

# THE POWER OF FAITH

## *SERIES: THE JUST SHALL LIVE BY FAITH*

By Danny Hall

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One of the most frustrating things about being a human being is being a human being! There are so many times when we just can't seem to do the right thing, or think the right thing, or make the right decision. Even on our best days there is always an undercurrent that isn't quite right.

About a week ago I came across a *Dennis the Menace* cartoon. A box of crayons is lying on the floor, and there are drawings all over the wall. Dennis' mom has put him in the corner. Dennis is saying, "Boy, I sure do wish life came with an eraser!" Have you ever felt like that? So many times I have. The good news is that there *is* an eraser. You just have to know where to look for it.

This is the second message in a series on the statement in Scripture "The just shall live by faith." This message will focus on the wonderful power of faith. For the most part we'll study Paul's letter to the Romans, where he uses this statement "The just shall live by faith" in his theme verses, 1:16-17. In order to understand this statement, we're going to do a quick survey of the whole book of Romans, just as we surveyed the book of Habakkuk in the last message (Discovery Paper 4671). Paul uses this statement as a launch pad for all the rest of his discussion in the book.

Verses 1-17 of chapter 1 are the introduction of the letter, and it is much longer than Paul's introductions usually are. It begins with powerful statements about who Jesus Christ is. It talks of Paul's longing to come and see the Romans and bring the gospel to them. It concludes with this powerful statement of what the letter is going to be about in verses 16-17, and we'll come back and study those two verses in just a moment.

In 1:18 Paul launches into a discussion of the plight of man. He talks about the problem of sin and its downward spiral in life, about how we fail to acknowledge who God is and give him the glory as our Creator and Lord. That leads to all kinds of deterioration and destruction of the very moral fabric of humanity. He spends the rest of chapter 1 talking about that.

In chapter 2 Paul speaks specifically to his Jewish brethren, who came to believe that by the privileges given them by God as his chosen people, they were special spiritually. Paul goes through chapter 2 and well into chapter 3 confronting that error. He reminds them that while they do have the Law and all kinds of special privileges, and they are called by God to be the conduit of his Messiah, to be the custodians of his truth and a light to the world, they have abrogated that responsibility. They have become ingrown and spiritually proud. Just as the pagans outside their nation have, they have fallen short of what it means to be truly human, to be people who are alive in God as we all were created to be.

But in 3:21 to the end of chapter 8, Paul gives us the wonderful news that God has an answer for all the problems of humanity's sinfulness, whether the pagan's or the Jew's. Paul builds a glorious exposition of who Christ is, what he has accomplished for us, and how faith in Christ will help us. By the time Paul gets to chapter 8, we are in a wonderful attitude of praise and worship for the great salvation God has given us.

Chapters 9-11 have posed all kinds of difficulty for students of the book of Romans. In these chapters Paul seems to be sidetracking into the problems connected with the nation of Israel's being set aside as God's people and the Gentiles' being "grafted in." But when we study our theme verses, we will see that these chapters play an important part in the argument Paul is unfolding as to what God is doing. It is directly related to what we learned in the last message from the book of Habakkuk about trusting God and his sovereign purposes.

Then in chapters 12-16, Paul finishes with a wonderful explanation of how our life in Christ impacts us

practically, day by day.

In summary, Paul is unfolding the glorious story of what Jesus Christ has done for us and how it impacts our lives so that we are set free by him.

With that overview in mind, let's go back and look at our theme verses, 1:16-17:

**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. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith; as it is written, "But the righteous man shall live by faith."**

In these two short verses Paul has managed to compress an incredible amount of wonderful truth. Let's try to unpack it as we look at the key elements of the verses.

## The gospel proclaims Jesus

First Paul says, "I am not ashamed of the gospel..." What possible reason could there be for him to be ashamed of the gospel? Some have theorized that perhaps Paul was a rather obscure preacher from an unimportant portion of the Roman Empire, and he was now planning to go to the capital city of Rome and begin to proclaim Christ in the face of the powerful might of Rome, to enter the teeth of the lion, so to speak. He might have been tempted to feel insignificant in the larger scope of things.

That could be true, but it is not at the heart of what Paul is saying. Possibly what Paul is speaking of here is his realization of what the plan of salvation looks like in its entirety. There is no other book in Paul's writings where he is more passionate and positive about his own Jewishness, yet brokenhearted about the unbelief of his Jewish brethren. "Paul," we want to ask, "didn't God promise the Jews, your people, that they would be the conduit of the Messiah? Aren't they God's chosen people? How is it that now the Jews seem to be set aside in favor of the Gentiles?"

This harkens back to Habakkuk. Remember, Habakkuk too was concerned about the fate of the Jewish nation. God said he would raise up the Chaldeans (Babylonians) to come in and discipline them. Habakkuk was aghast that God would raise up Gentiles to discipline the Jews! He couldn't understand and was actually angry and disillusioned with God. But God told Habakkuk to step back and take in the bigger picture. The sovereign God of the universe was working out his purposes, and Habakkuk needed to trust him.

In the same way Paul as a Jew might be tempted to be ashamed of the fact that the Jews had failed, and that this church he is planning to visit is a predominantly Gentile church, yet he, a former Pharisee, is the apostle to the Gentiles! This might seem like a crazy plan to him.

But regardless of the reason he is tempted to feel ashamed, what Paul wants us to realize is that he is *not* ashamed, because God is doing something greater than either Jew or Gentile could ever imagine! God has done something so significant, so wonderful, so amazing, that it transcends even the distinction between Jew and Gentile. This is God's sovereign work for the whole world, which he had always intended for the nation of Israel, now fulfilled!

The second word I want us to look at in Paul's theme verses is "gospel." We sometimes equate the word "gospel" with what we call the plan of salvation, in other words a description of what we believed to become a Christian. But that's not the way Paul uses the word "gospel." Paul is talking about the proclamation of who Jesus Christ is--the Son of God, crucified, risen, and reigning as Lord--the Savior. In the opening five verses of Romans he writes:

"Paul, a bond-servant of Christ Jesus, called as an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God, which He promised beforehand through His prophets in the holy Scriptures, concerning His Son, who

was born of a descendant of David according to the flesh, who was declared the Son of God with power by the resurrection from the dead, according to the spirit of holiness, Jesus Christ our Lord, through whom we have received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith among all the Gentiles, for His name's sake."

The gospel is all about Jesus Christ. It is the proclamation of Christ that draws people to him, and the proclamation of Christ was at the center of all that Paul was. In 1 Corinthians 2:2, where Paul is reflecting on his first visit to the Corinthians, he reminds them, "I determined to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and Him crucified."

## **The gospel is able to save**

Paul then says about this gospel that it is "the power of God for salvation." The word "power" is the great Greek word *dunamis* (from which we have derived our word "dynamite"). That word simply means to be able. It speaks of the inherent ability of the gospel to do what it's supposed to do.

Paul makes this same point in Galatians 3:10-14, which is the other place where he quotes the statement "The just shall live by faith":

**For as many as are of the works of the Law are under a curse; for it is written, "Cursed is everyone who does not abide by all things written in the book of the Law, to perform them." Now that no one is justified by the Law before God is evident; for, "The righteous man shall live by faith." However, the Law is not of faith; on the contrary, "He who practices them shall live by them." Christ redeemed us from the curse of the Law, having become a curse for us--for it is written, "Cursed is every one who hangs on a tree"--in order that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith.**

Paul reminds us here, as he teaches in Romans, that there is no inherent power in the Law to make us new or to change our lives. Rather, as the Law directed us toward holiness in God, it would expose us as being sinful. In contrast to that, Paul says that the gospel, the message of who Jesus Christ is and what he has done, is able to save us. The gospel is where we can find the "eraser" we're looking for. The gospel of Jesus Christ is how things can be made new, as we trust in him.

One of the manifestations of our spiritual weakness as human beings is that we tend to settle for less than what God offers. There are at least four categories that we fall into in this.

Some people's response to their spiritual need is despair. "I can't change anything. I'm awful. The world is awful. There's no spiritual hope."

Another category is what I call fatalism. "I'm not getting any better, and I can't do anything about it. I'm just doing what I can." It amounts to drudgery. There may be those days when an inspirational speaker or a crisis helps people in this category to rise to the occasion for a moment or two, so that things go better. But then they fall back into the rut of drudgery again. A lot of us live this way.

A third category we might fall into when settling for less than what God offers is humanistic pride. People in this category cling to accomplishments or success to feel good about themselves. It may be in the arts or sports or their profession. It may be in doing enough community service so everybody will think they're the most wonderful person in the community. Maybe they experience this through their children. There's a certain task where they get a little more accomplished, and people recognize them for that. There is nothing inherently wrong with that, of course, but some people settle for that as if that were what life is all about--human applause. Every morning they get up and run back to the rat race saying, "I've got to work harder, write a few more lines of code. Maybe we'll go public in the next six months and I'll be the richest guy on my block!"

The fourth category is religious pride. Some develop an attitude in life of being the most spiritual person they can be to feel good about themselves. Every religion, Christian and non-Christian, develops around its faith system a set of beliefs about what a good Christian (Muslim, Mormon, etc.) is. We have one in this church. If I were to ask you what a good Christian looks like, certain behaviors and religious activities, “Christian” things, which, again, are not bad in themselves, would come to mind: go to church every Sunday, read the Bible every day, etc. But when we define ourselves by how many good things we do and come to feel that these things are the essence of life, then we’ve settled for less than God offers us.

In contrast to these lesser responses to spiritual need, Paul says, indirectly in Galatians 3:10-14 and specifically in Romans 1:16, that the gospel itself is the power of God for salvation. The gospel will give us something far beyond anything we ever dreamed of. It’s what will break the back of all that despair, drudgery, or pride, whether humanistic or religious, and set us free to experience the real life that God wants to offer. The gospel tells us there is something more out there to be had! There is something real, in relationship with God himself, by which we can be set free from what holds us down, as we believe. This is the real power of the gospel.

### **Life-changing faith**

Paul goes on to say in 1:17 that in this powerful gospel, to everyone who believes, the righteousness of God is revealed. There are basically two positions on what he means by the righteousness of God. One is that this is God’s own moral quality of righteousness. The other is that this is the righteousness of God that is given to us. Throughout the book of Romans Paul actually uses this phrase both ways. Depending on the context, he emphasizes one meaning or the other. In 3:21ff especially, he uses both meanings when he talks about God’s being shown to be a righteous and just God while also giving to us his righteousness.

I think, however, that in this theme verse Paul is using the first meaning. This display of the gospel reveals to us that God himself is a righteous God. We might question his ways and motives at times, but the gospel, the finished work of Jesus Christ, declares to the world that God himself is righteous and he has acted justly in his world, even as he has acted lovingly and wonderfully and graciously toward all who would believe.

Paul then says the righteousness of God is revealed “from faith to faith.” Now if you were to look up the phrase “from faith to faith” in a number of commentaries on the book of Romans, you’d find umpteen different opinions on what it means. The Greek text literally says, “Out of faith unto faith.” Sometimes the interpretation of this phrase is that it’s intensifying or emphasizing the idea of faith. Another interpretation points to the progression of our walk with God; it begins with faith in Christ and continues with faith in Christ.

But I’d like to suggest another interpretation. The Greek word for faith is also the word for faithfulness, and depending on its context, it can be used that way. For instance, in Romans 3:3, Paul clearly uses this word in reference to God’s faithfulness: “What then? If some did not believe, their unbelief will not nullify the faithfulness of God, will it?” So, in this case, I would suggest that “faith to faith” is a hinge phrase in Romans 1:17. The righteousness of God is revealed from his faithfulness to our faith. That is, based on God’s righteous faithfulness to fulfill all his promises and accomplish his works, we place our faith in him. The powerful gospel has revealed him this way, and as we encounter his wonderful, transforming grace, the gospel comes home to us personally and powerfully, changing our lives.

### **Real life**

That brings us finally to the little statement “The righteous man shall live by faith.” Interestingly, Paul’s quote from Habakkuk is not a direct translation of either the Hebrew text or the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament used in Paul’s time. Paul is basically giving us his own paraphrase.

People have struggled as to how to translate this statement. It is most often translated as we read it above. But

an alternate reading, which you may find in the margin notes of your Bible, is also compelling: “The just by faith shall live.” There are strong arguments in favor of each, but in light of the whole course of the argument of Romans, I believe the second reading fits better. Paul is saying to us, “The just by faith shall *live*.” What he is inviting us to recognize is that this powerful gospel he is talking about, and which he is going to explain, gives us something more than just some sort of new religion--it gives us real life. The pagans can try to find life in self-indulgence or accomplishment. The Jews can search for it in religious privilege as well as in the ethnicity, legalism, and social structure that they have built. You can search for life in whatever you want, but you will find life only in Christ. The one who is justified by faith in Christ is the one who lives.

What God is offering to us is life that is outside of the normal human experience. An interesting study for you to do would be to trace out the word “life” or “live” in the New Testament using a concordance. The New Testament concept of life is not mere existence. It is a special kind of life, a life that is empowered by God himself. What Paul wants us to see is that in the gospel of Christ, what has kept us in bondage is broken and we are set free.

At the end of each major section of the book of Romans, Paul’s heart breaks forth in a song of praise. At the end of Romans 8, after his long discourse on the wonders of Christ and of his salvation, he offers a beautiful song of praise to God that concludes with these words: “For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord” (8:38-39).

At the end of chapter 11, after going through his discussion about how the gospel is for the Jew and Gentile alike in God’s sovereign purposes in the unfolding plan of salvation, Paul writes: “Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and unfathomable His ways! For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who became His counselor? Or who has first given to Him that it might be paid back to him again? For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To Him be the glory forever. Amen” (11:33-36).

At the end of chapter 16, after giving us wonderful instruction about how the gospel is to impact our life and giving his final greetings to his friends, he says, “Now to Him who is able to establish you according to my gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery which has been kept secret for long ages past, but now is manifested, and by the Scriptures of the prophets, according to the commandment of the eternal God, has been made known to all the nations, leading to obedience of faith; to the only wise God, through Jesus Christ, be the glory forever. Amen” (16:25-29).

The power of the gospel is that we can be made new, we can be made alive. Remember those four categories of settling for less than what God offers? What the gospel does is turn those things on their heads.

In the place of despair, the gospel offers hope. I will not be forever caught in the bondage of frailty and sinfulness. I can be set free. There is hope for new, eternal life and real victory.

In the place of fatalism, the gospel gives joy, a heart of praise and wonder that God has done something amazing to set us free.

In the place of humanistic pride, the gospel brings peace. I do not have to get up tomorrow morning and prove myself again. I don’t have to accomplish something so that someone will pat me on the back so I can justify my existence. God reaches into the turmoil of that rat race and gives me peace. I am truly loved, eternally welcome in the presence of God.

And finally, in the place of religious pride, there is freedom. I don’t have to worry whether I’m doing enough for God to make the grade, whether I’ve put enough money in the plate, whether I need to go feed the poor this afternoon, or come to church on Wednesday as well as Sunday. We are freed from that kind of bondage. God’s acceptance of us derives from what Jesus Christ has done on our behalf. Through him we are set free to just be who God created us to be, fully alive in him.

In the last message we saw that faith means having the perspective of God's sovereignty. Added to that, we can now see that faith means trusting in the gospel of Jesus Christ, the power of which break the bonds of our sinfulness and sets us free to experience the freedom of life in him.

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