

October 31, 2021
Sermon by Bishop Graham Rights

Romans 1:16-17 (8-17), 3:19-26

How Do You Spell Relief?

On the day October 31 in the year 1517, an Augustinian monk marched confidently up to castle church in Wittenberg, Germany, and nailed to the door of the church a list of 95 points he was prepared to debate with the religious authorities of his day. It was a bold maneuver, and one that 10 years earlier you would scarcely have expected from this same monk, Martin Luther.

I. The Experience of Luther

A. Tormented

10 years earlier Martin Luther was a tormented soul. He knew that salvation was for the righteous, and he also knew that he was not righteous. He felt that there was a tremendous gap between himself and God. When, in 1507, he celebrated his first mass as a priest, he experienced great terror that he, a sinner, was presuming to address the living, eternal, and true God. He could hardly finish the mass.

Luther searched for a way to become righteous. He tried good works: He tortured his flesh, he fasted, he engaged in prayers and vigils beyond what was required. He, however, found that he could never do enough. He went to confession. He was concerned that he remember and confess everything. Sometimes his confessions lasted as much as 6 hours at a time. It didn't take long for him to get through the major sins. His confessor would grow weary & once exclaimed to Luther: "Look here, if you expect Christ to forgive you, come in with something to forgive - blasphemy, adultery, murder of your parents - instead of all these petty sins." Luther was tortured by the thought that he might not even recognize what some of his sins were. Roland Bainton, who wrote a popular biography of Luther, says that his "conscience was so disquieted as to start and tremble at the stirring of a wind-blown leaf. The horror of a nightmare gripped his soul – the dread of one waking in the dusk to look into the eyes of him who has come to take his life." To Luther, God was a terrible God and Jesus Christ a harsh judge. Luther exclaimed: "I hate, I despise this God who demands that I become righteous before he will forgive me."

B. Relief

A turn by Luther toward a change occurred when, in preparation for his work as an instructor and a preacher, he turned to the Bible. In 1513 he began a study in the Psalms. He read the 22nd Psalm, which begins: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" He remembered that these were words Christ had used upon the cross. Christ had known separation from God - and suffering also. He knew just the kind of experience Luther was going through. Why did he have this experience - certainly not for himself? It was for others! Christ was not just a judge, but also a sufferer in our behalf. And Christ had been sent by God - he was, in fact, the indwelling of God himself. God, therefore, was not just a God of wrath; he was a God of love. "There is another God," exclaimed Luther.

Two years later, in 1515, Luther was studying in Paul's letter to the Romans. He describes his experience: "I greatly longed to understand Paul's Epistle to the Romans and nothing stood in the way but that one expression, 'the justice of God,' because I took it to mean that justice whereby God is just and deals justly in punishing the unjust. My situation was that, although an impeccable monk, I stood before God as a sinner troubled in conscience and I had no confidence that my merit would assuage him. Therefore, I did not love a just and angry God, but rather hated and murmured against him. Yet I clung to the dear Paul and had a great yearning to know what he meant.

"Night and day I pondered until I saw the connection between the justice of God and the statement that 'the just shall live by his faith.' Then I grasped that the justice of God is that righteousness by which through grace and sheer mercy God justifies us through faith. Thereupon I felt myself to be reborn and to have gone through open doors into paradise.

"The whole of Scripture took on a new meaning, and whereas before the 'justice of God' had filled me with hate, now it became to me inexpressibly sweet in greater love. This passage of Paul became to me a gate to heaven.... "If you have a true faith that Christ is your Savior, then at once you have a gracious God, for faith leads you in and opens up God's heart and will, that you should see pure grace and overflowing love. This it is to behold God in faith that you should look upon his fatherly, friendly heart, in which there is no anger nor ungraciousness. He who sees God as angry does not see him rightly but looks only on a curtain, as if a dark cloud had been drawn across his face." [Roland H. Bainton, *Here I Stand*, 49-50]

Now taking refuge in God, rather than trembling before him, Luther found relief. Relief, for Luther, was spelled "F-A-I-T-H" – faith, and by "faith," Luther means, "the grateful whole-hearted response of one's entire being to the love of God in Christ: ... full confidence in God." [K. S. Latourette, *History of Christianity*, p. 706] It helps me to remember that in New Testament Greek, the same word is used for "faith" and "trust." Having faith in someone is trusting that person.

II. Luther's Experience and Ours

The early Luther was not only a contrast with the later Luther, but also with many people of today.

A. Many People of today - no sense of need of forgiveness

Luther's agony over his sinfulness and need for forgiveness seems quite foreign to many of the modern era. "Why do I need salvation," people ask today; "salvation from what?" James Stewart, a famous Scottish teacher and preacher, Chaplain in Scotland to the Queen and ranked by *Preaching Magazine* as the best preacher of the twentieth century [Wikipedia], once described the modern response to the message of forgiveness: "There is some mistake! Christ has come to the wrong address. Forgiveness? For me? What do I need forgiveness for? No doubt there are plenty of others who have blundered and made a sad mess of things - that is why the world is in such a sorry plight - but I? what have I done, that I should be forgiven? That is not troubling me!"

Those who so react are just deceiving themselves. Reinhold Niebuhr was an outstanding theologian of a generation ago, but his insights into the human condition remain on target. Niebuhr once wrote: "Contemporary history is filled with manifestations of our hysterias and

furies; with evidences of our demonic capacity and inclination to break the harmonies of nature and defy the prudent canons of rational restraint. Yet no cumulation of contradictory evidence seems to disturb our good opinion of ourselves. We consider ourselves the victims of corrupting institutions which we are about to destroy or reconstruct, or of the confusions of ignorance which an adequate education is about to overcome. Yet we continue to regard ourselves as essentially harmless and virtuous." What a contrast with Luther! Far from being tormented, as Luther was, the people of our age are often complacent. As Luther himself once put it: "The final sin of human beings is their unwillingness to concede that they are sinners."

B. The need to face our sin

Yet this complacency is in reality only superficial, for when we are pushed below the surface into the depths of our world and our personal lives, we come face to face with the reality of our failings, of our sin, and of our need for God's grace and forgiveness.

1. World

When we look at our world, when we view the vast destructiveness waged by human beings on one another in wars and conflicts; when we view the injustices perpetrated by one people on another; when we view the millions of refugees driven from their homes, the legacy of racism in our nation and world, the staggering statistics of world hunger, the destruction we inflict upon our environment, and our own failures to overcome such global problems, we come face-to-face with our shortcomings before God - with our sin and our need for forgiveness.

2. Personal lives

And when we come face-to-face with the state of our own personal lives, we find how much we have lived under an illusion when we thought we had no need of God's mercy and forgiveness. Deep within us there is the knowledge, the uneasy feeling, that we have indeed failed to live up to the calling of God to us. The figure of Jesus Christ on the cross shatters our defenses. Confronting him we see the great chasm between ourselves and him. Then our conceptions of our goodness fade.

In his book entitled *Confessions*, St. Augustine describes his experience of confronting Christ: "You took me from behind my own back," he says, "where I had put myself all the time that I preferred not to see myself. And you set me there before my face that I might see how vile I was.... I saw myself and was horrified." [*Confessions*, 3:1; quoted by Stewart, *op. cit.*, 57] Jesus Christ shatters our complacency, just as he shattered the complacency of Peter when he looked upon him after Peter's denial. We do well to have times of examining our lives, recognizing the thanksgivings and shortcomings, meeting with our Lord at the close of the day, for example, and using the season of Lent as a time to review our lives.

As Christ breaks through to us and illuminates our shortcomings, and as we become ready to deal these, the way is opened for salvation - for well-being with God. For then we have no place to turn but to God, to cast ourselves in faith upon his grace and mercy. And as our faith opens our heart and will to God, we, as Luther, come to know the relief of his pure grace and overflowing love. The key is in the cross of Christ: There Luther could see his shortcomings, but also the love of God. There at its greatest do we see our shortcomings, which put Christ there and for

which he died. There in its fullness do we see the love of God which offers us his gracious, free gift of salvation, of well-being with him, and opens the doors to paradise for us.

The Moravian leader, Count Nicholas Ludwig von Zinzendorf, was well-versed in the thought of Luther. Once he wrote a hymn which I think provides a good commentary on Luther's experience and ours. It goes thus:

Ere we know our lost condition,
Ere we feel our inbred woe,
And exclaim with deep contrition,
To be saved, what must I do?
Naught can yield true consolation,
Vain is all our righteousness:
Faith alone in Christ's oblation
Gives the conscience rest and peace.

Living faith, with clearest vision,
Sees the Lamb upon the throne,
And in him a full provision,
Righteousness and peace, our own:
Then our days are marked with blessing,
Then our hearts with rapture glow;
Streams of comfort, rich, unceasing,
From the wounds of Jesus flow.

[Hymn 515, 1923 Hymnal]

Amen, may it be so.