

Martin Luther's Breakthrough

In that year (1519) I had once again turned to the task of interpreting the Psalms, relying on the fact that I was in better training for it since I had handled in the schools the epistles of St. Paul to the Romans and Galatians, and the epistle to the Hebrews. I had certainly been seized with a wondrous eagerness to understand Paul in the epistle to the Romans, but hitherto I had been held up—not by a 'lack of heat in my heart's blood', but by one word only, in chapter 1: 'The righteousness of God is revealed.' For I hated this word 'righteousness of God', which by the customary use of all the doctors I had been taught to understand philosophically as what they call the *formal* or *active righteousness* whereby God is just and punishes unjust sinners.

For my case was this: however irreproachable my life as a monk, I felt myself in the presence of God to be a sinner with a most unquiet conscience, nor could I believe him to be appeased by the satisfaction I could offer. I did not love—nay, I hated this just God who punishes sinners, and if not with silent blasphemy, at least with huge murmuring. I was indignant against God, as if it were really not enough that miserable sinners, eternally ruined by original sin, should be crushed with every kind of calamity through the law of the Ten Commandments, but that God through the Gospel must add sorrow to sorrow, and even through the Gospel bring his righteousness and wrath to bear on us. And so I raged with a savage and confounded conscience; yet I knocked impudently at Paul in this place, with a parched and burning desire to know what he could mean.

At last, as I meditated day and night, God showed mercy and I turned my attention to the connection of the words, namely—'The righteousness of God is revealed, as it is written: the righteous shall live by faith'—and there I began to understand that the righteousness of God is the righteousness in which a just man lives by the gift of God, in other words by faith, and that what Paul means is this: the righteousness of God, revealed in the Gospel, is *passive*, in other words that by which the merciful God justifies us through faith, as it is written, 'The righteous shall live by faith.' At this I felt myself straightway born afresh and to have entered through the open gates into paradise itself. There and then the whole face of scripture was changed; I ran through the scriptures as memory served, and collected the same analogy in other words, for example *opus Dei*, that which God works in us; *virtus Dei*, that by which God makes us strong; *sapientia Dei*, that by which He makes us wise; *fortitudo Dei*, *salus Dei*, *gloria Dei*.

And now, in the same degree as I had formerly hated the word 'righteousness of God', even so did I begin to love and extol it as the sweetest word of all. Thus was this place in St. Paul to me the very gate of paradise. Later I read Augustine on the *Spirit and the Letter*, where beyond all hope I found that he also interprets the righteousness of God in the same way, as that in which God clothes us when he justifies us. And although Augustine's statement of this is still open to criticism, and he is neither clear nor comprehensive in the matter of imputation, yet he is satisfied that the righteousness of God should be taught to be that by which we are justified.

In the strengthened armour of such thoughts I began my second interpretation of the *Psalms*.



Martin Luther

Martin Luther (1483 – 1546) was a German monk and professor of theology who begun the Reformation.

Paul, Justification, Assurance

Romans