

Prayers

To God

Tell the Lord your God how much you love Him.

If you find it hard to know what to say, think back on all He has done for you, or think of Jesus on the Cross ... that should help ...

If you find that your words flow out in unending praise and glory, that is wonderful! Let your words become the 'tongues of angels and of men'!

For Self

Ask the Lord your God to bless your family.

If you have been at war with some, release them into God's hands.

If you have been distanced from some for whatever reason, make a reason to get in contact and resolve to overcome the distance.

And for those who are close, bless them with every possible word of blessing.

For others

Lord God Almighty, may we show forgiveness in all our dealings with other people; may we demonstrate the truth of Jesus' teaching that love is the only way for people to behave and may we take every opportunity to speak with care and kindness to all who need help in this troublesome world. In this way, may we be the 'light to the nations' you have created us to be, a witness to all that is true, and a witness to all that is right. AMEN

Meditation

The Lord will come; He has never been slow.

He delights to fulfil our needs ...

We long to be able to see the truth,

so He comes in visions and prayer ...

We seek to work out what must be done,

so He reveals His will in His Word ...

We ask to know how to grow in grace,

so He comes with wisdom and strength ...

We seek to proclaim the Gospel message,

so He uses our witness and faith ...

*We try to give others our love and kindness,
so He heals through our care and prayer ...*

*The Lord will come; He has never been slow.
For Him, doing nothing is not on ...*

Bible Passage

Romans 1:16,17

¹⁶ For I am not ashamed of the Gospel; to everyone who has faith, it is the power of God for salvation, firstly for Jews and also for Greeks. ¹⁷ For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith; as it is written, 'The righteous will live by faith.'

Bible study Review

After the introduction to his letter to the Romans, these two verses plunge us immediately into a very powerful explanation of the Gospel of salvation. They are like a summary introduction of the letter, pointing us towards what Paul will say later, and they are an amazing piece of writing in which each word is important and has a unique role.

Romans 1:16,17 has had an immeasurable spiritual impact on generations of Christians. The passage both explains and declares God's plan of Salvation as something available in power and without exception, to give life to all who have faith in Jesus Christ. Through the centuries, Christians have returned to these words for inspiration and also for help to understand the true nature of their faith, and there is no doubt that Romans 1:16,17 has played a significant part in major revivals within the Church. Some of these have directly shaped not just the church but also world history, for example, the Reformation, and the Wesleyan Revival of the 18th century.

These verses have also been preached upon by countless preachers and evangelists, and thousands if not millions of Christians remember this passage as one that homes in on the truth of their own salvation. It has been suggested that we can measure the importance of words by what we remember of the first time we heard them. Certainly, I can remember first hearing this text expounded by John Stott as vicar of All Souls, Langham Place, when I was a student!

Indeed, at that moment I came to believe that this text was central to my own faith; it was special.

Coming half way through the first chapter of Romans, we can sense the 'gravitas' of these words as Paul writes about the deeper truths of the Gospel. Jesus is not mentioned directly, but the purpose of this passage is not to describe Him, rather, to state the importance of His work and how we should respond to Him. In his introduction about the 'Gospel of God' (1:1-3) Paul has already proclaimed that this Gospel is delivered in Jesus; Paul adds boldly 'I am not ashamed of the Gospel ...' (1:16). He had preached Jesus as God's Messiah and the Saviour of all across the Roman world and in every imaginable circumstance, and his conviction remains that when received by faith, God's good news about the death and resurrection of Jesus is indeed 'the power of God for salvation' (1:16). This is no 'theory', but for Paul, it the evidence of what happens to real people as they responded to the Word of God; they are transformed and 'live by faith' (1:17)

Romans 1:16,17 describes the Gospel using words with which we are familiar in the life of the church; 'faith', 'power', 'salvation', 'righteousness', 'revelation'. So if we want to understand more about what Paul means, we must look at each of these words carefully, which we do below in 'going deeper'. However, two phrases within the passage have kept Christians thinking about this text ever since it was written. Firstly, Paul says that in the Gospel, the righteousness of God is revealed 'from faith to faith'. Some believe this means that faith comes from God and is planted in the heart of the believer; others believe that this describes faith as dynamic, passing from one believer to another. Yet others have found a variety interpretations of the passage based on the fact that the original Greek text is not as clear as we would like! We should not be discouraged by such apparent confusion however; each way of understanding the passage which tells us more about the gracious saving work of God is a reason for thanksgiving, and for our deeper learning.

Lastly, the text concludes with a famous quote 'the righteous will live by faith'. This comes directly from Habakkuk 2:4, but it is also one way of interpreting the famous passage in Genesis where Scripture says of Abraham; 'and he believed the Lord and the Lord reckoned it to him as righteousness' (Gen 15:6), a passage to which Paul returns later on in the letter (see chapter 4). Here, Paul uses Old Testament scriptures to give a fuller account of what is meant by the word 'faith'. In one extraordinary sentence, Paul binds together God's old Covenant with Israel with the new Covenant of grace by which God's salvation is made available to all people by faith. This is God's eternal promise, and His Word.

Going Deeper

The Gospel for all people (1:16)

Because of Claudius' edict to evict Jews from Rome in 49 AD it is likely when Paul wrote, the church at Rome had contained no Jews. It is Paul's intention therefore to write to the Roman church explaining that the Gospel is freely available to Gentiles without condition. Most early churches contained a mixture of Jewish and Gentile Christians, and the tensions between these two groups made for divisions, and Paul had to address these in several of his letters (e.g. Galatians and Philippians). Yet with no Jewish Christians, the Gentiles in Rome may have felt somewhat exposed, for Jesus was a Jew and their heritage of faith came from Him through Israel. Paul's bold declaration 'I am not ashamed of the Gospel' tells the church at Rome that the Gospel is more important than such concerns, and he calls on these Gentile Christians to stand with him in the evangelistic task. Others accused Paul of driving a wedge between Judaism and Christianity, but he is only concerned about the proclamation of the Gospel to all people!

Verse 16 contains the heart of the Christian Gospel, 'the power of God for salvation' for 'everyone who has faith'. As we all know, the word 'salvation' can be used to talk about freedom from anything, but Paul's use of the word here is both highly specific and also universal. For the Jewish people, salvation meant the long awaited completion of God's promise that he would save His people from their worldly enemies (see Psalms 18:2f., 36:10, 68:19,20 and many more). Paul believes that God has come in Jesus to save the Jews, but not as they see it; moreover, this is the same Gospel for Gentiles. no less priority, God will save the Gentiles from the multitude of religious beliefs to which most people were bound in Roman days. Such is the 'power of God' for salvation for all people; one God, one salvation, and one

route to that salvation through faith in Jesus Christ! It is amazing to think that Paul was the first person to explain this basic principle of faith.

The righteousness of God ... from faith to faith (1:17)

When Paul writes about the Gospel 'for in it the righteousness of God is revealed' he uses the word righteousness in a special way. The Old Testament idea of righteousness is one of being 'right' with God; it is a simple and legalistic idea based on what you have done, wrong or right. There are two words in Hebrew to describe these two states, 'tsadiq' meaning 'righteous', and 'rasha' meaning 'wicked' (many psalms speak of the contrast between these two states). The problem was that although 'righteous' people strived to attain to God's standards by means of keeping God's laws as given by Moses, history showed that they could never reach that goal, and they could only strive for it. Paul declares that the Gospel reveals Jesus Christ as the only person who is righteous. It is only through His righteousness that we can be accepted by God.

An amazing example of the predicament of God's people in striving for righteousness is provided by documents found in the Qumran cave complex describing the beliefs of the Jewish 'Essene' community:

'By His righteousness my sin is blotted out ... if I stumble because of my fleshly wickedness, my justification is in the righteousness of God who shall stand for ever ... by His mercy he calls me to approach and bring my justification near ... that I might praise God for His righteousness'

Look carefully, and you will note that justification and righteousness are only ever brought 'near'. These people had no knowledge of Jesus, and no Gospel of salvation to give them the assurance for which they longed. Ultimately, their community was lost in the sands of the Judean desert, despite their piety and love of God. But the Church of God has been blessed by God from the first century to this!

'From faith to faith'

This phrase has caused confusion for many years. What can Paul mean by saying that 'the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith'? The confusion is shown by the many different translations of this you will find in Bible versions available today. At the heart of the issue is the fact that the word 'faith' contains many ideas. It can mean 'consent', belief in something, assent to some idea, even confidence, trust or affection, perhaps even constancy and dependability. It is important to remember that in the Bible, all these ideas are part of what it means to have a relationship with God through Jesus Christ.

Using these ideas, then the phrase 'from faith to faith' could mean a number of things, perhaps:

1. To have faith, and faith alone.
2. That righteousness starts with God's faithfulness to which we respond by faith.
3. The Gospel begins with our faith and spreads (in evangelism) to the faith of others.
4. The phrase is shorthand for 'the obedience of total and complete faith'.
5. We begin with being saved by faith and then live by faith in a life of holiness.

All of these could be true, and many have attempted to make a case for one or the other interpretation alone. However, although there is no good reason for us to think that the phrase should be limited to one interpretation or the other, I prefer the first and third explanations. They seem to me to explain the radical faith taught by Jesus; where we cannot find any other means of deciding a matter, we should turn to the teachings of Jesus.

'The righteous will live by faith'

As we have seen, this final sentence is a quote from the prophet Habakkuk (2:4), so we should look into what this phrase meant when Habakkuk first said it. This phrase came from a prophetic conviction that out of the most terrible of evils (the Babylonian Exile and all its horrors, as in the rest of Habakkuk), good will indeed prevail! Habakkuk adds famously 'but the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea' (Hab 2:14). Paul regards this prophecy as fulfilled in Christ, so the 'faith' in Habakkuk's prophecy is properly faith in Jesus Christ, the Messiah, through whom victory over evil is accomplished!

Application

Discipleship issues

Faith, the heart of the Christian message

The application of this passage of Scripture must surely be found within the Gospel work of the Church of God throughout the ages, through its evangelism and the fruits of that work! Indeed, the first few centuries of the church show growth almost unparalleled, and Paul certainly had faith for this! How much more should we accept the same vision which says that all people can find their salvation in the Gospel of Jesus?

All human searching for God throughout time and history, and of whatever religion, can only ever be made complete in the person of Jesus Christ. Some say that such a vision is judgemental of others who do not know Christ, but as we read through Romans in the coming days, we will find that this and many other questions are dealt with extensively, as Paul spends the rest of the letter to the Romans expanding this great text. Because of this, I will not write further about it here. Suffice that that this passage encourages all God's people to have confidence in their heritage of faith and proclaim it

You and I can wonder at the sheer breadth of this passage of Scripture, and allow it to speak to us powerfully about God's Word of salvation to all peoples. Our personal response must surely be to check how our own experience of faith in Jesus Christ measures up to this great Scriptural passage. As time goes by, we can all wander away from what should lie at the heart of our faith, and a passage such as this can help us take stock of where we stand with our faith. It is perhaps a passage that needs to be read and thought about both by individuals and by groups of people in the church, so that we do not wander far from the truth of what Jesus has done for us, and our need to respond to Him specifically, and by faith.

Ideas for what to do

- Study this passage by reading it several times over, and use whatever means you have to explore some of the words in it (perhaps using the internet). See if this throws up any additional understanding of faith.
- Could this passage be used to explain the faith to someone who was not Christians? Try to re-write this passage in such a way that will make it understandable to someone who is not a Christian.

Questions for groups

- 1. Discuss what you understand by the phrase the 'Evangelical faith of the Church', and whether Romans 1:16,17 explains it.*
 - 2. In what ways does this passage of Scripture help you understand your faith?*
 - 3. Look carefully at the different possible meanings for 'from faith to faith'. Do you feel that any are more significant than others? What would be your first choice?*
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Final Prayer

Dear Lord Jesus; so many things have been written about you. Guide us we pray through the Scriptures so that our eyes might rest on those passages that will bring the Gospel to life for us, and help us understand the precious gift of our faith. Lead us on Lord Jesus, we pray; AMEN