



Luther discovers “the Righteousness of God” (Romans 1:17)

“I had indeed been captivated with an extraordinary ardor for understanding Paul in the Epistle to the Romans. But up till then it was not the cold blood about the heart, but a single word in Chapter 1[:17], ‘In it the righteousness of God is revealed,’ that had stood in my way. For I hated that word ‘righteousness of God,’ which, according to the use and custom of all the teachers, I had been taught

to understand philosophically regarding the formal or active righteousness, as they call it, with which God is righteous and punishes the unrighteous sinner.

Though I lived as a monk without reproach, I felt that I was a sinner before God with an extremely disturbed conscience. I could not believe that he was placated by my satisfaction. I did not love, yes, I hated the righteous God who punishes sinners, and secretly, if not blasphemously, certainly murmuring greatly, I was angry with God, and said, ‘As if, indeed, it is not enough, that miserable sinners, eternally lost through original sin, are crushed by every kind of calamity by the law of the decalogue, without having God add pain to pain by the gospel and also by the gospel threatening us with his righteousness and wrath!’ Thus I raged with a fierce and troubled conscience. Nevertheless, I beat importunately upon Paul at that place, most ardently desiring to know what St. Paul wanted.

At last, by the mercy of God, meditating day and night, I gave heed to the context of the words, namely, ‘In it the righteousness of God is revealed, as it is written, “He who through faith is righteous shall live.”’ There I began to understand that the righteousness of God is that by which the righteous lives by a gift of God, namely by faith. And this is the meaning: the righteousness of God is revealed by the gospel, namely, the passive righteousness with which merciful God justifies us by faith,

as it is written, 'He who through faith is righteous shall live.' Here I felt that I was altogether born again and had entered paradise itself through open gates. There a totally other face of the entire Scripture showed itself to me. Thereupon I ran through the Scripture from memory. I also found in other terms an analogy, as, the work of God, that is, what God does in us, the power of God, with which he makes us strong, the wisdom of God, with which he makes us wise, the strength of God, the salvation of God, the glory of God.

And I extolled my sweetest word with a love as great as the hatred with which I had before hated the word 'righteousness of God.'**

*Martin Luther, *Preface to the Complete Edition of Luther's Latin Writings* (1545) (ET: Lewis W. Spitz, Sr., in *Selected Writings of Martin Luther* [4 vol.; ed. Theodore G Tappert; Minneapolis, MN: Fortress]) 1:26-27.

N. T. Wright on How Luther (and Everybody Else) Got Romans 1:17 All Wrong

“Unless there had grown up in the Western church a long tradition of (a) reading ‘God’s righteousness’ as *iustitia Dei*, then (b) trying to interpret that phrase with the various meanings of *iustitia* available at the time, and (c) interpreting that in turn within the categories of theological investigation of the time (especially the determination to make ‘justification’ cover the entire sweep of soteriology from grace to glory)—unless all this had happened, nobody would ever have supposed that the ‘righteousness’ in question in Romans 1:17 was anything other than God’s own ‘righteousness,’ unveiled, as in a great apocalypse, before the watching world. And unless the scholars of any time had lost their moorings completely, drifting away from the secure harbor of ancient Jewish thought, not least the biblical thought where both Paul and his contemporaries were anchored, and had allowed the little ship of exegesis to be tossed to and fro with every wind of passing philosophy, nobody would have supposed that ‘God’s righteousness’ was anything other than his faithfulness to the covenant, to Israel and, beyond that again, to the whole of creation. It would have been taken for granted that ‘God’s righteousness’ referred to the great, deep plans which the God of the Old Testament had always cherished, the through-Israel-for-the-the-

world plans, plans to rescue and restore his wonderful creation itself, and, more especially, to God's faithfulness to those great plans."*



N. T. Wright at the 2009 Society of Biblical Literature Meeting in New Orleans (Photo: R. Huggins)

*N. T. Wright, *Justification: God's Plan & Paul's Vision* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2009), 178.