

Living by faith / Learning faithfulness from God

Romans 1:8-17

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Introduction: A painting in the Rijksmuseum shows the reformers around a table. A burning candle in the center suggests how the Reformation held up the light of the Word and uncovered the darkness that had obscured the gospel for centuries. In the center are the two most prominent reformers, Luther and Calvin, surrounded by a number of others. God raised up Luther in the 16th century to awaken the church again to the true gospel. Every reformation in the church always begins with a work of reformation in the soul of one who is called to the deeper work of God in human history. So this week marks the 506th anniversary of Martin Luther's famous nailing of the 95 theses to the cathedral door at Wittenberg, an event that shook the foundations of Christendom in the 16th century. The Medieval period was getting the final nails put in its coffin because Martin Luther was willing to go back over the biblical text and be surprised by deeper meaning. As he restudied God's Word to the Apostle Paul in Romans, he was hungry for God to show him **larger truth than what he had previously understood**, and so let God expand his horizons beyond human tradition. He wasn't branching off into heresy or straying into false doctrine, but listening to the Spirit (Rev. 3:6), and his discoveries launched a deep renewal of the faith and mission of the church. That's the spirit of the Reformation that's worth reviving today!

1) So a brief review of Martin Luther's conversion to Jesus as Lord may be helpful; it actually took place in stages, beginning with his decision to become a monk; only later did he become a true believer in the gospel. Born in Eisleben, Germany, in 1483, he came from a peasant family; his mother was a pious Catholic who instilled the fear of God into her strong-willed son. As a university student returning to school one day after a visit home (1505), he was terrified by an awful thunderstorm. Thrown to ground by an enormous bolt of lightning, Luther cried out, "St. Anne, help me! I will become a monk." He called on St. Anne because she was the patron saint of miners, his father's occupation, and he took the vow seriously. Soon after, he was knocking on the doors of the Augustinian monks in Erfurt. He had always been a deeply religious person; from his youth, the question often arose in his heart, "*When will I ever become holy and do enough to receive God's grace?*" The penitential preaching of his day which he sat under was a continuous bombardment about hell and damnation; it placed a heavy burden of guilt on the hearer from the curse of the law, but never lifted this burden with the grace of the gospel.

Medieval teaching of the church insisted that the wrath of God can only be propitiated by good works and holy living. Luther's picture of God was that of an angry Judge, like what he saw every Sunday as a boy in the stained glass windows of the church: Christ painted as in John's vision in Revelation, with a double-edged sword coming out of his mouth. Martin understood nothing of the grace and mercy of God for sinners expressed in the cross itself. In 1510 Luther was transferred to a monastery in Wittenberg, where he would experience a spiritual breakthrough. It was a common practice of the

times to confess all your sins to a confessor, who would then grant you absolution (forgiveness). Luther confessed daily, sometimes for hours at a time. By his own testimony: *“I was a good monk, and I kept the rule of my order so strictly that I may say that if ever a monk got to heaven by his monkery it was I. All my brothers in the monastery who knew me will bear me out. If I had kept on any longer, I should have killed myself with vigils, prayers, reading and other work.”* Even his confessor grew weary of listening to his laborious lists of sins, and finally told him that since he had earned his doctorate in Bible (1512), he should now begin teaching and preaching; so Luther began to follow the Renaissance instinct of going back to the sources (the Greek and Hebrew). These studies led him to believe the church had lost the vision of several central truths of Scripture.

Luther was assigned the chair of theology at the University of Wittenberg and began to lecture in the Psalms (1513). Throughout his life, Luther had experienced recurring anxiety and depression, which contributed to his struggle with faith. Whenever he felt overcome by deep tribulation and confusion of soul, Luther found his comfort in Scripture (do we have that instinct?!). Then from 1515 to 1516 he lectured in Romans. What dawned on him in these studies was that salvation was a gift exclusively of God’s grace through Christ, received only by faith. The famous Reformation slogans were taking shape in his mind right there: *sola gratia, sola fide, sola Scriptura*; later *solus Christus* and *solus Deo gloria* would be added to complete the Protestant contribution to the flow of historical Christianity. Luther’s true conversion was taking place as he pored over Rom. 1, especially vv. 16-17. Biblical commentator Lane Keister writes of these verses: *“Here is the whole of Romans in a nutshell. Notice how many themes of Romans are present here: gospel, power of God, salvation, faith, Jew/Gentile, righteousness of God, revelation, righteousness by faith and eternal life. That is a lot of themes!”* Let’s focus on these verses ...

2) Paul says he’s not ashamed of the gospel. Why might someone have reason to be ashamed of the gospel? First of all, a crucified Messiah was not a popular idea; in fact, it defies all human logic. It represented such a shameful end to Jesus’ ministry. The cross is the essence of our faith, yet we certainly don’t want to exalt injustice, pain, or death as if they were worthy values – though the story revolves around those realities! And who wants to be told how sinful they are?! Yet the cross certainly underscores that truth! And since resurrection is such an unbelievable idea to most generations of humanity, maybe someone might be a little embarrassed to push that idea too hard. It’s easier just to reduce Jesus to “a great Teacher, a really kind and loving human.” Are there things about the gospel that you’re uncomfortable with? Paul says there’s plenty of good reason **NOT** to be ashamed of the gospel! First, it’s the **power of God for salvation** (that’s the opposite of loss, defeat, and destruction)! Isaiah 55 talks about the Word of God being sent forth to accomplish His purposes – and it always does! How much more will that be the case when God’s Word becomes flesh! God incarnate in our midst for the purpose of eliminating the barrier between us and God, destroying the obstacle to our reconciliation (namely, our sin)!

And how do we experience that power? Paul says this power comes over all who believe; in other words, faith is the instrument, the connection, the coupling point; trusting that what Jesus did in His life, death, and resurrection was on our behalf, in effect, **FOR YOU!** Jesus Himself lived by faith and was always faithful to His Father, to His calling, to those He came to save. So salvation is for **“the Jew first, then the Greek”**: the reason for the order has to do with the Jewish people being the original launching pad for God’s good news, which was always intended for the whole world, even in the OT. So they were again given the opportunity to be the primary agents and catalysts!

3) Verse 17 is the one that plagued Martin Luther the most until he finally understood it. Particularly, the phrase **“the righteousness of God”** was critical for Luther. Being a monk, he wanted to gain salvation *by what he did*. He not only held to the rules rigidly, but he confessed practically everything in his life as sin, but that still wasn’t enough. When he looked at the phrase **“the righteousness of God,”** he thought it meant the righteousness of a perfect Judge who condemns all sinners to everlasting torment (legalistic). The light came on for Luther when he finally realized that here in Rom.

1:17, the righteousness of God doesn't mean the kind that focuses on your faults and condemns, but rather God's righteousness (manifested in Christ as right-relatedness) that's given to us as a free gift when we exercise faith in Him. Instead of being our condemnation, the righteousness of God is our salvation: Jesus was always in right relationship with His Father, faithful to Him! So when we are "in Christ," we too share in that right-relatedness and learn faithfulness as we exercise His faith! Paul was quoting Hab. 2:4: "**The one who is righteous by faith will live.**" So the righteousness of the law could never save us, yet in the Psalms and prophets, there are multiple examples of parallelism between salvation and righteousness (Ps. 40:10, 98:2; Is. 51:5-6, 56:1, 62:1, 45:21). So it's the right-relatedness that we receive by faith in Jesus that saves us: what Luther called "an alien righteousness." What he meant is that it's a righteousness that's completely outside of us, not a righteousness to which we contribute at all. It's the right-relatedness that Jesus enfleshed throughout His life, and in His death – the relational righteousness of truly loving God with all His being, and loving His neighbor (all of them!) as Himself – to the point of laying down His life in the face of our rebellion instead of wiping us out as we deserved. This is the sense of how His sacrifice was "in our place": He did this instead of annihilating us all. This was God's own act of self-sacrifice on our behalf: He is the Judge who will call our sin to account, but at the cross He acted as our Advocate, declaring us forgiven – if we will simply turn to Him in faith, call on Him and trust in Him.

4) When Luther came to understand this, he says it was as if the very gates of heaven itself had opened up to him. He went back and reread the whole Bible with this in mind, and everything was different. It changed everything for him. That transformation of his understanding is what sparked the Reformation. Every aspect of our lives is affected when we understand Scripture properly – how we react to God and His work in our lives, how we treat one another, how we think, what we say, what we do. It changes our prayer life, our relationships, our behavior. There is nothing more practical than this doctrine of being made right with God by faith alone. So how then can people remain unchanged when they come to believe this gospel? How can you remain "enslaved to sin" when you have died to sin (Rom. 6)? How would you not offer your body as living sacrifices to God when you've seen His mercies incarnated (Rom. 12:1-2)? How could we fail to recognize that our freedom of conscience doesn't give us liberty to trample the consciences of others (Rom. 14)?

N.T. Wright gives us the following challenge in his book *The Day the Revolution Began*: "... **Unless someone in the church – in every Christian gathering, in every generation – is working toward a deeper understanding of fundamental Christian truth, it is dangerously easy for individuals and communities to drift away from the life-giving meaning of the gospel. We constantly need to move beyond popular summaries and slogans. The powerful love of God is so counterintuitive (contrary to common sense) that we tend to reduce it in our imagination and memory, and develop mechanisms to resist its definitive and transformative challenge. Or worse, we distort and twist it until we find ourselves saying [and doing] the opposite of what we should.**" This is the reminder we need as we celebrate this anniversary of the Reformation – pursuing the true meaning of Scripture and our calling! Mediocrity as surely as hyperactivism in Christian faith, commitment, and practice are both the work of the devil. Are you a mediocre Christian? A hyperactive Christian? Preferring your comfort over sacrifice for the sake of Christ? Preferring your own agenda over God's clearly stated will and purpose? Or overstuffing your agenda with Christian activism? How do we overcome these attitudes when they have become our life habit?! We must hunger for true nourishment – to know the meaning of the Word as Luther hungered for it and to be saturated with Christ's perspective and righteousness. We're called to identify with His cross (Gal. 2:20), meaning that we need to **visualize** our Savior in His self-sacrifice and **enter into His suffering** (Php. 3:10). So use your sanctified imagination to put yourself in Jesus' lacerated skin and broken body! And realize that **WE HUMANS** were the ones doing that to God – not God doing it to Himself! The cross was all about our rejection of God's authority over us – and His humble response of grace toward our faithlessness. And when we realize that Jesus responded to that injustice not out of fear or vengefulness, not with resentment or anger, but out of faithfulness to God's heart of love, with mercy and forgiveness, every moment of those long hours of torture and agony – we come to understand the righteousness that saves!