

Intro:

Some parts of scripture are significant both for what they *mean* and for what they *meant*. What I mean by that is some passages are significant signposts for the development of church history — the passage has a meaning, but as that meaning came to be understood, whole movements responded to their teaching.

No passage is more significant in that way than the passage we come to this morning, Rm 1.17c:

“as it is written, ‘BUT THE RIGHTEOUS *man* SHALL LIVE BY FAITH.’”

or, more famously to our hearing from the KJV:

“as it is written, The just shall live by faith.”

Everyone here this morning, indeed everyone in Bible believing Christian churches around the world, and indeed the world itself, owes a great debt to the meaning of this verse, and to what it meant to one man: Martin Luther.

Of course, Martin Luther had his faults; you can look them up and read all about them. He was just a man, and he had human failings. But God used him mightily in His Kingdom to bring about real salvation for millions of people around the world and the liberty to worship God according to one’s own conscience. (That is not to say Luther himself would have granted you that liberty — I am sure he wouldn’t like us!) Nevertheless, God used him in a mighty way to change the world.

So today I want to engage the meaning of our text and also something of what it meant and continues to mean in the life of Christians who have escaped the works-oriented dogmas of Rome.

First, let’s read the text occupying us these last eight weeks:

Read Rm 1.15-17

Proposition: The doctrine of salvation by faith alone is the soul-liberating doctrine of the entire Bible.

I. Justification by faith, a unifying theme

- A. The Old Testament iteration is expressed in terms of physical life, but has deep application to spiritual life (Hab 2.4)
 - 1. Habakkuk expresses his dismay over Israel’s sins and asks God to do something about it (Hab 1.1-4)
 - 2. The Lord responds with his plan to deal with Judah’s sins by punishing them by means of Babylon (Hab 1.5-11)

3. Habakkuk asks the Lord how he, the Holy One, can use such a wicked instrument as the Babylonians against His people (Hab 1.12-17)
4. The Lord's response: the arrogant will also fall (Hab 2)
 - a. In the midst of this response, comes the central statement of Habakkuk's prophecy (2.4)

"The key clause 'the righteous will live by his faith' sparkles like a diamond in a pile of soot."¹

- b. The proud, the unrighteous shall fall
- c. The righteous, the just, shall live *by faith*

The message is for the nation Israel as well as for the New Testament church – Habakkuk is preaching to a proud, rebellious, arrogant, unrighteous Israelite people.

- They needed to live by faith in God.
- They could only live by faith in God.

- B. The repetition in Galatians emphasizes the living of the spiritual life: by faith, not by works (Ga 1 3.11)
 1. Depend on the works of the law, live under God's curse (3.10)
 2. Live without dependence on the law (but not apart from the law of Christ), live under God's grace (3.11-13)
- C. The repetition in Hebrews expounds the nature of faith (Heb 10.38)
 1. God promises the return of Christ (10.37)
 2. The just lives by faith and doesn't draw back from God's promise (10.38)
 3. The nature of faith is expounded in the whole of Heb 11
- D. The repetition in Romans grounds the hope of faith in the acquisition of righteousness (Rm 1.17)
 1. The righteousness is from God
 2. This righteousness is revealed 'out of faith' [salvation by faith] 'into faith' [sanctification by faith], *i.e.*, 'from faith to faith'

¹ John F. Walvoord, Roy B. Zuck and Dallas Theological Seminary, *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures* (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1983-c1985). 1:1513.

3. Just as it is written in Habakkuk...

It is interesting that Paul quotes this passage three times:

- In his first epistle, Galatians
- In his chief epistle, Romans
- In his posthumous epistle [with an assist from Luke?], Hebrews

The doctrine is crucial to Christian faith. It is the irreducible minimum of the Old Testament; it is the liberating theme of the New Testament.

II. Justification by faith, a liberating theme

A. The soul's bondage to sin, to unrighteousness

1. Read Rm 1.16: power of God unto *salvation*
2. The need for salvation presupposes spiritual bondage
3. Spiritual bondage is the experience of every man (Paul will bring to prove this to us in Rm 1.18-3.20)

Rather than prove the point, I mean to illustrate it with the life of Martin Luther.

- Born into a middle class family, father a leaseholder of copper mines and smelters, greatly desired Martin to become a lawyer [and able to maintain him in his old age]
- Sent Martin away to various schools, entered the University of Erfut in 1501, received a masters degree in 1505
- Enrolled in law school at Erfut, but uncomfortable with the uncertainties of law and desirous of certainty for his soul
- July 2, 1505, returning to school from home, a lightning bolt struck near him, and he cried out 'Help! Saint Anna, I will become a monk!' – fearful of death and God's judgement

- July 17, 1505, entered a closed Augustinian friary [father furious], no further contact with outside world expected

Monastic Life:

“Luther dedicated himself to monastic life, devoting himself to fasts, long hours in prayer, pilgrimage, and frequent confession. Luther tried to please God through this dedication, but it only increased his awareness of his own sinfulness. He would later remark, ‘If anyone could have gained heaven as a monk, then I would indeed have been among them.’ Luther described this period of his life as one of deep spiritual despair. He said, ‘I lost touch with Christ the Savior and Comforter, and made of him the jailor and hangman of my poor soul.’”²

- As he progressed, he became more and more depressed about his spiritual condition: lost in the bondage of sin

B. The human escape from bondage, self-righteousness [good works]

Luther’s superior in the monastery “concluded that Luther needed more work to distract him from excessive introspection and ordered him to pursue an academic career.”³

- He became a lecturer at the University of Wittenberg and from 1510 to 1520 lectured on Psalms, Hebrews, Romans, and Galatians [but at first without a regenerated understanding]
- In 1516-17, the Pope decided to finance the rebuilding of St. Peter’s Basilica by selling ‘indulgences’
- “Roman Catholic theology stated that faith alone, whether fiduciary or dogmatic, cannot justify man and that only such faith as is active in charity and good works . . . can justify man. These good works could be obtained by ‘donating’ money to the church.”⁴ [‘Donations’ were by way of the purchase of indulgences.]

² Wikipedia, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Martin_Luther (Accessed 8.19.08).

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*

- Luther's teaching duties brought some relief from his introspection and gave him self-confidence. He published his '95 Theses', or statements against the indulgences that he was prepared to debate [a typical academic procedure] [Note: the Reformation began *before* Luther was personally reformed!]

C. The power of God unto salvation is revealed in righteousness through faith alone

The papacy took some time to respond to Luther, but in the meantime he continued to study and teach. Now I want to simply read for you Luther's testimony of his conversion in his own words:

"Meanwhile in that same year, 1519 [note year], I had begun interpreting the Psalms once again. I felt confident that I was now more experienced, since I had dealt in university courses with St. Paul's Letters to the Romans, to the Galatians, and the Letter to the Hebrews. I had conceived a burning desire to understand what Paul meant in his Letter to the Romans, but thus far there had stood in my way, not the cold blood around my heart, but that one word which is in chapter one: 'The justice of God is revealed in it.' I hated that word, 'justice of God,' which, by the use and custom of all my teachers, I had been taught to understand philosophically as referring to formal or active justice, as they call it, i.e., that justice by which God is just and by which he punishes sinners and the unjust.

"But I, blameless monk that I was, felt that before God I was a sinner with an extremely troubled conscience. I couldn't be sure that God was appeased by my satisfaction. I did not love, no, rather I hated the just God who punishes sinners. In silence, if I did not blaspheme, then certainly I grumbled vehemently and got angry at God. I said, 'Isn't it enough that we miserable sinners, lost for all eternity because of original sin, are oppressed by every kind of calamity through the Ten Commandments? Why does God heap sorrow upon sorrow through the Gospel and through the Gospel threaten us with his justice and his wrath?' This was how I was raging with wild and disturbed conscience. I constantly badgered St. Paul about that spot in Romans 1 and anxiously wanted to know what he meant.

“I meditated night and day on those words until at last, by the mercy of God, I paid attention to their context: ‘The justice of God is revealed in it, as it is written: ‘The just person lives by faith.’” I began to understand that in this verse the justice of God is that by which the just person lives by a gift of God, that is by faith. I began to understand that this verse means that the justice of God is revealed through the Gospel, but it is a passive justice, i.e. that by which the merciful God justifies us by faith, as it is written: ‘The just person lives by faith.’ All at once I felt that I had been born again and entered into paradise itself through open gates. Immediately I saw the whole of Scripture in a different light. I ran through the Scriptures from memory and found that other terms had analogous meanings, e.g., the work of God, that is, what God works in us; the power of God, by which he makes us powerful; the wisdom of God, by which he makes us wise; the strength of God, the salvation of God, the glory of God.

“I exalted this sweetest word of mine, ‘the justice of God,’ with as much love as before I had hated it with hate. This phrase of Paul was for me the very gate of paradise.”⁵

- Luther could not escape the bondage of his soul by charitable works.
- Luther could not escape the bondage of his soul by punishing his flesh [monastic life, self-flagellation, etc.]
- Luther could not escape the bondage of his soul by *teaching the Bible*, or *studying the Bible*.
- Luther could not escape the bondage of his soul by opposing the sale of indulgences.

Luther could only escape the bondage of his soul by faith in the finished work of Jesus Christ on the cross, by resting in Christ, and Christ alone.

As it is written, the just shall live by faith.

⁵ Translated by Andrew Thornton, OSB, for the Saint Anselm College Humanities Program, © 1983 by Saint Anselm Abbey.

III. Justification by faith, a personal theme

A. Harry Ironside described the gospel this way:

“It is impossible to understand the gospel if the basic principle be misunderstood or denied. Justification by faith alone is the test of orthodoxy. But no mind untaught by the Holy Spirit will ever receive it, for it sets the first man aside altogether as in the flesh and unprofitable, in order that the Second Man, the Man of God’s counsels, the Lord Jesus Christ, alone be exalted. Faith gives all honor to Him as the One who has finished the work that saves and in whom alone God has been fully glorified, His holiness maintained, and His righteousness vindicated, and that not in the death of the sinner but in the salvation of all who believe. It is a Gospel worthy of God, and it has demonstrated its power by what it has accomplished in those who have received it in faith.”⁶

1. The believer must see that it is Christ alone who saves.
2. The believer must appropriate the life/death/resurrection of Christ as his own means of receiving the righteousness that is from God.
3. Then the believer stands, personally redeemed.

B. Luther, two years after his experience of the new birth by faith, stood before the Emperor at what is called the Diet of Worms (Diet = parliament, pronounced DEE-et of Worms)

1. Called upon to renounce his writings
2. Agreed to renounce only if he could be shown to be wrong from the Scriptures, closing with this statement:

“Since your Imperial Majesty and Lordships demand a simple answer I will do so without horns or teeth as follows: Unless I am convicted by the testimony of Scripture or by evident reason — for I trust neither in popes nor in councils alone, since it is obvious that they have often erred and contradicted themselves — I am convicted by the Scripture which I have mentioned and my conscience is captive by the Word of God. Therefore I cannot and will not recant, since it is difficult, unprofitable and dangerous indeed to do anything against one's conscience. God help me. Amen.”⁷

⁶ H. A. Ironside, *Lectures on Romans*, pp. 26-27.

⁷ The Californian Institute for Ancient Studies – Reformation History, <http://www.specialtyinterests.net/lutherwords.html> (Accessed 4.19.08).

Conclusion:

Proposition: The doctrine of salvation by faith alone is the soul-liberating doctrine of the entire Bible.

Has it liberated your soul?