

Sermons through

# Romans

## From Faith to Faith

*Romans 1:17*

*With Study Questions*

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# From Faith to Faith

*Romans 1:17*

**For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes, for the Jew first and also for the Greek. <sup>17</sup> For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith; as it is written, “*The just shall live by faith*” (Romans 1:16, 17).**

## **Introduction**

There inevitably comes a time when children become aware of their own mortality. With that comes trepidation of what comes next – after this life. As we grow older that trepidation wanes, especially if we’re busy and living in a relatively safe environment. The natural discomfort human beings have with death may not resurface until they we’re elderly or unless we are living in a politically volatile/dangerous climate, where death happens to the young and old in plain sight with great regularity.

Perhaps that is one of the dangers of living in a safe environment. We tend to think that life will go on. It is this mentality Paul addresses in his letter to the church of the Thessalonians.

**For when they say, “Peace and safety!” then sudden destruction comes upon them, as labor pains upon a pregnant woman. And they shall not escape (1 Thessalonians 5:3).**

It would almost irresponsible to approach the verse we’re looking at today without some reference to the great Protestant Reformer, Martin Luther. It might be suggested that Luther was indulging a “peace and safety...life will simply go on” mentality after receiving his Master’s degree. This changed in a heart-beat – as quick as lightning.

At the age of twenty-two He was heading for law school on July 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1505 when an actual bolt of lightning nearly shocked him right into eternity. Without hesitation Luther developed what some might call an unhealthy fear of death and judgment. But it was Luther’s tortured soul that ignited the theological watershed leading to the Reformation. It was due to the Reformation that the light of the gospel once again began to race

across Europe – and the world, and everyone one of us, has been made richer for it.

We generally associate Martin Luther with his pounding of the 95 Theses on the door of the Wittenberg Cathedral – primarily addressing the abuses of the Roman Catholic Church, especially as it related to “indulgences” church members could pay to aid loved ones and family members out of purgatory (Luther himself had become a Roman Catholic Augustinian Monk); but all the turmoil surrounding Martin Luther flowed from his theological study and convictions – especially as it related to the verse before us.

Surrounded by the folly and darkness of the church did not dissuade Luther from his faith in Christ, but he did come to realize, first-hand, that man was incurably sinful – no matter what robes or collars they donned. Luther consequently was committed to *ad fontes*, a Latin expression meaning ‘to the source;’ the source being the Scriptures. But it wasn’t as if Luther found immediate comfort in his studies.

The majority of his Roman Catholic instructors and influences had interpreted the Bible in such a way that salvation was acquired via a combination of human works with God’s grace; and if Luther was aware of anything it was his own sinfulness. It was said that he, as a monk, would spend hours in the confessional and would barely make it to his room before the guilt of his sin would overwhelm him and he would required yet another dose of penance (a punishment as a token of penitence for sin).

Even when Luther began to study the very passage before us, the influence of medieval theologians (we should never underestimate the influence of our instructors) could not allow him to see this passage for what it was. The phrase “**the righteousness of God**” terrified Luther. He called the phrase “a thunderbolt in my heart” because knew himself to be unrighteous. It even made him angry (Luther was apparently a very passionate person).

Searching for peace in the fullness of the gospel in the New Testament Luther was yet again confronted with condemnation in the phrase “**the righteousness of God.**” “I did not love, yes, I hated the righteous God who punishes sinners” Luther conveyed, “Is it not enough, that God crushes us miserable sinners with His law, that He has to threaten us with punishment through the Gospel, too?”

But then, through great study upon the very verse we've read this morning and the illumination of the Holy Spirit, Luther rediscovered something; he rediscovered the grace of the gospel. His conclusion was that he felt "altogether born again and had entered paradise itself through open gates... I extolled my sweetest word with a love as great as the hatred with which I had before hated the word `righteousness of God.'"

It is with this history in mind (not to mention the Apostle Paul's own theological climate, which was similar to Luther's) that we examine this highly pivotal verse.

**For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith; as it is written, "The just shall live by faith" (Romans 1:17).**

### **The Righteousness of God**

The "it" here is referring back to the gospel mentioned in verse 16. So the "**righteousness of God**" is revealed in the gospel. This tormented Luther because he understood this to be a description of a righteous God in the face of sinful men. That mere knowledge is anything but good news. The Scriptures are not unclear when it comes to how a holy God does business with sinful men.

**For behold, the Lord will come in fire, and his chariots like the whirlwind, to render his anger in fury, and his rebuke with flames of fire. <sup>16</sup> For by fire will the Lord enter into judgment, and by his sword, with all flesh; and those slain by the Lord shall be many (Isaiah 66:15, 16).**

That God is righteous is not, in itself, good news for sinful men. And we certainly shouldn't draw the conclusion that God, in order to demonstrate love and grace toward this dark and broken race of humanity, somehow tempered His own righteousness. In other words, we should not think of the gospel as God somehow lowering the standard necessary to stand in His presence – something many of us do in order to obtain some psychological comfort in light of our own behavior.

We must recognize that the righteousness of God as a statement of an attribute of God certainly stands. It also stands that this God will judge the

world in righteousness (Acts 17:31). But is that the message contained in the gospel? It would appear, according to Paul, that everybody already knows **“the righteous judgment of God” (Romans 1:32)**. But *this* **“righteousness of God”** is something **“revealed”** *apokalyptetai* in the gospel.

**“Revealed”** meaning it cannot be derived from the natural operation of human reason. It is not known by general revelation (that which is known by all). This revelation needs the gospel – the vocal, written, preached propositional, Spirited-inspired message that God has kept His covenant/promise to send a deliverer to (among other things) save sinners.

And the necessity of it being **“revealed,”** it can be strongly argued, is because the mercy of God is not necessary to His character. God is constrained by His own character/nature to judge, but He is not constrained by His character to forgive. God could have left sinners to their own devices and still remained the holy and righteous God that He is. Mercy is optional – it is God’s free decision – a doctrine we’ll see with clarity when we reach the ninth chapter of this epistle.

What then is the **“righteousness of God...revealed”** uniquely in the gospel? To put it simply, it is the righteousness which God Himself *gives* and *approves*. Perhaps similar to how we might say a person has the eyes of his mother. We’re not talking about the mother’s eyes in a direct sense but how the child’s eyes are a result (in a certain sense) of the mother’s eyes.

So the **“righteousness of God”** in this context (the context of the gospel) is a righteousness which comes from God. It is a righteousness apart from our ability to obey the law (Romans 3:21); it is **“the gift of righteousness”** (Romans 5:17); it is a righteousness that is not our own (Romans 10:3). Paul writes of being found in Christ...

**...not having my own righteousness, which is from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which is from God by faith (Philippians 3:9).**

It was this that Luther called the **“alien righteousness”** of another. The full weight of God’s wrath and condemnation falling upon His own beloved Son and the unblemished righteousness of the **“bright morning star”** (Revelation 22:16) freely given through God’s gracious instrument of faith.

## From Faith to Faith

Toward the emphasis of faith, Paul utilizes the phrase **“from faith to faith”** a somewhat difficult clause. Whereas it only means one thing, it has been understood differently by various expositors.

Some hold that faith to faith speaks of our progress. The first “faith” being saving faith but elementary the second “faith” being the full grown faith to which Christians aspire. Others take it to mean the faith revealed in the Old Covenant as a similar foreshadow of the faith in the New Covenant. Another view is that the first “faith” is God’s faith, or faithfulness, and the second being the subsequent faith of those He saves.

But another possible interpretation, one that in my estimation best comports with the focus of Paul, is that it is faith from beginning to end; it is known by faith and received by faith and nowhere in that equation should man begin to place anything that comes from anywhere but the cross of Christ; or as Paul writes:

**But the righteousness of faith speaks in this way, “Do not say in your heart, ‘Who will ascend into heaven?’” (that is, to bring Christ down from above) <sup>7</sup> or, “ ‘Who will descend into the abyss?’ ” (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead). <sup>8</sup> But what does it say? “The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart” (that is, the word of faith which we preach): <sup>9</sup> that if you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved. <sup>10</sup> For with the heart one believes unto righteousness, and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation. <sup>11</sup> For the Scripture says, “Whoever believes on Him will not be put to shame (Romans 10:6-11).**

## The Just Shall Live by Faith

Paul completes his thought with a quotation from Habakkuk 2:4; the context of which was Habakkuk questioning how long God would endure the sinfulness of his fellow Israelites. God answers that He will judge them by raising up the vicious and bloodthirsty Chaldeans. The prophet is

further confused and asks God why He **“holds (His) tongue when the wicked devours a person more righteous than he” (Habakkuk 1:13)?**

God answers that He will then judge the Chaldeans for their pride and hellish desires (Habakkuk 2:5). It is in the midst of these sinful Israelite and bloodthirsty Chaldeans that God pronounces the only ones who will live through His judgments – **“But the just shall live by faith” (Habakkuk 2:4).**

Whether **“shall live”** means to *come to life* or *govern life* may be a topic worthy of discussion. But since true **“justifying faith”** is necessarily accompanied by faithfulness – since Christ as Savior is necessarily accompanied by Christ as Lord (though the distinction must ever be made that our souls might be at peace) I will not labor the subject. I would prefer to appeal again to Luther’s thoughts on the matter:

**The sum and substance of this letter is: to pull down, to pluck up, and to destroy all wisdom and righteousness of the flesh ... and to affirm and enlarge [prove to be large] the reality of sin, however unconscious we may be of its existence.<sup>1</sup>**

The gospel is tailor-made to answer the problem of sin, so much so that Jesus simply explained that it was for the sinner, and no one else, that He came to call.

**And when the Pharisees saw this, they said to his disciples, “Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?”<sup>12</sup> But when he heard it, he said, “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick.<sup>13</sup> Go and learn what this means, ‘I desire mercy, and not sacrifice.’ For I came not to call the righteous, but sinners” (Matthew 9:11-13).**

May these words resonate in our hearts as we turn to the Lord’s Table this morning.

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<sup>1</sup> Hendriksen, W., & Kistemaker, S. J. (1953-2001). *Vol. 12-13: New Testament commentary : Exposition of Paul's Epistle to the Romans*. New Testament Commentary (62). Grand Rapids: Baker Book House.

## Questions for Study

1. Why do you suppose people lose their discomfort with death and judgment (page 2)?
2. Discuss the issues surrounding Martin Luther: What tortured his soul? Where did he seek to find answers? What is meant by the Latin phrase *ad fontes* (pages 2-4)?
3. Is the “righteousness of God” good news or bad news for sinful men? Explain (pages 4, 5).
4. What are the different ways people have understood the phrase “faith to faith?” How do you understand it? Explain/justify your answer (page 6).
5. What is the context of Paul’s quotation from Habakkuk and why do you suppose he uses it here (pages 6, 7)?
6. What is understood by the words “shall live” (page 7)?
7. For whom is the gospel made (page 7)?