

Romans 1:14-17 Faith Alone

Introduction

Augustinian monk Martin Luther desperately wanted peace with God and to know that his sins had been forgiven, but he was afraid that the austere God with whom he wanted fellowship would continue to reject him because of his imperfections. Daily and lengthy times were spent in the confessional with his superior Johann von Staupitz. The older and wiser Christian leader directed Luther to the Psalms and to Romans, passages of the Bible with which he was familiar. How could a righteous God accept someone who is a sinner? How could God forgive me an undeserving sinner and still remain righteous? This is not just an historical issue for a German monk approximately 500 years ago; it is the central issue of the Gospel for every human being living on the planet. How can a perfect God have fellowship with me and one day accept me into heaven without spoiling heaven? While wrestling with this issue Luther went on a pilgrimage to Rome, according to his son Paul Luther, to the Church of St John Lateran, where there is a set of medieval stairs said to have originally been the stairs leading up to Pilate's house in Jerusalem, once trod upon by the Lord. For this reason they were called the *Scala Sancta* or "Holy Stairs." It was the custom for pilgrims, like Luther, to ascend these steps on their knees, praying as they went. At certain intervals there were stains said to have been caused by the bleeding wounds of Christ. The worshiper would bend over and kiss these steps, praying a long time before ascending painfully to the next ones. Remission of years of punishment in purgatory was promised to all who would perform this pious exercise. Luther began as the others had. But, as he ascended the staircase, the words of Romans 1:17 came forcefully to his mind: "The just shall live by faith." They seemed to echo over and over again, growing louder with each repetition: "The just shall live by faith," "The just shall live by faith." But Luther was not living by faith. He was living by fear. The old superstitious doctrines and the new biblical theology wrestled within him.

"By fear," said Luther.

"*By faith!*" said St. Paul.

"By fear," said the scholastic fathers of medieval Catholicism.

"*By faith!*" said the Scriptures.

"By fear," said those who agonized beside him on the staircase.

"*By faith!*" said God the Father.

At last Luther rose in amazement from the steps up which he had been dragging himself and shuddered at his superstition and folly. Now he realized that God had saved him by the righteousness of Christ, received by faith; he was to exercise that faith, receive that righteousness, and live by trusting God. He had not been doing it. Slowly he turned on Pilate's staircase and returned to the bottom. He went back to Wittenberg, and in time, as Paul Luther said, "He took 'The just shall live by faith' as the foundation of all his doctrine." This was the real beginning of the Reformation, for the reformation of Luther necessarily preceded the reformation of Christendom. (James Montgomery Boice, *Romans: Volume 1: Justification by Faith. 4 Romans 1-4* (pp.123-4.) On what are you relying to gain entrance into heaven? Is it by earning God's favour –your good works exceeding your failings? Or is it by the free gift of God, through the sacrifice of Jesus in our place on the cross, received by faith alone that we seek entry? Paul will explain and explore this key point as he writes the letter to the Christian Church in Rome.

1. The Gospel is the debt to the world (Romans 1:14-15)

(a) What does *I am a debtor* mean? (v14) *I am a debtor* ['I am bound' NIV] *both to Greeks and non-Greeks, both to the wise and the foolish.* The NIV renders Romans 1:14 *I am bound to...*, but

Paul's language is stronger in describing himself as *a debtor*. It is important to clarify what he is and is not saying. Now many of us are indebted to the bank. The monthly statement comes out and we may see a minus sign alongside our balance. This is not a good sign! However, even more people are indebted to a bank or other financial institution for a mortgage for our homes. For a period of time, usually for twenty-five years, a rather large sum of money is borrowed and that together with a lot of interest is repaid over the loan period, until, finally, the loan is paid off –hopefully before you are due to retire! However, that is not the kind of indebtedness that Paul is describing here. Think of this scenario: You are entrusted with a fairly large sum of money for a child by their parents and asked to invest it and pass it on when they become eighteen – as a result of the agreement you are indebted to the child until that sum is handed over. You will feel a sense of responsibility for that money to discharge your obligations honestly. Paul has been entrusted with the Gospel message by the Lord Jesus Christ to pass it on to the Gentiles (non-Jews) in particular. In a world where the number of believers at the time of his own conversion was numbered somewhere in the low thousands, taking the Gospel to the world was a huge task. Yet he willingly committed the rest of his earthly life to sharing this gospel message with as many people as possible in the known world of the 1st century AD.

(b) **To whom did he feel indebted?** (v14) *both to Greeks and non-Greeks, both to the wise and the foolish* In a word –everyone who had not heard of Jesus! In specific terms he uses two parallel phrases to describe the people to whom he was taking the Gospel. *both to Greeks and non-Greeks* – non-Greeks is literally *barbarians*. It is possible that this phrase refers to people living outside the bounds of the Romans Empire, who were not Greek-speakers and who did not share the Greek cultural values accepted within the Empire. This is reinforced by the second descriptive phrase: *both to the wise and the foolish* – that is those educated in the manner expected of the cultured classes within the empire in contrast to the people that did not have that opportunity. Whatever the specific meaning of these phrases the apostle was seeking to use inclusive terms to declare that everyone had a right to hear the good news of Jesus from those who follow Him.

(c) **Do I share Paul's eagerness to pass on the good news?** (v15) *That is why I am so eager to preach the gospel also to you who are in Rome.* When you first professed faith how natural it was for most of us to want to tell other people about it –so that they too might trust in Jesus. Yet when so many people have no interest and decline our invitations it is so easy to become discouraged and keep the good news to ourselves. Paul, two decades after his conversion is still as enthusiastic about the gospel as in his first year. Do you and me need to ask the Lord to rekindle our enthusiasm for Him with respect to evangelism? The greatest thing that could happen in this church over this year is not progress on the building project (though we do rejoice in it!) or successful programmes in church life (which we prayerfully seek) or an increased bank balance (all good things!) but someone or some people coming to faith in Jesus –I earnestly hope you believe that. If this is the case then we will pray to that end for people who need Jesus and seek to find ways to communicate something of God's love to people who need Him. Whether people in our local community, other parts of our own country or overseas –may God grant us the passion Paul had for making Jesus known.

2. **The Gospel is the power of God for the world** (Romans 1:16)

(a) **Why might Paul have been ashamed of the Gospel?** (v16) It is not talked about in Christian circles very often, but most of us, myself included, have remained silent in company sometimes when we ought to have spoken a word of witness. We were afraid of the likely reaction, of criticism for being a 'bible-basher' or 'holy-Joe' or some equivalent

phrase. I know that I have sometimes spoken too much on some occasions also, but that is another scenario. Here is a reference to a more common issue that most of us face in an increasingly secular society where for some Christians even mentioning a Christian view on a topic can result in a disciplinary hearing, a demotion or a possible dismissal from the workplace. Although on occasions he was as bold as a lion in proclaiming his faith, in I Corinthians 2:3 he admitted that when he came to Corinth, *I came to you in weakness and fear, and with much trembling*. Earlier in the same letter there are hints of the nature of some of the criticism he received. ¹⁸ *For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.* ¹⁹ *For it is written: 'I will destroy the wisdom of the wise; the intelligence of the intelligent I will frustrate.'* ²⁰ *Where is the wise person? Where is the teacher of the law? Where is the philosopher of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?* ²¹ *For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know him, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe.* ²² ***Jews demand signs and Greeks look for wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling-block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles,*** ²⁴ *but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.* ²⁵ *For the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength* (I Corinthians 1:18-25). There can be **intellectual 'shame'**, not least in University Biblical studies departments, some of which have been hostile to staff members that showed any sympathy with the Christian faith. Yet it can happen to all of us in other contexts – 'you don't believe that- do you?' There can be **social shame**: in the early Church the vast majority of Christians were slaves or from other humble circumstances. I Corinthians 1:26-28 records: ²⁶ *Brothers and sisters, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth.* ²⁷ *But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong.* Pressures of life in the upper classes are irrelevant to the vast majority of Christians, but there will be a few who pay a social price for accepting Jesus as Saviour and Lord in this country. This takes no account of the pressures people from some other faith community backgrounds experience when they make such a choice. There can be **moral shame**; in some contexts the presence of a Christian could cramp people's style. The offence of the Gospel contrasts with the hedonistic lifestyle of sexual promiscuity and excessive drinking etc of sections of our society; it also contrasts with the business values that can accommodate labor rate fixing [interest rate for banks borrowing unsecured money from each other] and similar misdemeanours in the banking industry; and dodgy tax avoidance schemes and other unethical practices in some other industries and businesses; if there are particular circumstance where you struggle with some area of your life arrange to meet with a Christian you trust to pray with you through this situation to enable you to win the victory over it.

(b) **Why was Paul not ashamed of the Gospel?** (v16) *For I am not ashamed of the gospel, (i) The nature of the Gospel because it is the power of God* In addition to his own conversion experience, he had seen lives changed by Jesus that were truly transformed with which no one could argue. Testimonies of people like John Newton of *Amazing Grace* fame, converted from a foul-mouthed hard-living slave-trader to a wonderful humble Christian man who accomplished so many wonderful things for God in his day. And, every other man, woman, boy or girl whose life has been committed to Jesus. God has not changed.

(ii) **The purpose of the Gospel** *that brings salvation* The power of God through His spoken word that brought the world into being (Psalm 33:6) and the dynamic power of God that raised Jesus from the dead is the very same power that awakens someone *dead in transgressions and sins* (Ephesians 2:1) and *made us alive with Christ* (Ephesians 2:5). When we pray for someone we are in touch with the most powerful being in the universe who *is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine...*(Ephesians 3:20). We can become

discouraged when we don't see quick results from our prayers, but need to grasp that God's timescale is far greater than our own.

(iii) The scope of the Gospel *to everyone who believes* at the very least to transform every human being created in His image to be like Jesus, but God does not force the good news on people –but they risk the eternal consequences of rejecting Him –if they decline His wonderful offer of salvation. People of every race or people group will one day sing His praises in heaven. I felt greatly uplifted at our Baptist World Congress in Birmingham, England in 2005 when people from well over one hundred nationalities sang God's praises together. How much more wonderful it will be in heaven! We must never forget that we are part of something so much bigger than what is going on in our local community. To be the only Christian in a workplace or family can be very hard at times; in parts of the Islamic world some Christians may go for years without meeting a fellow believer, yet grasping the bigger picture of God's saving purposes for His world stops us from too narrow a focus to recognise the scope of the impact of the gospel in the world.

(iv) The priority of the Gospel *first to the Jew, then to the Gentile* Both Jew and Gentile alike need to recognise Jesus as the Messiah, the Saviour of sinners; the exclusive claims of Jesus as Lord are non-negotiable. The Jewish people have the priority as the chosen people, descendants of Abraham set apart to bless the world with God's salvation (Genesis 12:3b) and with whom He established an everlasting covenant (Genesis 17:7); Paul recognised the importance of Jewish mission as well as the greater time and resource commitment in Gentile mission work. Acts 13:46-48 records Paul's words to unbelieving Jews in Turkish Antioch: Then Paul and Barnabas answered them boldly: *'We had to speak the word of God to you first. Since you reject it and do not consider yourselves worthy of eternal life, we now turn to the Gentiles. ⁴⁷For this is what the Lord has commanded us: "I have made you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring salvation to the ends of the earth."⁴⁸ When the Gentiles heard this, they were glad and honoured the word of the Lord; and all who were appointed for eternal life believed.* In total numerical terms the Jewish people are a miniscule part of the world population, but like Paul we too make no apology for supporting a Jewish mission, 'Christian Witness to Israel', as well as other agencies working amongst the wider world population of 'Gentiles'.

Paul felt 'indebted' to people until he had passed on the good news of Jesus to them; he was eager to share the responsibility for evangelistic work, no matter how hard it was at times. He was also not ashamed of what he stood for, even though by implication he was admitting that there had been times in the past when he had been. May we stand with him in these priorities for our own lives.

3. The Gospel is the revelation of God's righteousness in the world (Romans 1:17)

(a) What is the righteousness of God that Paul mentions here? (v17) *For in the gospel the righteousness of God is revealed* There are a number of aspects to this glorious truth. (i) The attribute of God Himself God cannot turn a blind eye to sin and pretend everything is okay when it is not; instead He has to be true to Himself. In Romans 3:25-26 Paul wrote: *God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement, through the shedding of His blood – to be received by faith. He did this to demonstrate His righteousness, because in His forbearance He had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished ²⁶ – He did it to demonstrate His righteousness at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus.* This is both incredibly serious –in that the cost of your redemption and mine required the sacrifice of the perfect, sinless, Son of God as our substitute and sin-bearer on the cross. We receive salvation as a free gift, but it is only free of cost to the recipient at the time of acceptance, the price has already been paid by Jesus. We are familiar with the National Health Service being free to the hospital patient yet the enormous cost has been willingly underwritten by British

taxpayers. The wonderful gospel of God that we rejoice in has to be a gift that cannot compromise His holy name or character. Yet this is only the first aspect of the gospel presentation. To stop at this point only highlights the gulf between a perfect God and sinful humanity. Therefore other aspects to this truth must come into play here. (ii) The activity of God Himself in salvation In various passages in the Old Testament this point is explained. Psalm 98:2-3, for example: *The Lord has **made His salvation known and revealed His righteousness to the nations.**³ He has remembered His love and His faithfulness to Israel; all the ends of the earth have seen **the salvation of our God.*** In Isaiah 46: 12b-13a God declares: *Listen to Me, you stubborn-hearted, you who are now far from My righteousness. ¹³**I am bringing My righteousness near, it is not far away; and My salvation will not be delayed. I will grant salvation to Zion** (God's people). The wonder and glory of the gospel is that God brings about the deliverance (or salvation) of His people in a manner that does not compromise His holiness. In fact, it not only confirms that God keeps His promises to save His people, but that no amount of evil in the world can ultimately frustrate this purpose from being carried out. How often do we see situations in the world where evil appears to triumph? How often do wicked people appear to get away with things? Paul reminds us 'Our God reigns'. He is on the throne and will be victorious. At a moment in time in history we see but a miniscule cross-section of what is going on. In the Bible from Genesis to Revelation we see the bigger picture from Creation to New Creation, and the final accomplishment of the perfect world God planned for His creation. The book of Revelation and other passages of the Bible give us the smallest of glimpses into that future –enough to encourage to persevere in our faith, to know that we will one day be vindicated in our stand for Him. In John's extraordinary visions in Revelation these wonderful words were articulated in heaven: *The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of His Messiah, and **He will reign for ever and ever*** (Revelation 11:15). This is incredibly exciting that Almighty God, the Creator of the heavens and the earth, would go to such lengths to save you and me, and yet do so in a manner consistent with His holy character. (iii) The accomplishment of God Himself Paul in Philippians 3:8-9 explains His conversion and its implications in these terms: *that I may gain Christ⁹ and be found in Him, **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 on the basis of faith.*** What does Paul mean? He is referring to a status we must have if we are ever going to be good enough to enter heaven. It is something that became possible because Jesus died in our place on the cross, shedding His precious blood so that we might be forgiven for all our sinful thoughts, words and actions. He is incredibly careful here to state that it is not my own 'righteousness' or good deeds that earn me a place in heaven. I could never manage that. Instead, Paul makes it plain that God's righteousness is a **gift** to us (Romans 5:17: *For if, by the trespass of the one man, 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!*) This righteousness is received by you and me **through faith** (Romans 3:22: *This righteousness is given through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe.*) In II Corinthians 5:21 Paul writes some extraordinary words that I am always thrilled to read: *God made Him (Jesus) who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God.* Do you get this? When God looks at His children by faith –believers, He sees us 'clothed' with the perfect righteousness of Jesus and thus treats us as if we were as sinless as Him. Paul will come back to this subject in Romans chapter four, but when we grasp what the gospel is about this truth does not crush us with the sheer impossibility of earning our way to heaven, instead it ought to cause us to rejoice in the wonderful good news that Jesus has obtained for me what I could never have accomplished on my own.*

(b) **How does this righteousness of God affect me?**— *a righteousness that is by faith from first to last,(v17)* In practice what does this mean to me as a Christian? It is more than a guarantee of heaven when we die –though that would be more than we could ever deserve. It means direct access to God when we pray –that He hears our prayers and answers them. Because many of us have been taught this from childhood we can so easily take it for granted as an entitlement. It is not! Rather it is an incredible privilege to come before Almighty God, in the name of Jesus, in the power of the Holy Spirit, with our feeble words that can contribute to the transformation of circumstances not only locally, but on occasions on the other side of the world. It is also an assurance when the devil puts thought in our minds that ‘you are a failure’ you can never be good enough for God. In such circumstances, we can reply, God already knows that. My salvation was granted because Jesus was good enough; my place in heaven is assured because Jesus was good enough; my relationship with God is based on the fact that Jesus was good enough... The true child of God will not use such truths to think I can get away with living a sinful life and still get into heaven. Instead they will want to give their lives in service to such an amazing God who has done all this for them. They will show in their character evidence of the grace of God at work in their lives. Having received such love from God we surely will want to pass it on. Are you here today as someone who has never received God’s salvation, His gift of righteousness? Don’t hesitate to receive the greatest gift of all cry out to God for it – don’t delay because we never know if we will get another opportunity. We become Christians by faith and we live that way till we enter His personal presence in His eternity. It is a gift of God, but each of us has a solemn responsibility to take hold of it. Have you done so yet?

(c) **What is the significance of the quotation from Habakkuk?** *just as it is written: ‘The righteous will live by faith (v17).* It is a reinforcement of what he has said already in this passage. The wonderful good news of the gospel –the greatest good news in human history – must be received as a gift by faith in order to have God’s righteousness credited to our account because of Jesus. Yet in view of the extraordinary nature of this gift we must not take it for granted but live day by day, year by year with the same faith by which we trusted in God in the first place. There is no place for complacency. May God help each one of us to place our faith in Him through Jesus, but also keep on living by faith in fellowship with our great God and Saviour, Amen.