

COMING UNDER GRACE

i. Martin Luther's Text: the Heart of the Gospel

Romans 1:16, 17

These two verses tower like a majestic summit of Paul's gospel. They offer a short, striking summary of Romans, which the remaining chapters seek to explain and elucidate.

I am not ashamed of the gospel (v16a). In a culture based upon shame and honour, a carpenter from Galilee proclaimed as the Saviour of the world sounds preposterous. Despite the gospel perceived as a "stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles" (1 Cor 23:23), Paul unashamedly proclaimed Christ.

In a place like Rome, it took courage not to be ashamed of what must have seemed absurd viz someone who suffered a disgraceful death on the eastern fringe of the Empire being proclaimed as God in human flesh. Caesar was regarded as son of the gods, certainly not a Jewish crucified criminal.

However, in a daring counter-offensive way, Paul calls the gospel *the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes* (v16b). The people of Rome, like modern Americans, were conscious of their power. Rome literally defined power. The Roman army controlled the better part of the western world. Its navy ruled the Mediterranean Sea. Roman roads were legendary. Latin, increasingly replaced Greek as the language of commerce and culture. Roman law determined what was right and wrong, who would live and who would die.

In comparison, the gospel of Jesus appeared insignificant. But the power Paul speaks of is a different power. It's not the power of politics and state-craft, of ideas and movements or whatever. It is *the power of God*, a combination of his freedom and sovereignty to do whatever he wills to do. It is supernatural power, 'dunamis'. In contrast to naked, satanic power, power as brute force, the paradox of God's power is strength through weakness, wealth in poverty, life in death through supernatural intervention. *to everyone who believes* (v16b).

Believing faith involves trust. Trust is a relational word. One trusts not in something, but in someone. That someone is Jesus. Belief is based on God's character and actions. God has done something at the cross, objectively true whether we subjectively respond or not. Faith not only involves trust and belief, it requires commitment; deciding to live in the

present according to the future promises of God, entrusting our destiny to him despite present circumstances to the contrary.

For in the gospel the righteousness of God is revealed (v17a). Martin Luther at first hated the word 'righteousness' for he saw it depicting God's justice which necessitated judgement. However, a journey to Rome in 1510 on ecclesiastical business saw him as a pilgrim ascend the *Scala Sancti*, the 'Holy Stairs', medieval stone stairs thought to be the original stairs to Pilate's home in Jerusalem, which Jesus would have used on the night of his arrest and trial. Luther was living by fear not faith. As he ascended each stair on bloodied and bruised hands and knees, *By fear* said Luther. *By faith* said Paul. *By fear* said the scholars of the medieval church. *By faith* said the Scriptures. *By fear* said Luther's fellow pilgrims. *By faith* said God, the Father. Slowly it dawned on Luther, *The just shall live by faith!*

In his own words, it was as if he had entered the very 'gates of paradise'. The burden and guilt of sin had been borne by another. The righteousness of Christ was counted in his favour. This was a forensic act, a legal declaration, 'not guilty'. No legal fiction as some dismiss it, it was the means of being put right with God. God declaring believers righteous, not guilty, though still sinful, is grounded in a truth deeper than the human mind can penetrate. In Christ, God deals with us not by what is, but by what can be, indeed will be, through the person and work of Christ. A new condition, justification by grace through faith, is established by God which bears fruit in new life i.e. sanctification.

This truth transformed the life of Martin Luther and ushered in the greatest Reformation in history. Likewise, this truth, being right with God through what Christ has done, received by faith, transforms the believer by way of deep assurance of salvation as we look to Him. Luther described this as the truth by which the church stands or falls. May it be the truth by which we live our lives today.

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