do the righteous suffer and the wicked prosper? (Ps 73). Finally he confessed, “When I tried to understand all this, it was oppressive to me till I entered the sanctuary of God, then I understood their final destiny” (Ps 73:16,17). Job questioned the justice of God’s ways and received the rebuke, “Who is this that darkens my counsel with words without knowledge? Will the one who contends with the Almighty correct him? Let him who accuses God answer him!” (Job 38:2; 40:2).

Why, God, why? Again and again this question arises in the human heart. Finally Habakkuk learned to trust humbly in the Lord and to say, “I will wait patiently for the day of calamity to come on the nation invading us” (3:16). In the face of the impending disaster he exclaims, “I will rejoice in the Lord, I will be joyful in God my Savior” (3:18).

The outline of the book is clear and simple. Laetsch’s, somewhat altered, is:

God’s Ways and Judgments in Carrying out His Plan of Salvation Are Unsearchable

- I. Habakkuk’s first complaint and God’s answer, 1:1-11
 - A. Habakkuk’s complaint: Why does God tolerate Judah’s wickedness? 1:1-4
 - B. God’s answer: I will send the Chaldeans as a judgment on Judah, 1:5-11
- II. Habakkuk’s second complaint and God’s answer, 1:12-2:20
 - A. Habakkuk’s complaint: Why does God use a nation more wicked than His people to discipline them? 1:12-2:1
 - B. God’s answer: The wicked will perish, but the righteous will be saved, 2:2-20
 1. The righteous will live by his faith, 2:2-5
 2. The Chaldeans, God’s agents in disciplining Judah, will themselves be punished, 2:6-19
 3. The Lord reigns supreme, 2:20
- III. Habakkuk’s prayer, 3:1-19
 - A. His plea that God remember His mercy, 3:1,2
 - B. His vision of the coming King as the righteous Judge and victorious savior, 3:3-15

C. His joyful confession of faith, 3:16-19

The Exposition of the Text

The central thought of the text is the focal point of the entire book and finally of all of Scripture. It is the truth that “the righteous will live by his faith” (v. 4).

As the text opens, the prophet has concluded his second complaint against God. Now he addresses himself in a brief soliloquy:

Verse 1:

עַל־מִשְׁמַרְתִּי אֶעֱמְדָה וְאֶתִּיצְבָּה עַל־מִצְוֹר
וְאֶצְפֹּה לְרֵאוֹת מַה־יִּדְבַּר־בִּי וּמָה אֶשָּׂיב עַל־תּוֹכְחָתִי:

*I will stand at my post and take up my station on the rampart;
And I will be on the lookout to see what He will say to me and what answer I shall give to my complaint.*

With eager anticipation the prophet waits for God’s reply to his second complaint. “Why are you silent,” he asks, “while the wicked (meaning the Chaldeans) swallow up those more righteous than themselves (namely, the believing remnant in Judah)?” (2:13). How could God in His righteousness and holiness permit the believers among His chosen people to suffer along with the unbelievers at the hands of the merciless and godless Chaldeans?

God’s reply to Habakkuk’s first complaint had not answered all the questions in his mind. He was still perplexed. How could God’s providence be reconciled with His justice? Nevertheless, the very fact that God did condescend to speak to him encouraged Habakkuk to address the Lord a second time.

The verbs *אֶעֱמְדָה*, *אֶתִּיצְבָּה*, and *אֶצְפֹּה* are all cohortatives. The cohortative denotes self-encouragement, resolution, and determination (GK, 130e). These verbs, therefore, express the prophet’s eagerness as he prepares himself to watch for God’s reply.

The word *מִשְׁמַרְתִּי* denotes the activity of watching, guarding, or serving as a sentry. Beck’s translation, though not literal, brings the thought out well: “I will stand as a watchman.”

מִצְוֹר is a rampart, a wall, a fortification. It may be raised either for defense or offense. One is not to suppose, of course, that the prophet literally climbs a watchtower or stations himself on some fortification. He is speaking figuratively. In his heart, mentally, he is awaiting another message from God.

The preposition *בִּי*, literally, “with me,” has the sense here of “to me.” The thought is that the prophet anticipates that the Lord will enter into a conversation with him, that He will place His words into his heart.

The most difficult part of this verse is the last clause, “what answer I shall give to my complaint.” One would expect this to read, “what answer He will give to my complaint,” and some translations such as *Today’s English Version* (TEV) and the new Jewish Publication Society translation (JPS) do indeed render it this way. The JPS has a note explaining that it takes *ashib* as equivalent to *yashib*. The Syriac also reads the third person singular instead of the first person. Retaining the first person singular reading of the MT, one must supply a thought such as: what answer I shall give *myself and others* in response to my charge against God. The reading in the text of the NIV reflects the sense correctly: “what answer I am to give to this complaint.” The translation in the footnote, “and what to answer when I am rebuked,” does not fit into the context. The prophet is not contemplating how he will justify himself when he is rebuked for having questioned God’s providence and justice. Rather, he is eagerly awaiting God’s response.

תּוֹכְחָתִי is a rather strong word meaning reproof, rebuke. Habakkuk is referring to the charge he has made against God. His complaint does not flow from sinful unbelief, of course, but from genuine perplexity. The

prophet recognizes that God is just and holy. He addresses Him as “my Holy One” (1:12). He admits that God’s eyes are “too pure to look on evil” (1:13). But why then will He permit the cruel and wicked Chaldeans to afflict His people? God’s ways and judgments are incomprehensible to him and seem to be in conflict with the Lord’s revelation of Himself as the holy and righteous God.

The prophet seeks an answer not merely for his own sake, however, but for the people’s. In order to be able to speak to them boldly and confidently, he must first of all be assured in his own mind. How can he answer their doubts and questions if he himself is troubled? But try as he will, he has not been able to resolve his problem on his own. So now he is determined to wait quietly and patiently for an answer from God Himself.

This will always be the attitude of believers. When they are troubled, when they are assailed by doubts, they will look to the Lord for an answer to their questions and problems. The days of the prophets and apostles are, of course, over, and so we do not expect God to answer us by a direct revelation. But we will search the Scriptures He has given us through the apostles and prophets. That Word will calm our fears and overcome our doubts. In his spiritual distress and anxiety Luther turned to the Scriptures and there found peace for his troubled heart.

Verse 2:

וַיַּעֲנֵנִי יְהוָה וַיֹּאמֶר
כַּתֹּב יָבוֹן וְבָאֵן עַל־הַלְחָוֹת לְמַעַן יִרְוֵץ קֹרֵא בֶן:

Then the LORD answered me and said:

“Write the revelation and inscribe it clearly on tablets so one may read it on the run.”

LORD is the tetragrammaton, signifying the Savior-God, the God of free and faithful grace, who forgives wickedness, rebellion, and sin (Ex 34:6,7). In His grace and mercy He now speaks to His prophet. The message He brings is one of comfort, encouragement, and hope, not only for the prophet, but for all the faithful. Its purpose is to strengthen and fortify them for the approaching ordeal.

The word *וַיַּעֲנֵנִי* denotes a divine communication or revelation. It may be either visual (Dn 8:1-12) or audio-visual (Dn 8:13-27; Is 1:1; 6:1ff). It may also be purely oral, being perceived by the ear (1 Chr 17:3-15). The word may also designate the written record of the revelation (2 Chr 32:32; Ob 1; Na 1:1). In our passage the revelation is purely oral; the prophet does not report having seen anything. The translation “revelation” (NIV) or “prophecy” (JPS) is therefore better here than “vision” (NASB, Beck, NEB).

The Lord instructs the prophet to write down what he hears. He is to inscribe it on tablets. *בָּאֵן* means to make clear, either by explaining fully (Dt 1:5) or by writing in large, clear letters so the message can be easily read (Dt 27:8 and here).

The reason for doing this is explained in the last clause, “so one may read it on the run.” The TEV catches the sense well: “Write down clearly on tablets what I reveal to you, so that it can be read at a glance.” The NIV misses the point when it translates, “so that a herald may run with it.” The word *וְבָאֵן* may, to be sure, mean proclaim, act as a herald. But that is hardly the sense here. It is hard to imagine a herald running with large stone tablets, and, furthermore, nothing is said about where he should go.

וַיַּעֲנֵנִי has, rather, the common meaning to read (cf., e.g., Dt 17:19). The preposition that follows indicates the object (GK, 119 1; cf. Jr 36:13).

The erection of stone tablets inscribed with a message was a common practice in ancient times (cf. 1 Macc 14:25-49 for an example; also Job 19:24). These tablets, like our billboards, were set up in public places such as the market place, the temple courts, or along a highway. There they could be seen and read by all who passed by. If the writing was large, people could read it without stopping as they hurried past. In an age when TV and other mass media were not competitively clamoring for people’s attention, the Lord’s message inscribed on such tablets would make a deep impression on all who read it.

Inevitably the preacher will be reminded of how Luther posted his Ninety-Five Theses on the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg on October 31, 1517. Within two weeks, much to Luther's surprise, they had spread through all of Germany, and within four weeks throughout Europe.

The church of our day would do well to follow Habakkuk's example. Only Judgment Day will reveal the extent of the harvest reaped from sowing the seed of the Word by means of the mass media. The printing press, radio, and TV are tools given us by God to be pressed into the service of the Gospel. Luther devoted his life to translating the Bible and writing pamphlets and books because he recognized the value of the ministry of the printed word. The preacher will want to point out this implication of the text.

Verse 3:

כִּי עֹד תְּזוּן לְמוֹעֵד וְיָפֹת לְקֹץ וְלֹא יִכְזֹב
אִם־תְּתַמְּמָהּ תִּכְהַלֹּךְ כִּי־בֹא יְבֹא לֹא יִאָּחַר:

Surely, the revelation still waits for the appointed time, and it hastens toward the end and will not fail to come true.

Even though it tarries, wait for it, because it will surely come; it will not delay.

Commentators differ on whether this verse is the beginning of the revelation itself that Habakkuk is to write on the tablets, or whether it is still a part of God's instructions to the prophet, with the revelation proper beginning in verse 4. The majority, including Fuerbringer and the NIV, read כִּי as a causal conjunction, "for." Luther read it as the particle introducing direct narration (like ὅτι recitativum) and translated: *naemlich also*. The best is, however, to read it, as Laetsch does, as an affirmative interjection, "surely." Since these words are rich in comfort for Habakkuk and God's people, it would seem that an important element of the message would be missing if this verse were not included in what the prophet was to engrave on the stone tablets. Whether the inscription goes beyond verse 4 is also uncertain. The question is not of great importance since the entire book was intended for the admonition and comfort of God's people.

There is no verb in the first clause of verse three, but this is easily supplied: is, or waits. The appointed time is the time set by God for the fulfillment of the prophecy. The word יָפֹת is apocopated from יָפִיתָ, the Hiphil imperfect of פָּוֵה, meaning in the Qal to breathe or blow, and in the Hiphil to cause to blow, to blow hard, pant, gasp, and then to hasten. The picture is that of a runner who gasps for air as he strains to reach the goal. The "end" is the last time, the New Testament age. Similar expressions are found in Daniel 8:17 and 11:35 (עֵת־קֹץ) and in Daniel 8:19 (מוֹעֵד קֹץ).

In a bold personification God describes the prophecy as rushing toward its fulfillment.

The Lord assures Habakkuk furthermore that the prophecy will not fail to come true. It may seem to be slow in coming to pass; but just as we are assured that the world will come to an end in spite of the scoffing of doubters (2 Pe 3:3-9), so God's Old Testament people could be certain of the fulfillment of His promises to them. תְּתַמְּמָהּ, meaning delay, hinder, is a Hithpael of מָהַה, a form that does not appear in the Qal. תִּכְהַלֹּךְ is a Piel imperative meaning wait for. The infinitive absolute בֹּא used with the finite verb יְבֹא serves to emphasize the certainty of the coming.

These words have a messianic import. Starke points out that even many rabbis referred this prophecy to the Messiah. He quotes a certain Rabbi Salomon who paraphrases the thought in this way: The time is still in the future when the prophet, the Messiah, will arise in the last days (*Synopsis*, A.T., 6, p 487f).

This passage, together with verse 4, is quoted in Hebrews 10:37,38: "For in just a very little while, He who is coming will come and will not delay. But my righteous one will live by faith. And if he shrinks back, I will not be pleased with him!" It would take us too far afield in this present study to discuss the reasons for the rearrangement of the thoughts and variations from the Hebrew text in the wording of this quotation. Suffice it to say that it is based on the Septuagint and that the holy writer combines this with a phrase from Isaiah 26:20. It is

significant, however, that he interprets the passage messianically and renders בֵּאֵר בְּבֵרָא with ὁ ἐρχόμενος ἤξει. As is well known, ὁ ἐρχόμενος is a messianic title (cf. Mt 11:3). The writer to the Hebrews refers the prophecy to Christ's Second Coming, showing once again that many Old Testament prophecies that speak of the Messiah's coming speak of both His First and Second Advent.

Laetsch ably shows the Messianic significance of the Lord's comforting words to Habakkuk:

The Chaldean may conquer and deport you, but he cannot stop, not even delay, the coming of the Redeemer and your salvation. This is God's answer to the prophet's anguished cry, We shall not die?! (Ch 1:12). The answer is a divine, emphatic No! The death of Judah as a nation would involve the nonfulfillment of vision, of God's promise concerning the Redeemer coming out of Judah and the house of David. This vision cannot fail! It will surely come in its appointed time, and the nation will not and cannot die before the advent of Him of whom the vision spoke and who is the Author of man's salvation and the only Foundation of the believer's faith. (The Minor Prophets, St. Louis: Concordia, 1956).

What faith-strengthening encouragement and hope the Lord held out to His faithful prophet and the remnant of true believers in Judah! These are words of comfort and reassurance for the church of all times, and especially in these last evil days. No matter what hardships and trials we Christians may yet have to face before our Lord returns in glory, His promises to us cannot fail. For His elect's sake He will shorten the last days and preserve us unto His heavenly kingdom. Our salvation is sure!

Verse 4:

הַנִּיָּה עֲפָלָה לֹא־יִשְׁרָהּ הַנְּפִשָׁוּ בּוֹ וְצַדִּיק בְּאַמוּנָתוֹ יִתְיָה:

See, his soul is puffed up; it is not upright within him. But the righteous will live by his faith.

This verse is a brief summary of God's revelation which runs through the end of the chapter.

The fundamental thought is that the wicked, who are puffed up with pride, will not continue. The just alone will live, and they will live by faith in the Savior God promised to send.

The word עֲפָלָה is a Pual perfect, third person singular, feminine. The subject is therefore, the feminine word נְפִשׁ. The wicked, those who are not upright and righteous in God's sight, are described as puffed up, bloated with pride and arrogance. What the consequences of their ungodly life will be is not stated in so many words. But according to the nature of Hebrew poetry the thought is to be supplied as the opposite of the future of the righteous. The wicked will not live, but die. They will experience not only temporal, but eternal death. This will be the fate first of all of the proud and haughty Chaldeans, a doom graphically spelled out in the fivefold Woe that follows. But it is the terrible end also of all who live such a presumptuous, ungodly life.

The righteous are not, of course, the people of Judah as such. Their sins were delineated in 1:2-4. But the righteous are the small remnant who believe God's promise of salvation and put their trust in the coming Redeemer. "Righteous" is, of course, a forensic term. God pronounces them righteous because Christ's perfect righteousness has been imputed to them. Their sins have been covered, and with Isaiah they joyfully confess, "He has clothed me with garments of salvation and arrayed me in a robe of righteousness" (61:10).

Therefore they will live. Even physical death will not be able to rob them of that life of which Jesus spoke when He said, "He who believes in me will live even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die" (Jn 11:25). This life begins the moment they come to faith, and it continues without interruption and without end into all eternity.

This life is theirs by faith, בְּאַמוּנָתוֹ. The root of the word אָמוּנָה expresses the idea of firmness. When used of God, it denotes His faithfulness in keeping His promises, His reliability, dependability and

trustworthiness (Dt 32:4; Ps 89:33 [H 34]). It is also used in this sense of man; he is faithful, honest, and trustworthy in all he says and does (Pr 12:22; 2 Chr 19:9). But that is not the meaning in our passage. In contrast to the pride and wickedness of the Chaldean, the righteous has a firm, unshakable trust and confidence in God's promises. Though he may experience suffering and even death, he clings firmly and patiently to the Word of his God. The Septuagint translates **הַיְיָמֶֿנִי** with **πίστις**. The word **πίστις** is also used in the three New Testament passages that quote these words. In Romans 1:17 Paul uses it to denote the humble, joyful, childlike confidence and trust with which a sinner embraces the righteousness from God which is revealed in the Gospel. That is the sense also in Galatians 3:11 and Hebrews 10:38. Our theologians have described it as the **ὄργανον ληπτικόν**, the receiving organ by which Christ's perfect righteousness becomes the sinners personal possession. Through faith he enjoys all the blessings of salvation. These are his, not as a result of his personal efforts, but as a free, undeserved gift of God's grace.

The Septuagint translates the second clause in this verse: **ὁ δὲ δίκαιος ἐκ πίστεώς μου ζήσεται**. The Hebrew third person singular suffix is incorrectly reproduced with the first person possessive pronoun **μου**, and the word **הַיְיָמֶֿנִי** is referred to God. That the righteous will live through God's faithfulness to His promises is not false doctrine, but it is not the sense of the Lord's words to Habakkuk. In Romans 1:17 and Galatians 3:11 Paul drops the **μου**. In Hebrews 10:38 it is taken with **δίκαιος**, and so the sense of the original in Habakkuk is preserved.

The doctrine of justification by faith was, as we know, the central issue in the Reformation. When God led Luther to realize that justification becomes ours not through our works but by faith, that is, by simply embracing God's wonderful gift of forgiveness, the Reformation was on its way. This comforting truth was so precious to Luther that he laid his life on the line for it. At Worms he stood before the princes of church and state with fear and trembling, to be sure, but with the firm resolve not to deny the truth and lose his soul. "Unless I am convinced," he said, "by the testimony of the Scriptures or by clear reason (for I do not trust either in the pope or in councils alone, since it is well known that they have often erred and contradicted themselves), I am bound by the Scriptures I have quoted and my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and I will not retract anything, since it is neither safe nor right to go against conscience. I cannot do otherwise, here I stand, may God help me, Amen" (LW, 32: 112f).

Homiletical Hints

The challenge facing the preacher on this occasion is that the sermon ought to accomplish a triple objective: 1) it ought to expound the text; 2) it ought to show how the text relates to the Reformation; and 3) it ought to point out the significance of the text for the Christian and the church of today. The ordinary sermon has only the first and last of these objectives.

To do justice to each of these areas the preacher will need to plan his sermon carefully. Tight writing will be imperative. Unnecessary and, above all, irrelevant thoughts must unhesitatingly be eliminated if the sermon is not to become inordinately long.

Preaching Values

These are thoughts suggested by the text. The preacher will not necessarily incorporate all of them in a single sermon. But it is helpful to list them, first, in order to see better what sermon material the text offers, and secondly, in order to be able to choose better what to use and what to save for another time. Some are doctrines, others are applications of the text.

1. Taking one's problems to the Lord
2. Listening to God
3. God's revelation to and through His prophets and apostles
4. The inspiration of Scripture
5. The inerrancy of God's Word
6. God's providence in history
7. Christ, the center of God's promises
8. God's faithfulness to His promises
9. Christian patience
10. God's justice
11. God's love
12. The sin of pride
13. The end of the wicked: death
14. The gift of Christ's righteousness
15. Salvation by faith
16. Life through Christ

Outlining the Sermon

Preaching is teaching. If that is true, it is essential that a sermon have a clearly stated theme and a logical arrangement of the material. The theme should be a proposition, a complete thought. This does not necessarily mean that it must be a complete sentence; but if it is to be more than a topic, a verb must at least be implied. The parts should be a logical division of the theme.

Logic is important because it is an aid in learning. An effective teacher (and preacher) is one who has his material well organized and then presents it well. A clear, logical arrangement will make the sermon easy to memorize for the preacher and easy to follow for the congregation.

Here are a few sample outlines on this text:

Guard Your Reformation Heritage!

The heritage of:

- I. An open Bible, vv. 1,2;
- II. An open heaven, vv. 3,4.

This outline has the virtue of bringing the application directly into the theme. "Guard" implies that the heritage is in danger (as it is!). "Your" shows that the heritage belongs to the individual hearer. The preacher might consider whether he would prefer to use "treasure," "cherish," "appreciate," or some other verb instead of "guard." The theme might be: The Heritage of the Reformation. This would be an abbreviated form of the proposition: What is the heritage of the Reformation? This theme is objective; that is, it does not introduce the application into the theme itself.

The outline given above has the added virtue of brevity. Brevity is an aid to the memory both for the preacher and the hearers. Your hearers will recall the outline more readily as the sermon progresses if it is short and striking. Another feature is the repetition of the word "open" in the parts, a rhetorical device called anaphora.

Thank God for the Blessings of the Reformation

For the blessings of salvation:

- I. Sola Scriptura, vv. 1,2;
- II. Sola gratia, v. 3;

III. Sola fide, v. 4.

As in the first outline, the theme in this one is an imperative. It also is applicatory. The preacher will have to know his congregation and decide whether to use the familiar Latin “solus” or whether to substitute the English equivalents. If he chooses to use the Latin terms, he will, of course, have to make sure that every one understands them.

Why Will We Praise God on the Five Hundredth Anniversary of Luther’s Birth?

Because God through Luther restored to us

- I. His holy Word, vv. 1,2;
- II. His free salvation, vv. 3,4.

The theme is formulated as a question. It could also take the form of an imperative: Praise God etc.

The Just Shall Live by Faith

This is a truth

- I. Revealed by God, vv. 1,2,3;
- II. Meant for all, vv. 2,4.

The parts in this outline do not use a key word in the theme as the point of division (*fundamentum dividendi*). Rather, the entire proposition, the statement as a whole, the “truth” as such is the basis for the division.

Justification by Faith - The Keystone of the Reformation

The keystone resting on

- I. God’s written revelation, vv. 1,2;
- II. God’s sure salvation, vv. 3,4.

This theme utilizes the idea of a keystone, the topmost stone that ties together the two vertical members of an arch. An idea such as this that is not found in the text but is introduced into the theme is a homiletical device called an auxiliary concept. Keeping this procedure in mind will sometimes give the preacher a helpful perspective from which to approach his text. The alliteration and rhyme in the parts are a mnemonic aid.

Another feature of this outline, as in the others here presented, is the symmetry in the wording of the parts. Symmetry, too, is aid for the memory. It also adds a touch of poetic beauty to the outline, and so enhances its appeal. The poetry in which God chose to give us so much of His Word shows that beautiful form is worth striving for. But, of course, fidelity to the text must never be sacrificed in the interest of symmetry, alliteration, rhyme, or any other rhetorical consideration. The text must always determine the outline; the demands of structure dare never do violence to the text.

Justification by Faith - Our Lutheran Heritage

- I. It is guaranteed by God, vv. 1,2,3;
- II. It was won by Christ, vv. 3,4.

The point of division for the parts in this outline is “justification.” The preacher might give thought to reversing the order of the parts. This would allow him to explain what justification by faith is at the beginning of the sermon and avoid the pitfall of possibly repeating himself. Often in the interest of clarity and logic it is helpful to rearrange the order of the thoughts in a text for the sermon. Sometimes this may be done for theological reasons, preaching justification, for example, before sanctification.

God's Gracious Providence in the Birth of Luther

- I. Luther was God's chosen instrument, vv. 1,2;
- II. Luther brought God's saving message, vv. 3,4.

Though not a sentence, the theme is a proposition. The verb is implied: Luther's birth was an act of God's gracious providence. A variation of the theme might be: Luther, A Gracious Gift of God to His Church.

The opening line of one of Luther's hymns might also serve as a theme for a sermon on this text. Here are two examples:

Dear Christians, One and All Rejoice! (TLH #387)

Because God has given you

- I. His Word, vv. 1,2;
- II. His Son, v. 3;
- III. His salvation, v.4.

Lord, Keep Us Steadfast in Thy Word! (TLH, #261)

The Word

- I. Revealed through Habakkuk
- II. Restored through Luther;
- III. Entrusted to us.

The second of these outlines may be subject to the criticism that only the first part is based on the text. A division such as Part I, Exposition of the text; Part II, Application, is admittedly inferior. Nevertheless, if an experienced preacher has cogent reasons for dividing his material in this way, he may do so without violating his homiletical conscience. No rule of homiletics is a law of the Medes and Persians. The purpose of homiletics is to train a preacher to organize his material logically and present it effectively. The division in the above outline may be justified on the basis that it provides an opportunity for presenting a fuller picture of the Reformation and the challenge facing the church today.

For the sake of illustrating how these outlines may be expanded, the following example is offered:

Introduction: The significance of the 500th anniversary of Luther's birth: Luther was God's servant in reforming the Christian church. Through Luther God has given us a precious heritage.

Guard Your Reformation Heritage!

The heritage of

- I. An open Bible, vv. 1,2
 - A. God gave Habakkuk His Word
 - 1. The deplorable situation in Judah in Habakkuk's time
 - 2. God's revelation to Habakkuk
 - 3. God's instructions to Habakkuk to write His Word on tablets
 - 4. God's desire that His people read His Word
 - a. To prepare them for the approaching disaster
 - b. To strengthen their faith
 - B. God used Luther to restore His Word.
 - 1. The Bible had become a closed book under Rome.
 - 2. Luther translated the Bible so people could read it for themselves.

3. The invention of the printing press facilitated the dissemination of the Bible.
4. Luther emphasized the importance of Christian education.
5. Luther pointed out that the Bible is its own interpreter.
- C. Thank God that the Bible is readily available to us today!
 1. We have it in contemporary translations.
 2. God's Word is taught in our churches and schools.
 3. We ought to appreciate and make use of these blessings.
 4. A heritage not appreciated will soon be lost.
 - a. Consider the Jews.
 - b. Consider the land of the Reformation.
 - c. In many parts of the world the Bible is not readily available today.
 - d. It could happen to us! Amos 8:11,12
 5. Real appreciation will lead us to share God's Word with others.
 - a. That explains Luther's tireless energy in preaching, teaching, writing.
 - b. What great opportunities we have to share the Word!
 - i. At home
 - ii. Abroad

Transition: The purpose of God's Word is to lead sinners to heaven. Through the Reformation God has given us the heritage of

- II. An open heaven, vv. 3,4
 - A. God encouraged His people to wait patiently for the fulfillment of His promises, v.3
 1. They would experience suffering and exile.
 2. But the Savior would come in the fullness of time.
 3. God faithfully keeps His promises.
 - B. Salvation is God's free gift.
 1. Christ's righteousness has been credited to all.
 2. The wicked proudly reject it, v. 4a
 3. We are all equally proud and wicked by nature.
 4. Justification or forgiveness becomes ours through faith, v. 4b
 5. That means heaven with everlasting life and salvation is open.
 - C. God opened Luther's eyes to this comforting truth.
 1. Rome taught that salvation depends on one's works.
 2. Luther's tower experience
 3. Luther's joy in the Gospel gave him the courage to confess his faith boldly.
 - D. We need to guard the heritage of the Gospel.
 1. Many who once had the truth have lost it.
 2. We are in constant danger of losing it.
 - a. We are surrounded by false teachers.
 - b. We are threatened by a spirit of complacency, lukewarmness.
 - c. The enemy that lurks within us opposes the Gospel.
 3. A bold confession like Luther's is the need of the hour.

Conclusion: We are not custodians of a museum but heralds of a King! Only by sharing the Gospel will we and our children continue to enjoy the blessings of our Reformation heritage.

This by no means exhausts the outlines that can be developed from this text. Try your hand at it. Be creative. Use your imagination. I'm sure you can do better. And even if you feel yours isn't "better" and you decide to use one of these outlines, you will at least have the joy and satisfaction of preaching a sermon that is the product of your own reflection and meditation on the text. Such preaching will be alive and powerful. It will be the centerpiece of a joyous, God-pleasing celebration of the anniversary of Luther's birth. And it will not fail to bring you and God's people the Lord's promised blessings .