

The Saving Power of God

Romans

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Gracious God and Father, we praise you for your presence and power in Jesus Christ. We praise you for the promise of the Spirit of power who raised him from the dead to raise us up likewise in his grace and mercy, and we pray as we come in our weakness to Christ's strength and in our darkness to Christ's light, that he will open the eyes of our understanding that we may see our need, his grace, and matchless glory, and be lost afresh in wonder and love and praise as we adore him and trust in him. So we come, our heavenly Father, and pray that our minds may be illumined by your truth, that our hearts may be warmed by your Spirit, that our wills may be bowed down before every word that comes out of your mouth in holy Scripture. Feed us, we pray, and speak to us for your servants are listening. We pray this through Jesus Christ our Savior and Teacher. Amen.

Please be seated.

Now we're turning for the third time in Romans 1 this evening to continue our study. We're going to read from chapter 1, verse 14 to the end of verse 17, although it is particularly verses 16 and 17 that are the focus of our attention this evening. Paul is writing to the Romans. You will find the passage on page 939 of the Pew Bible. He has greeted them and he has given thanks to God for them and explained his desire that somehow he might come to them. Little presumably did he know that he would come to Rome as a prisoner and that God would answer his prayers in that surprising way. But he tells us in verse 14 he wants to come to Rome because,

14 I am under obligation both to Greeks and to barbarians, both to the wise and to the foolish. 15 So I am eager to preach the gospel to you also who are in Rome. 16 For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. 17 For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, "The righteous shall live by faith."

In the last months of Martin Luther's life in the middle of 1545, a few months before he died in early 1546, he sat down to write the preface to a collection of the works that he had written in Latin. You can imagine him now looking back over his career, a career that has spanned now about 25 years as the leading Protestant Reformer, a man who has had a

price on his life, a man who has had all kinds of adventures for the Gospel, and as he pens his preface to the collection, the new collection of his Latin works, he almost inevitably looks back over these past 25-26 years and he reflects on and meditates on the extraordinary discovery he made that at the end of the day led to the transformation of the whole of Europe. He was, as you know, a monk. He was a Professor of Theology. He was a lecturer on the Bible and he lectured his way consecutively through many books of the Bible, but there was one expression in the Bible, and indeed actually one text in the Bible, that caused him great difficulty. It was this text in Romans 1. In the Gospel, says the Apostle Paul, the righteousness, or in Luther's Latin translation, the justice of God is revealed.

All his life since he had entered a monastery, Martin Luther had been regarded as a principle candidate for canonization in the Roman Catholic Church. He outstripped his contemporaries in all kinds of ways but he tells us, looking back on those earlier days, how this was a text of Scripture that he abominated and hated. He hated the idea of the justice of God. He hated the idea of the righteousness of God and could not understand how the message of the Gospel could be a message about divine righteousness, that righteousness, Luther concluded, would only damn him and condemn him to hell.

Then in one of those historic moments of illumination, it dawned on him that the righteousness of which Paul speaks here is not the righteousness by which God condemns sinners but the righteousness by which God saves sinners. He felt himself to be like a man who had broken out of a prison cell, indeed the way he put it was to say, "The gates of paradise flew open. I felt myself to be born again." And he tells us as his mind raced through many texts of Scripture with which he was familiar, at last after all the Bible study he had done as a monk, as a teacher, as a professor, at last he began to see that this was a text that helped him to make sense of his Bible. He discovered the power of God for salvation and from that moment onwards, as the last of his life story makes clear, he was utterly unashamed of the Gospel. He boasted about the Gospel. Sometimes he over-boasted in the Gospel. But he became a man who was from that point onwards no longer a hater of the Gospel that he had mistaught, but someone who boasted in the Gospel and boasted in its grace and boasted in the righteousness of God and not least boasted in this glorious letter that Paul is writing to the Romans.

And Luther's own experience, perhaps your own studies in Paul's letter to the Romans, certainly do underline for us that when we come to verses 16 and 17, we are standing at the gateway to the whole of this letter. Sometimes in theological seminaries, professors will say to students who are preparing to preach, "I want you to tell me in one sentence what this sermon is going to be about." If you are giving a speech or a presentation somewhere, you will read somewhere in a book, make sure early on at the beginning of your presentation you tell people what it is that this presentation is about. It was also a principle of the rhetoric of the classical world in which the Apostle Paul was preaching the Gospel.

So as he writes to Rome, as he begins to expound to them what he calls in this letter "my gospel," he sets out before us in these two verses what will be the theme of the 15 ½

chapters that are to follow; what will be the whole point of the letter to the Romans. His boasting in the Gospel because it is "the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek because in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, 'The just, the righteous will live by faith.'" This is overture to Romans and as we work our way through the rest of the book, God willing, we will see how from time-to-time the Apostle Paul will return to one or other of the themes that he's been speaking about in these two verses and work them through in the symphony of salvation that he is expounding in this letter.

And I want us to notice this evening four things that he underlines for us and that over the coming weeks we will see him picking up and working out in greater detail and returning to at a different level in order to help us to understand the richest, the height, the length, the breadth, the depth, of the saving power of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

And that, of course, is the very first thing he says. The Gospel of which he is unashamed, he is unashamed of it because it is the saving power of God. Verse 16, "I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation." If you had done a word association test with the first readers of this letter of Paul and had said to them, "Black," they would have said, "White." If you had said to them, "Horse," they probably would have said, "Chariot." And if you had said to them, "Power," they would all have said, "Rome." Rome. Of all nations, of all empires that had arisen over the years, Rome was the nation and the empire of power. It had devastated the entire world as Tacitus, you may remember from somewhere in high school, had written about the Romans of this period, "They make a desert and they call it peace." They had overwhelmed other nations. They had invaded other countries. They had covered the ancient world with their roads and with their political power and with their imperial and wonderfully powerful Roman army. Everywhere they went, the Roman army was feared and they brought the whole of the ancient world into subjugation to their prince and leader, Caesar.

So the great word of the ancient world, the great challenge politically for Christians in the first century, was whether they would be willing or unwilling to say that Caesar was Lord. Rome epitomized the power of this world and yet over against that, the Apostle Paul is saying that another power has been unleashed in the world. Interestingly, this power is also international in its influence. It's for Jews and Greeks, for Greeks and barbarians. Interestingly, he's already underlined that this power also lays waste to its enemies but its enemies are not foreign nations but sin and death and Satan and hell. And this power in the Gospel, like the power of Rome, has an enormous efficiency but its efficiency is to save men and women for all eternity. The efficiency of Rome can subjugate nations, the efficiency of Gospel power can save men and women for eternity.

And for that reason as the Apostle Paul looked forward to being in Rome, he looked forward with confidence and a terrific sense that when he went to Rome, he would not need to be ashamed of the Gospel. One of the things I hope we will discover in our studies in Romans is that that was true intellectually. The Apostle Paul is able to expound the Gospel to us in these chapters in such a way as we begin to learn things about unbelievers that unbelievers don't know about themselves, or at least are denying about

themselves, and so we do not need to be ashamed of the Gospel when we come to unbelievers and when we see mighty powers with great accomplishments. The Apostle Paul is saying to us we do not need to be ashamed of the Gospel, indeed the empires and nations and capital cities of our world need to hang their heads in shame before the Gospel, whether those capital cities be Washington or London or Beijing or Paris, because all the powers that are set loose in those capital cities, brain power, financial power, scientific power, technological power, cannot in one individual's life provide the forgiveness of sins and the hope of eternal life.

And because Paul saw far beyond the petty powers of empires and nations and individuals, whether they were rampant power or intellectual power or technological or scientific power, he looked forward to going to Rome as a person who would not be ashamed of the Gospel because he had seen its saving power at work and so he rejoices in the Gospel.

He's not ashamed of the Gospel for a second reason: it is the saving power of God and it comes uniquely with a universal appeal, "it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek." Actually this was one of Paul's great passions in life as a Jewish convert to demonstrate that the Gospel was for the Jew who came to faith in Jesus Christ and for the Gentile who came to faith in Jesus Christ. Of course, he understood there was a kind of historical precedent. The Gospel had, first of all, come to the Jews and so wherever Paul went, you can read about this in Acts 9 through about Acts 19, everywhere he went the first stop in town was always to seek out the Jews or the God-fearers, to go to the synagogue and to preach the Gospel to the people who already knew the Old Testament Scriptures, to teach them that the Messiah had come. But he understood better, in fact, than some of the other apostles understood that since the day of Pentecost, the Gospel was to spread as Jesus commanded beyond Jerusalem, beyond Judea, beyond Samaria to the uttermost parts of the earth because as Peter says on the day of Pentecost, "The promise is to you and to your children but also to those who are afar off, wherever the Holy Spirit works through the Gospel and calls men and women to faith in Jesus Christ." It's for Jew and Gentile.

It's interesting how he works this out in the rest of Romans, how he shows in the chapters that follow, in chapter 2 and 3, how the Gentile needs the Gospel, and how the Jew needs the Gospel. Then in chapters 9 through 11, how he works this out in history. How the Jews have rejected the Gospel and the result has been the Gospel has come to the Gentiles. And how he works this out later on in the congregations in Rome that seemed to have been a mixture of Jew and Gentile and therefore there was some tension and difficulty and he works out this Gospel because it is internationally applicable, universally applicable both to Jew and to Gentile.

And particularly today, we need to be very clear in this. The Apostle Paul understands that there is only one way of salvation whether you are Jew or Gentile. There are not two ways of salvation, one for the Jew and one for the Gentile. There is only one way of salvation and that way of salvation is through faith in Jesus Christ. It is, he says, a Gospel that is the saving power of God for all, but there is a limitation, and the limitation it is for

all and only for those who believe in Jesus Christ. So he wants to emphasize the power of God in the Gospel and the universal appeal of grace in the Gospel. That's for him and for us a glorious thought. "There is nobody," as it were, "who is outside of the scope of me bringing the Gospel to them, because of their religious background, their ethnic background, their social background. No," Paul is saying, "the Gospel is to go to all and it may be received, Christ may be received by all who come to him in faith."

This, of course, is why we delight, don't we, in the sheer international character of the Christian church? Why it's a concern to us that Jim and others are in Mexico. Or that Robert Belding is in Pakistan. Or that our friends are in Uganda. Or that others are in China. Why are we concerned about this, especially in a day when we've become so sensitive to the fact that bringing the Gospel may transform a culture and shouldn't we leave people in their cultures? No, not if being left in that culture means that you are left bereft of salvation in Jesus Christ.

So Paul wants us to understand there is power in the Gospel and the power in the Gospel is for all who believe, but that obviously raises a central question: how is it that the Gospel is this saving power? That's a good question, isn't it? One worthy of our asking ourselves. How is the Gospel the saving power of God? Well, you notice Paul's explanation, "For," he says, that's a word that indicates to us, "Now I'm going to explain the reason for this. It's the saving power of God for all who believe because in the Gospel the righteousness of God is revealed." It's the saving power of God, it makes a universal appeal and now, thirdly, it reveals the righteousness of God.

Now, what does Paul mean when he speaks about the righteousness of God? Well, God's righteousness is, of course in the first instance, a characteristic of God. He is the righteous one. What does it mean that God is righteous? It means that God is absolutely consistent with his character, undeviating in his faithfulness to his character and to, at the end of the day, the pursuit of the honor and majesty and glory of his character. And he reveals that righteousness, as we learn in Scripture, by the way in which he pledges himself to men and women to be that righteous God. He does that in his covenant in the Old Testament Scriptures. And he then manifests that righteousness in terms of whether we are rightly related to him in his covenant. So if we are unrighteously related to him in his covenant, he righteously reveals his righteousness in judgment and condemnation and you find that in the Old Testament Scriptures. But to those who are rightly related to him in his covenant, he reveals his righteousness and blessing and joy and delight and pleasure and communion.

So what's the problem? The problem is that none of us by nature is rightly related to God. Paul will go on to underline this, in fact the whole point of chapter 1, verse 18, to chapter 3, verse 20, is to prove to us there is none who is righteous, no not one. And that's why the glorious thing that Paul is saying here in Romans right at the beginning is that the marvel of the Gospel is that this holy righteous God in a holy righteous way is able to provide righteousness for sinners when they come to believe. And you see how he says that. He says it actually three times, really. He says, "I'm not ashamed of the Gospel because it's the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes. For in it the

righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, 'The righteous shall live by faith.'"

So you see in a sense, Paul is bringing to bear upon this little verse the whole of the Bible's teaching about God's righteousness. God is a God of perfect righteousness and as he relates to us, he relates in a righteous way to our sinfulness by judging us and by condemning us for our sinfulness, but the glory of the Gospel is that this righteous God has, as it were, devised a way of acting with perfect righteousness in providing the righteousness that sinners need to stand in his holy and righteous and glorious presence. In a way, you can see why Luther was on his tiptoes when he realizes what the righteousness of God was. Yes, it was true that God would act righteously, yes, it was true he was a sinner, it was true that this righteous God condemns sinners righteously, but in the Gospel, this is why it's good news, because God in his grace has solved my final problem with his final solution so that without compromising his own righteousness by acting in perfect righteousness, he's able to provide for me the very righteousness that I need in the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

And he'll work this out in the rest of the epistle. In fact, if you're looking for a simple way to understand what Romans is about, it's this, chapter 1, verse 18, to chapter 3, verse 20: my absolute lack of righteousness. Chapter 3, verse 21, to chapter 8, verse 39: God's glorious provision of the righteousness that I need. Chapter 9, verse 1, to chapter 11, verse 36: that righteousness of God vindicated in all he has done in history among Jew and Gentile. And chapter 12, verse 1, to chapter 16, verse 27: that righteousness worked into the lives of God's people so that they are transformed more and more, no longer conformed to this age but transformed by the renewing of their minds into the glorious likeness of our Lord Jesus Christ.

This is the Gospel in a nutshell, isn't it? I need but lack righteousness if I'm going to stand before him. Where am I going to go? The God before whom I shall one day stand himself has provided that righteousness for me in the gift of his Son, Jesus Christ. And he has shown his righteousness in all his dealings in history with Jews and Gentiles, and that righteous God through the Gospel by the power of the Holy Spirit is going to work that out into my life so that I'll become more and more an expression of his own character in my individual life, in my relationships with others, in my love for my fellow believers in the church, and my passion to see the Gospel taken to the ends of the world.

"Yes," says Paul, "I am not ashamed of the Gospel. It is the saving power of God for all who believe because in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith." Perhaps he just means from faith to faith, just it's all a matter of faith. And then this fourth point: the Gospel is the saving power of God that makes a universal appeal, it reveals the righteousness of God and it is confirmed by the sacred Scriptures, "as it is written." Habakkuk 2:4, "The righteous shall live by faith." And you see what he's saying, he's saying this is not a novelty. I hope we're all clear on this. There are not two different ways of salvation in the Bible. There is only one way of salvation taught in the Bible and if you look through Romans, you will see many passages quoted by the Apostle Paul in which he's saying the message of the Gospel in the New Testament is consistent

with the message of God in the Old Testament and the message of God in the New Testament consistent with the message of God in the Old Testament. So there are not two ways of salvation. There is not one way of salvation for the Jews and another for the Gentiles. There's only one way of salvation taught in the Scriptures from beginning to end.

That's how Paul is able to reach back into Habakkuk 2:4 and say, "Didn't you notice it there? The righteous, those who have been restored to fellowship with God, whose lives begin to be aligned with God's purposes, the righteous shall live by faith." And in a way, that's another summary of this whole book, how to become that righteous man, that righteous woman, in God's sight who lives day-by-day from beginning to end by faith. And when we feel something of the weight of this, we understand why the Apostle Paul is able to say, "I'm not ashamed of the Gospel. It's the saving power of God that makes a universal appeal, that reveals the righteousness of God, and it's gloriously confirmed in the pages of sacred Scripture."

I began with Martin Luther, let me end not in Wittenberg but in Geneva, and not in the 16th century in 1519, but in the 19th century in 1816. In 1816, a Scotsman by the name of Robert Haldane decided that he and Mrs. Haldane would do well to pay a visit to Switzerland, an excellent idea, incidentally, if you're a husband looking for something nice to do with your wife. They went to Geneva. Haldane was passionately devoted to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Enormously rich landowner, he sold it all for the cause of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Have any of you ever seen Gleneagles Hotel in all its majesty? That's the kind of land that Robert Haldane owned.

A student from the theological seminary came along one day to escort Mrs. Haldane on a tour of Geneva because somebody else wasn't able to turn up. You need to understand that Jean-Jacques Rousseau had said about the faculty of theology in Geneva, "If anybody mentioned the name the Lord Jesus Christ to them, they would blush with embarrassment." This was a city, a church, a theological seminary that was totally and utterly ashamed of the Gospel and taught its students to be ashamed of the Gospel and when this student came along, not knowing who Robert Haldane was and how persistent the Scots could be, found himself in conversation with him and Haldane began to press, did he understand the Gospel? Did he know that he was a sinner? Had he heard of the saving righteousness of Jesus Christ? Had he experienced the power of the Gospel for salvation? And here was a theological student who had no idea whatsoever about the very basics of the Gospel and was totally ashamed of the kind of thing that Haldane was saying.

But the Spirit began to draw him and he said, "Can I come back, Mr. Haldane, with one of my friends?" And two of them came back. Then three of them. Then four of them and Haldane started all over again. So many of them came that the professors in the seminary took it in turn to stand outside the apartment where the Haldanes were residing for these weeks and take down the names of these wretched students who were sitting under Robert Haldane's teaching on the letter to the Romans. And as he taught them, young man after young man after young man was brought in glorious saving faith to Jesus

Christ, right with God; became unashamed of the Gospel. And an amazing number of those young men became enormously significant figures, especially in the churches of France throughout the early part of the 19th century because they gave themselves to the study of Romans and they found the power of God in its truth and it transformed the way they thought so that they understood the Gospel and it most gloriously transformed the way they lived so that their lives made an impact not only in Geneva but in France and to the ends of the earth just because in a little apartment, a man who was actually there for a vacation, taught the epistle to the Romans, the power of God for salvation.

Do you think it could possibly be, my friends, as we have begun to set out on this adventure of studying Paul's letter to the Romans, that as we study it together, as we study it on our own, as we talk about it together, as its truth breaks into our lives, that in another 200 years time, because that was almost 200 years ago, somebody somewhere in a pulpit would be standing and saying, "You know, there was a time around 2008 and 2009 and 2010 in Columbia, South Carolina, when young men and young women gave themselves without reservation to the study of Paul's letter to the Romans and the power of the transformation of their lives reached to the ends of the earth"?

Beloved, that's what we're here for, to get the Gospel so that we can go to the ends of the earth with the Gospel in obedience to our Lord Jesus Christ. Is it just a dream to think it could happen to us here, little us here in Columbia, South Carolina? Little you and little me? Nobody knows anything about us but if the power of the Gospel breaks through, then everything will be different. May it be so as we give ourselves to this study.

Heavenly Father, we pray that you would fill us with the power of the Gospel of Jesus Christ that we may learn its truth but its transforming influence may make us more and more like our Lord Jesus and that through the ministry of your Holy Spirit, we may be sent to the ends of the earth and to our neighbors in Columbia, with the power of God for salvation. And this we pray in Jesus' our Savior's name. Amen.