

Romans 1:8-17

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[0 : 0 0] On Wednesday, the 31st of October, we mark the 501st anniversary of the occasion, as I've mentioned already, on the occasion Martin Luther nailed his 95 theses on the church door in Wittenberg. And this is the moment, in the opinion of many, that sparked the Reformation.

And no doubt a case can be made for holding that opinion. It's certainly the moment that receives most attention, even though there can be debate as to whether it is or not the most significant moment or the moment that sparked the Reformation. But one thing is clear, and maybe something that we're not quite so familiar with or aware of, and that is that for Luther himself, it was certainly a different moment, probably some two years later, that served to bring about not Reformation, but transformation in his own life and soul. The moment has been described, or is sometimes described as his tower experience, a reference to where it took place. Listen to Luther's own words as he recalled the occasion. And I'm just going to read the final words that he himself wrote concerning that experience. He concluded what he had to say, and we'll come back to what he said before, but at this point, we'll just notice what he said in conclusion. He said this, here I felt I was altogether born again and had entered paradise itself through open gates.

Now that is some testimony, but what was the cause of such a transformation? What was the cause of what Luther himself describes as this new birth? I felt I was altogether born again.

Well, in that sentence, Luther says, here I felt. But where? And the reference is not to a location, but to a verse in the Bible. And it is our text for this evening, the words of Romans chapter 1 and verse 17. For in the gospel, a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last. Just as it is written, the righteous will live by faith.

Before we spend a little time exploring the meaning and significance of that text, we need to backtrack several years and follow very swiftly and no doubt inadequately the footsteps of Martin Luther that we might better understand why this verse, applied to Luther by the Spirit of God, produced such a spiritual awakening in the life and soul of Martin Luther.

[3 : 0 9] Luther was born on the 10th of November 1483 in a home of modest means. But as he grew up, it became clear to his father that he was a clever lad, indeed extraordinarily gifted in that regard.

And he would profit from a university education and in the father's mind also secure the financial future of the family.

And so the father determined that Luther would study to be a lawyer. So even 500 years ago, folk thought that was a way to make lots of money. But anyway, I'm not saying that's always the case.

But that was the father's perspective. And off he went to study law. Now the father did have one concern. His son was very religious. And the father feared that this might derail his best laid plans. And of course it proved to be a legitimate concern.

Luther's great concern, even as a very young man, was how could he be right with God? This was his concern. This was what consumed him.

[4 : 24] How can I be right with God? As a young man, his hero, or certainly somebody he very much looked up to, was a man called Prince Wilhelm of Anhalt.

A noble who became a Franciscan monk and was so devoted in his eyes, or given his understanding of devotion, he was so devoted that he beat and starved himself to death.

And Luther very much admired this man for what he had done. And I think who your heroes are says a lot about your theology. And it was clear that Luther had a very dark sense of what was involved in becoming acceptable to God.

How he understood what was involved in at least attempting to be right with God. And in this life project of securing a right standing before God, the obvious route in Luther's mind was to become a monk.

Surely all those religious duties that he would engage in would help him to bridge that chasm that separated a miserable sinner like he knew himself to be and a righteous God.

[5 : 36] And when he became a monk, Luther threw himself into his duties with unparalleled zeal. But he never seemed to get any closer to God. In fact, such was his sense of sin and unworthiness that he would exhaust his confessors with sessions lasting several hours.

As he would rake his mind and his conscience and confess every sin that he could possibly make memory of. Now these marathon sessions of confession in turn would lead to him failing in some of his prescribed duties.

Which would in turn increase his burden of guilt. And it was a vicious circle that Luther did not seem able to break. His life was dedicated to climbing what he saw as this steep ladder to heaven.

But more often than not, it was maybe one step forward, but then two steps or more back. He had a terror of God.

God was not for him one who could be approached. Indeed, this terror that he had reached a crisis point when he was to lead a mass for the first time as he was training as a monk.

[6 : 58] In all his life, he had never spoken directly to God. He had always prayed to Mary or the saints. He never felt able to address God directly. But as he was given the task of leading the mass, he was going to have to do this.

And this was just something that created this crisis for Luther. How could he possibly speak to this distant, righteous God who looked down on him with disappointment and judgment?

One of the things that was forbidden to those who were training to be monks was private study of the Bible. But they were allowed to study the Bible in the library.

And Luther secured a quiet spot in the library and would spend hours consuming the Bible and becoming very knowledgeable as to its contents.

Now, what that led to in Providence was the opportunity to serve as professor of Bible at Wittenberg University. His superiors saw his intellectual capacity, his scholarly gifts, and this door opened up for him, which gave him even more opportunity to study the Bible.

[8 : 17] And as he did, he became increasingly disenchanted with the practices he observed round about him. And in particular, and perhaps most famously, the selling of indulgences to secure release from purgatory for loved ones.

I think maybe most of us will be familiar with Tetzels famous ditty. He was the man responsible for the sale of these indulgences. And as I say, you no doubt have heard this ditty that he employed, translated, of course, from German into English.

When the coin in the coffer rings, the soul from purgatory springs. Well, as I say, perhaps many of you have heard that one. But maybe you haven't heard another one of his beauties.

And it probably loses something in translation. But it goes along these lines. Place your penny on the drum. The pearly gates open and in strolls mum. Who had been in purgatory, but now she's allowed into heaven on payment of this sum.

Now, Luther's difficulty with indulgences was not just due to the obvious abuse of the system and the oppression of the poor. But the fact that in his mind, it cheapened repentance.

[9 : 33] Repentance was too easy. He said, we're such awful sinners, it can't be that easy to sort out sin. It can't just be a case of paying some money and it's all dealt with.

No, it's got to be more difficult. It's got to be more painful. It's got to involve more effort. And this is just too easy. This is one of his problems. They were not the only problem, but one of the problems he had with indulgences.

And in fact, you could even argue that his fighting against them, laudable though it was, was also in part one more attempt to get right with God.

Doing the right thing in this matter of indulgences. When Luther posted his 95 thesis, he was looking to provoke a scholarly debate, not spark a revolution.

The thesis is, if you read them, they're not exactly gripping. They were written in Latin, so they certainly weren't intended for mass consumption. Now, I give that little background really just to illustrate, I hope, and make clear that Luther was a man who was desperate to get right with God.

[10 : 40] But try as he might, he just couldn't do it. All his study, all his prayers, all his masses, all his duties that he performed, attending chapel five, six, seven times a day, going days without eating or drinking, it all was to no avail.

He felt himself not any closer to God. In fact, he felt himself more distant from God. And this God that he was distant from was, in his eyes, a very harsh and implacable God.

Listen to Luther's own words. And I'm just going to read from a book that I've got up here, rather than just transcribe the words. I'll just read the paragraph in question. This is directly from what Luther had to say about his life at that point.

And he says this, Though I lived as a monk without reproach, that is in the eyes of others. He was a very disciplined and conscientious monk. I felt I was a sinner before God with an extremely disturbed conscience.

I could not believe that he was placated by my satisfaction. I did not love, yes, I hated the righteous God who punishes sinners. And secretly, if not blasphemously, certainly murmuring greatly, I was angry with God.

[11 : 59] And said, As if indeed it is not enough that miserable sinners, eternally lost through original sin, are crushed by every kind of calamity, by the law of the Decalogue, without having God add pain to pain by the gospel, and also by the gospel threatening us with his righteousness and wrath.

And he goes on. That gives you a sense of where he was at in his spiritual journey. And this is subsequent to the posting of the 95 Theses there on the church door in Wittenberg.

Now, as we turn to the text that turned things around, and I don't think we can be overly dramatic and suggest that it was this moment alone.

This was very much the culmination of perhaps many other moments of insight and understanding. But nonetheless, Luther himself identifies his coming to an understanding of this verse as being foundational to his spiritual state and spiritual awakening.

It was, as he understood this verse, that he was able to proclaim or exclaim, Here I felt I was altogether born again, and had entered paradise itself through open gates.

[13 : 17] Well, what can we draw from this text as we look at it in the light of this man, desperate to get right with God and failing miserably in every attempt to do so?

Well, as we look at the text, we can maybe draw out the following truths from the text concerning the righteousness that the text speaks of. And we can notice the source of righteousness as it's identified in the text.

We can also notice what the text says concerning the revelation of this righteousness. But then also notice what the text says about the manner in which we can appropriate or make our own this righteousness that the text speaks of.

And then finally notice what is said about what we might call the life of righteousness. First of all then, let's notice what the text says concerning the source of righteousness.

We'll read the verse again, Romans 1, 17. For in the gospel, a righteousness from God is revealed. A righteousness that is by faith, from first to last, just as it is written, the righteous will live by faith.

[14 : 27] The righteousness that Paul is speaking about, he identifies as a righteousness from God. So this righteousness is God's righteousness. It has God as its source.

It is the righteousness of God. Now in fairness, I suspect in as much as I can try and place myself in the mind of Luther, I don't think Luther would have had a great difficulty with that statement.

He acknowledged in his own way the righteousness of God. The problem was that the righteousness of God was for him terribly oppressive. Because all it did was demonstrate how different he was to God, how wide the chasm.

God was indeed a righteous God, and he was a miserable sinner. So far from being a comfort to him, this reality of the righteousness from God was oppressive for him.

This righteousness, as Paul recognizes, is from God. But then the verse goes on to speak of, and this is really the heart of the verse, what we could call the revelation of this righteousness.

[15 : 35] How is this righteousness revealed or made known? Well, what does the text say? For in the gospel, a righteousness from God is revealed. So this righteousness from God is revealed, says Paul, in the gospel.

How so? How is God's righteousness revealed in the gospel? That's really the question we want to try and answer. Let me suggest in three ways. And I don't think we need to choose one or other of these ways.

I think it's fair to consider that in all of these ways that I'm going to identify, the righteousness of God is revealed in the gospel. Though I will focus on one in particular as being central to Paul's meaning as I understand it.

So the question again, how is the righteousness of God revealed in the gospel? Well, perhaps one very obvious way, but worth highlighting, is that God's righteousness is revealed as it is incarnated in the person of Jesus.

If we want to know what the righteousness of God looks like, we look to Jesus. There we see. We see a perfect demonstration, picture of the righteousness of God in the person of Jesus, the altogether righteous one.

[16 : 51] The one who came into this world and lived a perfect life, who was tempted in all ways as we are, and yet without sin. So how is the righteousness of God revealed in the gospel?

Well, in the person of Jesus. In Jesus, we see the righteousness of God. Now again, I'm sure Luther would have agreed that Jesus was the altogether righteous one.

But this also for Luther, that moment in his understanding only served to further torture Luther. Because again, all it did was demonstrate how far short he fell as he measured up to Jesus.

But the righteousness of God then is revealed in the person of Jesus. But I think we can also say, secondly, that God's righteousness is revealed in the gospel by the manner in which it is manifested in what we might call the logic of the gospel.

The genius of the gospel, of God's good news that secures salvation for sinners, is that it both respects the holiness and righteousness of God. We see this ultimately in the cross.

[18 : 01] The cross reveals to us just how bad sin is. The cross reveals to us how miserable we are as sinners, that such a solution was necessary for our sin to be dealt with.

And so the genius of the gospel is in recognizing how sinful we are and how serious sin is, but in dealing with it, but at the same time providing for us.

And by that means providing for us the hope of forgiveness and reconciliation. The gospel, the logic of the gospel takes sin seriously.

And so in the scheme of the gospel, the righteousness of God is revealed. But thirdly, and perhaps the principal sense that Paul has in mind, that is that the righteousness of God is revealed in the gospel as his righteousness is gifted to us as sinners in the gospel.

And I think the manner in which Paul is speaking here of a righteousness from God being revealed, he's speaking of righteousness in a very similar sense that he speaks to it later on in this same letter.

[19 : 12] If we notice in Romans chapter 5 and in verse 17, listen to what Paul says here. For if by the trespass of the one man, that is Adam, death reigned through that one man, how much more will those who receive God's abundant provision of grace and of the gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man, Jesus Christ?

So here he speaks of the righteousness of God, but he speaks of it in terms of a gift that is given to sinners, that we receive from God a gift of righteousness revealed in the gospel, revealed in and through Jesus.

Paul again uses that same sense of the word righteousness when he writes to the Philippians. Let me just read one more text. In Philippians chapter 3 and verses 7 to 9, listen to what he says there.

But whatever was to my profit, I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things.

I consider them rubbish that I may gain Christ and be found in him. And then listen to what Paul says. Not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness that comes from God and is by faith.

[20 : 40] And I think that is the sense that Paul has principally in mind in our text in verse 17. This righteousness of God that is given to his people as it is received by faith.

And it is this truth that turned Luther's theology and life upside down. Remember what we've discovered about him. Here's this man frantically trying to do what he has to do to get right with God.

Frantically trying to gain merit before God and failing miserably. And here he realizes that he doesn't need to do any of that. Indeed, it's quite impossible for him to secure acceptance with God by his own efforts.

But what he needs to do is simply receive the righteousness of another as a gift that is given to him. And so his whole world turns upside down, but in a very wonderful direction.

It's Luther who coined this expression of the sweet exchange, of the sinner giving to Jesus his sin and receiving from Jesus his righteousness.

[21 : 47] And he also illustrated the truth that he discovers in this verse with a very provocative story of a king and a prostitute. This was in a tract that he wrote soon after his tower experience to illustrate what he discovered to be what Paul was teaching here in this verse.

And let me just, again, read a couple of sentences where he illustrates this truth with this allegory of a king and a prostitute.

And listen to what he says. Luther was very provocative, and he often used provocative language because that's the kind of guy he was. And he does it in this allegory that he employs.

So he's speaking about this reality, this sweet exchange of our sin being laid upon Jesus and Jesus' righteousness being given to us. Our relationship to Jesus establishing this new status.

And he says this. At the heart of it is a story, or the heart of this tract that he wrote, is a king who marries a prostitute. Luther's allegory for the marriage of King Jesus and the wicked sinner.

[22 : 57] When they marry, the prostitute becomes, by status, a queen. It's not that she made her behavior queenly and so won the right to the king's hand. She was and is a wicked harlot through and through.

However, when the king made his marriage vow, her status changed. Thus she is simultaneously a prostitute at heart and a queen by status.

In just the same way, Luther saw that the sinner on accepting Christ's promise in the gospel is simultaneously a sinner at heart and righteous by status.

What has happened is the joyful or sweet exchange in which all that she has, her sin, she gives to him. And all that he has, his righteousness, blessedness, life and glory, he gives to her.

Thus she can confidently display her sins in the face of death and hell and say, If I have sinned, yet my Christ, in whom I believe, has not sinned.

[23 : 57] And all his is mine, and all mine is his. Well, that's the manner in which Luther sought to communicate in a vivid and provocative way the truth that he had discovered in this verse.

So the revelation of righteousness in the person of Jesus, in the genius of the gospel, but very particularly in the manner in which God's righteousness is given to his people.

And that leads us on really to an intrinsically related point that I've distinguished by calling it the appropriation of righteousness. Because there remains the question, how does all this help me?

How can I secure Christ's righteousness? How can I receive that cloak of righteousness that I might be properly attired and be received by God?

Well, Paul tells us very clearly in this verse. But in the gospel, a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last.

[24 : 59] A righteousness that is by faith. How do we receive this gift of righteousness? By faith. By believing God when he promises to give us this gift and by receiving it by faith.

That's how we receive it. That's how we appropriate Christ's righteousness. By believing the promises of God and trusting in his word.

Back in the day, in the Old Testament, we read of Abraham. And what is said of Abraham? Abraham believed. He trusted in God's promises.

And it was counted to him as righteousness. Not that his belief or faith earned him the gift of righteousness. But that faith was the hand that received the gift that was offered.

And notice what Paul says. That it is by faith from first to last. The sense being that it is by faith and faith alone. And hence we speak of justification by faith alone.

[25 : 58] Or being made righteous by faith alone. And this is a truth that maybe is familiar to us in our tradition. But it is striking how, even today, and among many people who have been brought up in the church, have great knowledge or considerable knowledge of the Bible, how many people still cling on to this notion that our good behavior can somehow secure God's favor.

It seems to be a way of thinking that is ingrained in the DNA, the spiritual DNA of men and women. We just imagine that at the end of the day, we're probably just about good enough.

Now, Luther had no such illusions. He knew he wasn't good enough. But we sometimes have that idea. Well, yes, you know, I'm not perfect, but I'm probably just about good enough to secure God's favor.

And what Luther discovered, and what this verse teaches us, is that we'll never be good enough. However, Jesus is good enough, and his righteousness is given to us. And as we receive it, so we are not only accepted, but embraced by the Father.

As we receive, by faith, his righteousness, that is altogether sufficient for us. But let's notice just briefly, and very finally, a final thing that we read here in this verse concerning righteousness, what I'm calling the life of righteousness.

[27 : 21] The final statement in the verse. Just as it is written, the righteous will live by faith. For Paul, salvation and life are different ways or different aspects, really, of the same reality.

He speaks of what God gives us, sometimes as salvation and sometimes as life. It's not that they're synonyms, but they're looking at the same reality from different perspectives.

We're saved from sin and guilt and condemnation, and we are saved for life, for life eternal. And the quote that he employs, that is from the prophet Habakkuk, is employed by Paul in a way to acknowledge, I think, two complementary realities.

First of all, that the gift of salvation is initially received by faith. But also, and perhaps more particularly, that the righteous, those made righteous, as they receive that gift, are then to live life day by day by faith.

Life begins by faith, but life is lived day by day by faith. Trusting in the promises of God, resting on all that he has done and does for us.

[28 : 39] And of course, that's what Luther did. He received the gift and he lived the life. And what a life it was in the service of God. As we were hearing this morning, a flawed life, of course, with his own faults and sins that accompanied him throughout life, as is true of us.

But nonetheless, a life lived to the glory of God and for the extension of his kingdom. He was saved by faith and he lived by faith.

And nothing has changed. 500 years have passed. But for you and me, this is also the only way of being accepted and embraced by God. If we are to be right with God, this is the way that God has established.

The only way that we can become right with God is by faith, receiving the gift of Christ's righteousness. A righteousness not our own, but that is graciously and lovingly given to us.

Well, let's pray. Heavenly Father, we do thank you for your word. We thank you for the power of your word to transform men and women and boys and girls.

[29 : 52] In every age, in every nation, in every context, in every circumstance. We thank you for the words that brought transformation and new life, new spiritual life in the experience of Martin Luther are words that continue by the working of your spirit, continue to rescue sinners such as we are and bring us to that place of receiving by faith this wonderful gift of Christ's righteousness.

Righteousness, not our own. And we thank you for that. Help us to live by faith day by day. Help us even in this week that has begun. In whatever the week holds. In whatever the duties or tasks that lie ahead in the course of this week.

That everything that we do, we would seek to do. Trusting in yourself. Living day by day by faith. And we pray these things in Jesus' name. Amen.