

## II. The Righteous by Faith Shall Live

September 15/16/17, 2015

Romans 1:8-17

**Aim:** To understand the overarching theme of Romans: that in the gospel, the righteous are justified by faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

In his opening words to the believers at Rome, Paul tells of his sincere spiritual motives in wanting to minister to them. With warmth, affection, and sensitivity that permeate the entire letter, he assures them of his genuine devotion to God and his genuine love for them. Although Paul had not personally founded or even visited the church at Rome, he carried the heartfelt passion of Christ for their spiritual welfare and an eager desire to develop their spiritual and personal friendship. The letter to Rome reveals that Paul not only had the zeal of a prophet, the mind of a teacher, and the determination of an apostle, but also the heart of a shepherd.

### A. Paul Is Eager to Preach the Gospel (Romans 1:8-15)

Greek letters often had an expression of thanks or petition to the gods in the second main part of the letter. Paul adapts this form for his own purposes, generally including a thanksgiving and, often, a prayer for his readers at an early point in his letters. After thanking God for the widespread knowledge of the Romans faith (v. 8), Paul mentions his frequent prayer that he might visit them (vv. 9-10). The reason for this desire is given in vv. 11-13: that Paul and the Romans might strengthen and comfort one another in their faith. Finally, as both an explanation of his wish to visit Rome and a transition to the statement of the letter's theme, Paul expresses his strong sense of obligation to preach the gospel to all sorts of people (vv. 14-15).

His greeting finished, Paul, following his usual custom, launches into thanksgiving and prayer for his readers. Prayer in this passage consists of both thanksgiving and intercession. The two go together. Intercession expresses true and personal faith, while thanksgiving acknowledges the confidence that God has heard and has answered, is answering, or will answer our requests. Whether thanksgiving follows or precedes intercession, as here, the two should be kept together.

#### 1. Paul's Thanksgiving (1:8)

<sup>8</sup>*First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you, because your faith is proclaimed in all the world.*

The opening word, 'first,' implies a series, but Paul never comes to a 'second' or 'next.' It is hard to know whether Paul simply forgets to maintain the sequence he begins or whether the phrase functions here simply to highlight what Paul considers of primary importance. In either case, Paul draws special attention to his thanksgiving, a feature typical of Paul's letters. He offers his thanks to 'my God'; only in Romans, however, does Paul offer his thanks 'through Jesus Christ.' This is an indication that Christ is the one who has created the access to God for such thanks to be offered.

Paul was grateful for what God had done for and through him, but he was equally grateful for what God had done in and through other believers. Paul's thankfulness was intimate, first of all because of his spiritual closeness to God. 'I thank my God,' he declared. No pagan would have made such a statement, nor would have most Jews referred to God with a personal pronoun. For

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Paul, God was not a theological abstraction but a beloved Savior and close friend. Paul gave thanks ‘through Jesus Christ,’ the one eternal Mediator between God and man.

Our access to God is not in our own right, nor is it direct and immediate. It is only ‘through’ our mediator Jesus Christ. This is humbling (reminding us of our inherent unworthiness to approach the holy and good God), but also reassuring (reminding us that we will be welcomed and heard in that name).

Paul’s thankfulness was also intimate because of his spiritual intimacy with fellow believers, even to such as those in Rome, most of whom he did not personally know. ‘I thank my God ... for you all,’ that is, for all the believers in the church at Rome. The specific reason for Paul’s thankfulness for the Roman Christians was their deep faith, which was ‘being proclaimed throughout the whole world.’ By ‘faith,’ Paul was not referring to the initial trust in Christ that brings salvation but to the persevering trust that brings spiritual strength and growth. Some churches are famous because of their pastor, their architecture, their stained glass windows, or their size or wealth. The church in Rome was famous because of its faith.

The word Paul uses for ‘thanks’ is *eucharisto*, from which the church gets the term *Eucharist*. Paul conjoins the words *universe* and *cosmos* to say that the Roman Christians’ reputation for faith has been broadcast throughout the cosmos, or universe. In a sense Paul is using hyperbole, however, when first-century people spoke of the world, they were speaking of the known world, which, in their case, was the Mediterranean world. Therefore, Paul is expressing joy that people throughout the Mediterranean world are talking about the faith of the Roman Christians; their faith has made an impact.

Paul’s reason for giving thanks is that ‘your faith is being proclaimed in the whole world.’ Nothing is implied in this about their faith being particularly strong; the very fact of their faith is sufficient reason for giving thanks to God, the author of faith. That people in the Roman capital have bowed the knee to the Lord Jesus is something that would be widely known, and perhaps highlighted, by the early missionaries.

### 2. Paul’s Prayer (1:9-10)

#### a) *Divine Witness (1:9a)*

<sup>9</sup>*For God is my witness...*

Paul often follows his thanksgivings with assertions about the constancy of his prayer and concern for his readers as well as petitions for their spiritual growth. Here Paul’s unceasing prayer for the Romans (v. 9b) has a more personal focus: his own desire to minister personally to them (v. 10). The “witness formula” that introduces verse 9 seems to indicate that Paul is eager that the Romans know of his heartfelt concern for them and desire to see them.

Perhaps because most of the Romans did not know him personally, Paul here calls the Lord as ‘witness’ to his sincere love and concern for his spiritual brothers and sisters at Rome. He is eager that the recipients of his epistle understand the depth of passion he feels in his grateful heart for the remembrance that is being published throughout the known world concerning their faith, and he demonstrates his eagerness by swearing a vow. This is not the only time in the epistle that the apostle takes such a vow to guarantee the truth of what he is saying. The basic purpose of Paul’s vow is to assure the Roman Christians that his desire to come visit them is not casual.

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### b) *Spiritual Service (1:9b)*

*...whom I serve with my spirit in the gospel of his Son...*

Before stating what it is that he calls God to witness, Paul digresses in a relative clause that affirms the sincerity of his service to God. The word Paul uses for ‘serve’ (*λατρευω*, *latreuō*) focuses attention on his service in its vertical aspect as an offering of worship to God. Paul qualifies his worshipful service of God as being ‘in my spirit’ and ‘in the gospel of His Son.’ The former phrase is particularly unclear, but what fits Pauline usage and makes sense in the context is an emphasis on the engagement of Paul’s ‘deepest’ person in the ministry to which he has been called. As this inward part of Paul’s person is the instrument of his service, the gospel of God’s Son is the sphere of his ministry.

*Latreuō* (‘to serve’) is always used in the New Testament of religious service, and is therefore sometimes translated ‘worship.’ Godly service calls for total, unreserved commitment. Paul served God with everything he had, beginning with his ‘spirit,’ that is, flowing out of a deep desire in his soul (cp. 12:1-2).

The gospel is the possession of Jesus, but, even more, Jesus is the heart of the content of the gospel. We use it so glibly in the church today. The term *gospel* has become a nickname for preaching anything rather than something with definite content. The word for ‘gospel’ is *euangelion*. The prefix *eu-* refers to something good or pleasant. The word *angelos* or *angelion* is the word for ‘message.’ Angels are messengers, and an *angelos* is one who delivers a message.

Paul’s primary service to God was ‘the preaching of the gospel of His Son,’ the ministry to which the Lord had called him and to which he gave every breath of his life. But as he goes on to explain, that service to God included deep, personal concern for *everyone* who believed the gospel, whether they heard it from him or from someone else.

### c) *Unceasing Prayer (1:9c-10a)*

*...that without ceasing I mention you <sup>10</sup>always in my prayers... ..*

‘Unceasingly’ does not refer to unceasing petition or the like, but to prayer offered at frequent and regular intervals. He was not redundant by using both ‘unceasingly’ and ‘always’ but simply gave a negative and positive expression of his concern.

Although Paul does not state the particular petitions he made on behalf of the Roman Christians, we can safely assume they were similar to those he mentions in other letters (e.g., Eph. 3:14-19). The content of all Paul’s prayers was spiritual. He prayed for individual believers, but he also offered many prayers for groups of believers. He prayed that their hearts would be knit with the heart of God, that their knowledge of His Word would be made complete, and that their obedience to His will would be made perfect.

### d) *Specific Petition (1:10b)*

*asking that somehow by God's will I may now at last succeed in coming to you.*

Paul’s reticence to claim any authority over the Romans is again evident in his unusual failure to spell out any specific petitions for the Christians there. Rather, in v. 10 Paul shares with the Romans a petition he often brings before God, which though related to the Romans, has more to do with his own plans.

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Paul knew from experience that it was one thing to make plans, but another for those plans to be realized. For example, see the carefully laid plan set out in 1 Corinthians 16:5-9, none of which were fulfilled as Paul had hoped. Even the great apostle must accept ‘the will of God.’ It was not as if his prayer was for personal pleasure, for example, to see the sights of the Eternal City. Paul had but one goal; he wanted to come for gospel ministry to them. Neither his prayers, nor ours—even our most noble—are always answered in ways that seem best to us. As it happened, Paul did come to Rome, but as a prisoner. In that city he later met his death at the decree of the emperor.

Paul’s eagerness to serve God was always directed ‘by the will of God.’ He did not serve in the direction of his own desires and insight but according to the will of the One he served.

### 3. Paul’s Desire (1:11-15)

With ‘for,’ Paul introduces several verses (vv. 11-15) in which he explains why he wants to come to Rome. Paul really advances only one reason, which he delineates in three roughly parallel purpose statements: 1) ‘to share some spiritual gift’ (v. 11); 2) ‘to have a harvest’ (v. 13); and 3) ‘to preach the gospel’ (v. 15).

#### a) *To Share Some Spiritual Gift (1:11-12)*

##### (1) Apostolic Strengthening (1:11)

<sup>11</sup>*For I long to see you, that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to strengthen you—*

Paul is not distant or aloof from the people he writes to. Rather, he longs to be with them. Paul is not sure what gift or gifts he might impart because he has not been to Rome. He simply wishes to enhance their spirituality. He knows that maturity will bring sweet and wonderful fellowship between himself and the Romans.

‘Spiritual gift’ (*χαρισμα πνευματικον, charisma pneumatichon*) is a literal translation of the Greek and may refer to that kind of spiritual gift which Paul elsewhere denotes simply with ‘gift’ (*charisma*; cp. e.g., Rom. 12:6; 1 Cor. 12). But Paul never elsewhere uses the combination ‘spiritual’ and ‘gift’ with this meaning. We should think rather of an insight or ability given Paul by the Spirit, that Paul hopes to ‘share’ with the Romans. What gift Paul may want to share with the Romans cannot be specified until he sees what their needs may be. Whatever it is, its purpose will be to ‘strengthen’ their faith.

Paul wanted to visit the Roman believers in order to serve them lovingly in God’s name. The ‘gift’ Paul wanted to impart was ‘spiritual,’ not only in the sense of being in the spiritual realm, but also in the sense that it had its source in the Holy Spirit. He was not speaking about the gifts he discusses in chapter 12, because those gifts are bestowed directly by the Spirit Himself, not through a human instrument. He must therefore have been using the term ‘spiritual gift’ in its broadest sense, referring to any kind of divinely-empowered spiritual benefit he could bring to the Roman Christians by preaching, teaching, exhorting, comforting, praying, guiding, and disciplining.

Paul is not referring to starting out in the Christian faith but to becoming confirmed, built up, and edified in it. Nor is he writing about charismatic gifts here but about establishing believers in confidence and maturity in their faith. This is why Paul wrote the letter to the Romans, and it is why, in the providence of God, his letter is given to us—that the faith that has taken root in our

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souls may be established so that we may grow to maturity and full conformity to the image of Christ.

His hoped-for coming would be, he says, ‘to strengthen you.’ This is the same word (*stērizō*) we find in his final doxology where he declares that ‘God is able (that is, ‘powerful’) to strengthen you’ (16:25). Implied here is Paul’s sense that there is a deficiency or ‘weakness’ in Roman Christianity that needs buttressing. Since he is not able to remain in Rome, it is likely that he planned his letter as the way to ‘strengthen’ the Roman Christians.

### (2) Mutual Encouraging (1:12)

<sup>12</sup>*that is, that we may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith, both yours and mine.*

‘But that is,’ used only here in the NT, implies that what follows in some sense ‘corrects’ what has just been said. What is being corrected is probably the last phrase of v. 11, ‘in order to strengthen you.’ It is not that Paul wants to withdraw this statement but that he wants to expand it by recognizing the *mutual* gain that will accrue from his visit. This rather cumbersome expression suggests both commonality – Paul and the Romans share the same faith – and distinction – the faith they share brings with it different perspectives and gifts, which, when shared, bring mutual edification. But the fact that he mentions it here signals Paul’s diplomacy. For he is dealing with a church that, while certainly within the scope of his authority (cp. 1:5-6; 15:15), is built on another person’s foundation (cp. 15:20). If Paul is to gain a sympathetic ear for ‘his’ gospel from the Roman Christians and enlist their support for his Spanish mission (15:24), he must exercise tact in asserting his authority.

Lest his readers think that he had in mind a one-way blessing, Paul assures them that a visit would be to his benefit as well as to theirs. Although he was a highly-gifted and greatly-used apostle, having received revealed truth directly from God, Paul never thought that he was above being spiritually edified by other believers.

Paul is quick to acknowledge that the ‘sharing’ of ‘spiritual gifts’ is a two-way street. He ‘longs to see them’ to give but also to receive. They, too, are people of ‘faith.’ They will be encouraged by him and he by them. Paul’s greatness, however, included his humility in learning from and being encouraged by ordinary folk.

Paul expects to receive a blessing from them as well as giving one to them. This is surely true among Christians always. When the relationship is what it should be, the blessings run in both directions.

Paul knew that very few things will strengthen an older believer’s faith more than the vibrant faith of a new believer (cp. 1 John 1:3-4). On the flipside, there is little that will benefit a new believer more than exposure to the mature faith of a more experienced brother or sister in Christ.

### b) *To Reap Some Harvest (1:13)*

<sup>13</sup>*I do not want you to be unaware, brothers, that I have often intended to come to you (but thus far have been prevented), in order that I may reap some harvest among you as well as among the rest of the Gentiles.*

Paul’s ‘I do not wish you to be unaware’ usually points to information that is new to his readers. They may not have known that he had ‘often planned to come’ to them but ‘until now’ had been ‘prevented.’ Any plan to come to the world capital of the Gentiles, however, was frustrated by a far-reaching decree of the Roman emperor Claudius. In 49 AD, Claudius expelled the Jewish

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community from Rome, ‘preventing’ Paul the Jew from coming there. He must await the death of the emperor five years later to come to the city.

Paul frequently uses a phrase such as ‘I do not want you to be unaware’ as a means of calling attention to something of great importance he was about to say (e.g., Rom. 9:25; 1 Cor. 12:1; 1 Th. 4:13). Here he uses it to introduce his determined plan to visit the saints at Rome. His intent was not to make a social call but ‘to obtain some fruit among’ the believers in Rome. Paul’s ministry was an unending quest for spiritual fruit. Among the Romans, the fruit Paul longed for involved addition, the increase of converts to Christ and the increase of their spiritual growth in Him. It included both new converts and maturing converts. They were spiritual fruit in the broadest sense of being the product of the gospel’s power in men’s lives, both to save and to sanctify. The apostle wanted to be used to help the Roman church grow in service to Christ.

Paul reaffirms his concern for the Roman Christians and his desire to minister with them. Not only has he longed to see them (v. 11a) and prayed that he might be able to make the trip (v. 10), but he often made specific plans to that end. In a parenthetical clause, Paul mentions that these plans have been hindered – probably by the demands on Paul of his ministry in the eastern Mediterranean (cp. 15:19). With the last clause of v. 13, Paul expresses the purpose of coming to the Romans – to ‘have a harvest’ among them. ‘Harvest’ refers to the product of his apostolic labors (cp. Phil. 1:22), including here probably both an increase in the number of Christians through evangelization ‘among’ the Romans and a strengthening of the faith of the Roman Christians themselves (cp. v. 11b). By adding the phrase ‘as among the rest of the Gentiles,’ Paul makes clear again that he views the Roman Christians as belonging to a ‘Gentile’ church.

### *c) To Preach the Gospel (1:14-15)*

#### (1) General Audience (1:14)

*<sup>14</sup>I am under obligation both to Greeks and to barbarians, both to the wise and to the foolish.*

Paul’s plan to have a harvest among the Roman Christians has its source not in a desire for personal aggrandizement but in his sense of missionary ‘obligation’ (cp. 1 Cor. 9:16b). Most Christians think they are doing something special when they tell others about the gospel. But Paul understands that such witnessing is not something special, for he is a debtor (v. 14) or a ‘servant’ (v. 1) of the gospel. We, like Paul, should feel ourselves indebted to preach the gospel to everyone. It is a debt we can never escape.

Paul was ‘under obligation’ in at least two ways. First, he was under obligation to God on behalf of the Gentiles. Because God had appointed him a unique apostle to the Gentiles (Rom. 1:5; Acts 9:15), he was under divine obligation to minister the gospel to them. Second, he had an obligation, or debt, to the Roman believers directly, because of their spiritual need.

Paul is in debt both to the high-minded Greek and to the barbarian, but he is not talking about a pecuniary obligation or debt; he does not owe them money. Paul is writing about a moral debt. He is burdened by an obligation that accompanied his office as an apostle. He had been set apart as the apostle to the Gentiles, and he spends his life discharging that obligation. Ultimately, the debt Paul owes is owed to God and to Christ, but he transfers that indebtedness, that obligation, to the people who need to hear the gospel.

The apostle says he must pay a gospel-debt to all Gentiles. We must note that his debt is to God, but the payment is to men. He uses two phrase to describe the entire Gentile population of the

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world. When he says, ‘to Greeks and barbarians,’ he means those under Greco-Roman culture and those outside it—everyone! ‘Wise and...foolish’ means those who have intelligence and those who do not—everyone! Paul sees himself as a man who cannot rest until every gospel cent is paid to every Gentile creditor.

‘To Greeks and barbarians’ and ‘to the wise and to the foolish’ seem to be parallel phrases, ‘Greeks’ representing ‘the wise’ and ‘barbarians’ representing ‘the foolish.’ The Greeks of that day included people from many lands who were educated in Greek learning and trained in Greek culture. They were highly sophisticated and were often looked upon as being on a higher level than others. They certainly looked on themselves in that way. The Greek language was thought to be the language of the gods, and Greek philosophy was thought to be little less than divine.

Centuries earlier when Greeks first heard the stammered guttural speech of foreigners, sounding as it did to them as ‘bar bar bar,’ they called such people *‘barbaroi,’* ‘barbarians.’ In time, however, because of the spread of Greek philosophy, literature, and science among other peoples ‘Greek’ also came to mean ‘wise’ or ‘cultured’ and ‘barbarian’ to mean the ‘ignorant’ or ‘uneducated.’ Because the Romans were ‘educated’ and ‘cultured,’ they came to be included among ‘the Greeks’ although Latin was their primary language. But Paul is no intellectual snob; he will preach to both Greeks (the ‘wise’) and barbarians (the ‘foolish’). He is the apostle to the Gentiles, whoever they are, ‘Greek’ or ‘barbarian,’ ‘educated’ or ‘uneducated.’

The term ‘barbarians’ was frequently used to designate those who were not Hellenized, that is, not steeped in Greek learning and culture. The word is onomatopoeic, having been derived from the repetition of the sound ‘bar.’ To a cultured Greek, other languages sounded like so much gibberish and were mimicked by saying ‘bar, bar, bar, bar.’ In its narrowest sense, ‘barbarians’ referred to the uncultured, uncouth, and uneducated masses, but in its wider sense it was used of anyone who was non-Greek.

Paul was therefore expressing his responsibility to the educated and the uneducated, the sophisticated and the simple, the privileged and the underprivileged. Like the Lord he served (1 Pe. 1:17), Paul was no respecter of persons. The gospel is the great equalizer, because every human being is equally lost without it and equally saved by it.

### (2) Specific Audience (1:15)

<sup>15</sup>*So I am eager to preach the gospel to you also who are in Rome.*

Paul now relates what he has said generally in v. 14 to the specific situation of his desire to come to Rome. That Paul includes the Roman Christians among those to whom he wants to preach the gospel is, at first sight, strange. We can understand Paul’s desire ‘to preach the gospel’ to refer to the ongoing work of teaching and discipleship that builds on initial evangelization.

Paul’s external obligation to minister did not preclude his internal desire to fulfill that obligation. He not only was willing but ‘eager to preach the gospel’ to believers in Rome.

In this case, to ‘gospel’ (or ‘evangelize’) means more than initially proclaiming the Christian message, but includes providing solid ‘building up’ of those who made an initial response.

## **B. Paul Is Not Ashamed of the Gospel (Romans 1:16-17)**

Paul’s pride in the gospel (v. 16a) is the reason why he is so eager to preach the gospel in Rome (v. 15). This pride, in turn, stems from the fact that the gospel contains, or mediates, God’s

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saving power for everyone who believes (v. 16b). Why the gospel brings salvation is explained in v. 17a; it manifests God's righteousness, a righteousness based on faith. Verse 17b finally, provides scriptural confirmation for this connection between righteousness and faith.

After having gained the attention of his readers by explaining the purpose of his writing and then introducing himself (1:1-15), Paul now states the thesis of the epistle. These two verses express the theme of the book of Romans. These words summarize the gospel of Jesus Christ, which Paul then proceeds to unfold and explain throughout the remainder of the epistle.

With these verses we begin the first main section of Romans, chapters 1-8. These chapters are really an exegesis of 1:16-17. You never get beyond these two verses. 1:1-15 is the introduction; 1:16-17 is the theme; then 1:18-8:39 is the exegesis of that theme.

### 1. The Power of God (1:16)

The beginning of verse 16 explains (cp. the 'for') why Paul is eager to preach the gospel in Rome (v. 15). But it also picks up the various descriptions of Paul's commitment to the ministry of the gospel in vv. 1-15).

#### a) *Gospel (1:16a)*

<sup>16</sup>*For I am not ashamed of the gospel...*

The negative form of Paul's assertion, 'I am not ashamed of the gospel,' may be a literary convention. However, 'the foolishness of the word of the cross' (1 Cor. 1:18) would make some degree of embarrassment about the gospel natural – particularly in the capital of the Gentile world.

Paul was never deterred by opposition, never disheartened by criticism, and never ashamed for any reason, of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Although that gospel was then, and still is today, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, it is the only way God has provided for the salvation of men, and Paul was both overjoyed and emboldened by the privilege of proclaiming its truth and power wherever he went.

Paul enjoyed nothing more than being known as a Christian. He had no shame. Jesus warned us that if we are ashamed of Him before men, He will be ashamed of us before His father (Mk. 8:38; Lk. 9:26). That is the real crunch for many Christians. They want to be Secret Service Christians. If we get rebuffed enough times, pretty soon we find ourselves tempted to be embarrassed about our faith, but not the apostle. He could not wait to get to Rome because he was not ashamed of the gospel.

There is no need to be intellectually ashamed of or disappointed in the gospel as a system. Paul is not speaking to backward or primitive people. He is surrounded by the Greek and Roman world with all its intellectual understanding, yet he is not ashamed of what he is preparing to speak about. We should then not be ashamed of the practice of Christianity, but also not of the teaching of it in its intellectual concepts. There is an imperative here, not just a passing thought. It is a lifelong experience not to be ashamed.

#### b) *Power (1:16b)*

*...for it is the power of God...*

The second clause in v. 16 explains ('for') why Paul is not ashamed of the gospel. The term 'power' (*δυναμις*, *dunamis*) as one might expect, is used widely in Greek philosophy and

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religion, but its NT background is undoubtedly to be sought in the OT teaching about a personal God who uniquely possesses power and who manifests that power in delivering (Ex. 9:16; Ps. 77:14-15) and judging (Jer. 16:21) His people.

*Dunamis* ('power') is the Greek term from which our word *dynamite* is derived. The gospel carries with it the omnipotence of God, whose power alone is sufficient to save men from sin and give them eternal life.

The Greek word translated 'power' is *dunamis*, the word from which we get 'dynamite.' The gospel indeed has incredible power. But because TNT has a negative connotation, it may be better to use the word 'dynamic' for the gospel. Paul is not ashamed of the good news of the gospel because it is the dynamic, unharnessable power of God to effect salvation and all its temporal and eternal benefits for everyone who believes.

Only one is omnipotent, and He is the Lord God, and the Lord God has power to spare. God's power is invested in the gospel. God has promised that His Word will not return to Him void (Is. 55:11). The foolishness of preaching is the method God has chosen to save the world. That is why Paul said he is not ashamed. He wanted to preach the gospel because it is the power of God to salvation. It is not the power of the preacher's eloquence or the power of the preacher's education; it is the power of God.

### c) *Salvation (1:16b)*

...for salvation...

'Salvation' and its cognates are widely used in both the Greek world and the LXX to depict deliverance from a broad range of evils. The NT as a whole uses 'salvation' and its cognates with much of the same broad range of meaning as the OT, whereas Paul uses the words only of spiritual deliverance. Moreover, his focus is eschatological: 'salvation' is usually the deliverance from eschatological judgment that is finalized only at the last day. Characteristic, however, of Paul's (and the NT's) outlook is the conviction that these eschatological blessings are, to some extent, enjoyed by anyone the moment he or she trusts Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord.

Surely the greatest manifestation of God's power is that of bringing men to 'salvation,' of transforming their nature and giving them eternal life through His Son. Paul uses the noun *sōtēria* ('salvation') some nineteen times, five of them in Romans, and he uses the corresponding verb twenty-nine times, eight of them in Romans. The basic idea behind the term is that of deliverance, or rescue, and the point here is that the power of God in salvation rescues people from the ultimate penalty of sin, which is spiritual death.

'Salvation' (*sōtēria*) in everyday language meant 'rescue from dire peril' or 'recovery of health from life threatening illness.' For the apostles, however, 'salvation,' pointed to 'deliverance from the wrath of God at the Judgment Day' (13:11; 1 Pe. 1:5, 9). Therefore, although that 'salvation' properly belongs to the future, it is a present reality to those who belong to the Messiah, Jesus, crucified and risen (10:13 – 'every one who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved').

Some people object to terms such as *salvation* and *being saved*, claiming that the ideas they convey are out of date and meaningless to contemporary men. But 'salvation' is God's term, and there is no better one to describe what He offers fallen mankind through the sacrifice of His Son.

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We often use the word ‘salvation’ as though it were parallel to ‘justification.’ There are biblical reasons for using ‘saved’ in this way, yet when Paul is being explicit he uses ‘justification.’ When we accept Christ as our Savior, we are justified. Justification addresses a legal problem. It means God declares that our guilt is gone on the basis of the finished work of Jesus Christ. But our salvation is much wider than that. Salvation includes three tenses: past, present, and future. Romans 1-8 covers all three tenses of salvation. Chapters 1-4 deal with the past act of salvation for the Christian, which is justification. Romans 5:1 through 8:17 deals with salvation’s present aspect, which is sanctification. Then, in a brief but very striking way, 8:18-39 speaks of the future aspect of salvation, which is glorification. Salvation includes all of this on the basis of the finished work of Christ.

### *d) Faith (1:16c)*

*...to everyone who believes...*

The last part of v. 16 introduces themes that recur as key motifs throughout Romans. First, God’s salvific power is available ‘to everyone who believes.’ ‘Believe’ and ‘faith’ are key words in Romans; they are particularly prominent in 3:21-4:25. The lack of an explicit object after ‘believe’ is also characteristic of Romans; the language of faith has become so tied to what God has done in Christ that further specification is not needed. To ‘believe’ is to put full trust in the God who ‘justifies the ungodly’ (4:5) by means of the cross and resurrection of Christ. Pauline (and NT) faith is not (primarily) agreement with a set of doctrines but trust in a person. Though not explicit here, another focus of Romans is the insistence that faith is in no sense a ‘work.’ We must insist that believing is not something we *do* (in the sense of ‘works’) but is always a response, an accepting of the gift God holds out to us in His grace (see especially 4:1-8). ‘Believing,’ then, while a genuinely human activity, possess no ‘merit’ or worth for which God is somehow bound to reward us; for salvation is, from first to last, *God’s* work.

*Pisteuō* (‘believes’) carries the basic idea of trusting in, relying on, having faith in. When used in the New Testament of salvation, it is usually in the present, continuous form, which could be translated ‘is believing.’ Salvation is not merely professing to be a Christian, nor is it baptism, moral reform, going to church, receiving sacraments, or living a life of self-discipline and sacrifice. Salvation is believing in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior.

But this same phrase introduces another recurring motif of Romans: the availability of God’s power for salvation’ for ‘*all* who believe.’ Paul’s ministry to Gentiles derives from his understanding of the gospel itself as eschatological revelation that fulfills the OT promises about the universal reign of Yahweh. This required the elimination of those barriers between Jew and Gentile laboriously erected by the oral (and written – cp. Eph. 2:15) law.

### *e) Scope (1:16d)*

*...to the Jew first and also to the Greek.*

It is also typical of Romans that Paul does not rest content with a reminder of the universalism of the gospel but immediately introduces a note of particularism: ‘to the Jew first and then to the Greek.’ In opposition to ‘Jew,’ ‘Greek’ must indicate, broadly, any non-Jew. What is the nature of the Jew’s priority (‘first’) over the Gentile? Paul clearly accords some kind of priority to the Jew. If we ask what precedence Paul accords Israel elsewhere in Romans, we find that his emphasis is on the special applicability of the promise of God to that people whom He chose (3:2; 9-11). However much the church may seem to be dominated by Gentiles, Paul insists that

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the promises of God realized in the gospel are ‘first of all’ for the Jew. To Israel the promises were first given, and to the Jews they still particularly apply.

Salvation has no national, racial, or ethnic barrier but is given to every person who believes, ‘to the Jew first and also to the Greek.’ It was ‘to the Jew first’ chronologically because Jews are God’s specially chosen people, through whom He ordained salvation to come (John 4:22). Paul says the gospel is ‘to the Jew first,’ and of course his practice, as seen throughout Acts, was to preach in the synagogue first and then, when they rejected him, to turn to the Gentiles. Today, unfortunately, we Christians often just leave the Jewish community alone.

Paul makes this concept of salvation very large but also very limited. It was very large: ‘...to every one...to the Jew first, and also to the Greek.’ The Jews had thought of salvation as applying only to themselves. Paul emphasizes that this is not so. Salvation, he says, applies to Gentiles as well as Jews. But it would be just as correct for us to say that salvation applies to Jews as well as Gentiles. It is a completely open circle. The circle of salvation is as big as one can imagine. It includes the world’s entire population, throughout all time. It is totally universal. It is the power of God unto salvation, to everyone.

The circle of salvation is large, but it is also very small. There is a definite limitation: ‘...to every one that believeth.’ The circle is as big as the world, but includes only those who believe. Each individual has the choice of either accepting or rejecting the gospel. The gospel is the power of God for that total salvation to all who believe that to them accrues the active and passive obedience of Christ. But it is limited to those who believe.

### 2. The Righteousness of God (1:17)

This was the verse the Holy Spirit used to awaken Luther as he was preparing his lectures on the book of Romans. He glanced at a manuscript from Augustine and found where Augustine said that the righteousness here is not God’s righteousness but that which He provides for people, who do not have any righteousness. It is the righteousness he makes available by free grace to all who believe. Luther called it ‘alien righteousness.’ This righteousness is not our own; it is Jesus’ righteousness.

This is the thematic verse for the epistle. Everything that comes after it will be an explanation of this one line: ‘For in the righteousness of God...’ The Greek word *dikaiousune* is the word used in the New Testament for ‘justification. We are going to see that word again and again as we pour over this letter to the Romans.

Salvation involves more than justification. We are justified by faith, but we are also to live in the present by that same faith. After being justified by faith, we are to live by faith. It is the second aspect of salvation, our sanctification, that Paul will explain in 5:1 through 8:17.

#### a) *Righteousness is Revealed (1:17a)*

<sup>17</sup>*For in it the righteousness of God is revealed...*

Verse 17 shows why (‘for’) the gospel is God’s saving power to everyone who believes (v. 16b).

#### (1) Revealed

The verb translated ‘is being revealed’ (*αποκαλυπτεται, apochaluptetai*) is an important biblical term. Meaning originally ‘uncover,’ this verb and its cognate noun, ‘revelation,’ are typically used by Paul to refer to the eschatological disclosure of various aspects and elements of God’s

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redemptive plan. Paul's point will be that the gospel in some way actually makes manifest, or brings into existence, the righteousness of God. The present tense suggests that Paul is thinking of an ongoing process, or series of actions, connected with the preaching of the gospel. Wherever the gospel is being proclaimed, the 'righteousness of God' in its eschatological fullness is being disclosed.

Of particular interest is the verb, 'is being revealed.' The present tense ('is being') and the passive ('revealed') tell us that through the gospel God is *presently* revealing His just and merciful verdict upon the guilty. Paul uses exactly this word in the next verse where, however, it is 'the wrath of God' that 'is being revealed' by God 'from heaven.' The revelation of that verdict properly belongs to the Last Day. However, there is no waiting and no uncertainty. Those who reject Him are already guilty and condemned, and those who belong to Christ are already acquitted and righteous in His sight. The preaching and hearing of the gospel is an eschatological moment, anticipating the End. The 'salvation' of the future is 'now.' This is the 'Day of salvation' (2 Cor. 6:2).

### (2) Righteousness

The term 'righteousness' is used over thirty-five times in the book of Romans alone. Faith activates the divine power that brings salvation, and in that sovereign act 'the righteousness of God is revealed.' A better rendering is '*from* God,' indicating that He imparts His own righteousness to those who believe. It is thereby not only revealed but *reckoned* to those who believe in Christ (4:5).

The gospel reveals what this 'righteousness of God' is—it is a radical, heavenly righteousness (cp. Phil. 3:9; 2 Cor. 5:21; Rom. 5:17). It is not human righteousness, but 'the righteousness of God.' It is an alien righteousness—righteousness from Heaven.

What is this 'righteousness of God' (*dikaiosynē theou*)? With the exception of 2 Cor. 5:21, Paul uses the phrase 'righteousness of God' only eight other times, all in Romans, so the phrase might give us a clue to the distinctive message of the letter. There are three main options for the meaning of the phrase.

First, the expression might refer to *an attribute of God*. Under this general heading are to be included two distinct possibilities. According to the first, 'righteousness' is God's justice, or rectitude (*iustitia distributiva*, 'distributive justice'). This interpretation was widespread in the early church. The second possibility takes its point of departure from the alleged OT meaning of 'God's righteousness': God's faithfulness, especially to His covenant with Israel. This interpretation also has an ancient pedigree, but it is particularly popular in recent studies. In this understanding, the gospel reveals 'the faithfulness of God [to His promises of salvation].'

Second, 'righteousness of God' might refer to a *status given by God*. Luther's personal spiritual struggle ended with his realization that God's righteousness meant not 'the righteousness by which he is righteous in himself, but the righteousness by which we are made righteous by God.' Not the strict 'distributive justice (*iustitia distributiva*) by which God impartially rules and governs the world, but a righteousness that is not one's own (*iustitia aliena*), a new standing imparted to the sinner who believes – this was what made Paul's message 'good news' to Luther. Luther viewed this righteousness as purely forensic – a matter of judicial standing, or status, and not of internal renewal or moral transformation. This understanding of 'righteousness of God'

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stands at the heart of Luther's theology and has been a hallmark of Protestant interpretation. On this view, Paul is asserting that the gospel reveals 'the righteous status that is from God.'

Third, 'righteousness of God' might denote *an activity of God*. Especially significant are the many places in the Psalms and Isaiah where God's 'righteousness' refers to His salvific intervention on behalf of His people. If Paul is using this 'biblical' meaning of the word, then his point would be that the gospel manifests 'the saving action of God.'

These options are neither exhaustive nor mutually exclusive, and two or more of them are often combined in the interpretation of 1:17. However, most interpreters make a decision at this point, choosing either activity or status and offering more or less convincing explanations of the data that appears to conflict with the view they have chosen. But must we make this choice? Do we have to choose between theology (*God acting*) and anthropology (the *human being* who receives) – as some have stated the dilemma? Could we not take 'righteousness of God' here to include *both* God's activity of 'making right' – saving, vindicating – *and* the status of those who are so made right, in a relational sense that bridges the divine and the human?

For Paul, as in the OT, 'righteousness of God' is a relational concept. Bringing together the aspects of activity and status, we can define it as *the act by which God brings people into right relationship with Himself*. With Luther, we stress that what is meant is a status *before* God and not internal moral transformation – God's activity of 'making right' is a purely forensic activity, an acquitting, and not an 'infusing' of righteousness or a 'making right' in a moral sense. But while 'sanctification' and 'justification' are inseparable, they are distinct; and Paul is badly misread if they are confused or combined. To use the imagery of the law court, from which righteousness language is derived, we can picture God's righteousness as the act or decision by which the judge declares innocent a defendant: an activity of the judge, but an activity that is a declaration of status – an act that results in, and indeed includes within it, a gift.

### b) Faith and Faith (1:17b)

...*from faith for faith*...

Just what this prepositional phrase modifies is not clear, but it more likely points toward a connection with 'righteousness of God.' Paul's addition of 'for faith' to 'on the basis of faith' has been the subject of endless discussion. Probably, the combination is rhetorical and is intended to emphasize that faith and 'nothing but faith' can put us into right relationship with God.

'From faith to faith' seems to parallel 'everyone who believes' in the previous verse. If so, the idea is 'from faith to faith to faith to faith,' as if Paul were singling out the faith of each individual believer.

The gospel is revealed through Christ, who suffered in our place because our human righteousness was not good enough. Through the resurrection He offers His righteousness to us. So we see God's righteousness in the gospel. But specifically we understand this by faith: 'the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith,' an intensified phrase that means 'entirely of faith.'

The response of believing in the gospel is critical, though there is debate over the words, 'from faith to faith.' One possible way to understand this is that the preacher declares the word of God 'from' his faith 'for' the faith response of the hearer.

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### c) *As It Is Written (1:17c)*

...as it is written, 'The righteous shall live by faith.'

Habakkuk says, 'Behold, his soul which is lifted up is not upright in him: but the just shall live by his faith' (Hab. 2:4). He is contrasting the person whose soul is 'lifted up' on the basis of his or her good works with the person who lives 'by faith.' Paul is drawing the same contrast. It isn't only the contrast of becoming a Christian through faith rather than through moral or religious works; it applies to the present aspect of salvation as well. The person who waits to be saved on the basis of his or her own righteousness will wait forever.

The quotation from Hab. 2:4 confirms the truth that righteousness is to be attained only on the basis of faith. The main problem with this quote is that Paul appears to give the words a different meaning. Hab. 2:4 is God's response to the prophet's complaint about God's inaction and injustice. It instructs the person who is already righteous how to face the difficulties of life and, especially, the apparent contradictions between God's promises and what takes place in history. In Paul, the quotation functions to characterize how it is that one can attain right standing with God and so live eternally.

Another key difference is found if we take 'on the basis of faith' with 'the righteous one' rather than 'will live'; for example, consider the RSV translation: 'He who through faith is righteous shall live.' Of greatest significance is the way Paul in Romans 1-8 consistently links faith with righteousness (cp. the summary in 5:1) and shows how 'life' is the product of that righteousness (cp. 5:18 and 8:10). These connections favor the translation 'the one who is righteous by faith will live.'

In both the meaning of the terms and their connections, then, Paul's quotation differs from the meaning of the original. But the differences should not be magnified. The point in Habakkuk is that faith is the key to one's relationship to God. The meaning of faith in the NT is deepened through its intimate relationship to Christ as the object of faith, but the OT concept shares with NT 'faith' the quality of absolute reliance on God and His Word rather than on human abilities, activities, or assurances.

Understanding the quotation from Habakkuk 2:4 makes an eternity of difference for those seeking Christ. When Martin Luther was searching for God, for a long time he thought that 'the righteousness of God' was a condemning righteousness. And seeing the righteousness of God as God's standard of judgment sometimes drove him to despair. However, little by little he began to understand, and finally the day came when he saw that *God gives His own righteousness to make man righteous through faith*, and Luther's life was turned upside down. With this understanding, Luther went on to withstand the entire world!

'The just shall *live* by faith.' Beginning in 4:17 and especially in chapter 5 and on, *life* and *death* will become key words. Paul will constantly contrast being dead and being alive. We are to 'live by faith' now. In chapters 5 and 6 Paul will develop this into a call to fullness of life on the basis of the blood of Christ, by faith, now. It isn't just being justified, it is something much more than that.

For next time: Read Romans 1:18-32.