

“The power of God for salvation” (Part One)

Reflection 19 in the series “Salvation: The Quest”

In lives that often are challenging, when faced with the inevitable setbacks and the sometimes ongoing indignities we suffer, one of the great texts in Scripture is Romans 1:16-17, Paul writing:

“I am not ashamed of the gospel,
because it is the power of God
for the salvation of everyone who believes:
first for the Jew, then for the Gentile.
For in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed,
a righteousness that is by faith from first to last,
just as it is written:
‘The righteous will live by faith.’”

I remember as a kid being asked to memorize this text. My parents gave me maybe thirty cards with Scripture texts on them to memorize. And this was one of them. And rightly so. This is still a text to be committed to memory at least till you get to that age when nothing commits to memory.

Yet exactly what this text means is not entirely clear. When I read the commentaries on it, as often happens I am left with more questions than answers until I close the commentaries and begin to think again from the heart and then the text at least in its broad strokes becomes clear again.

First, the background to this text: The apostle Paul is writing to the church in Rome probably in the early spring of AD 57 during a three-month stay in Corinth. It’s at the end of his third mission tour. Paul had wanted to go to Rome for a long time. It was the capital of the empire. It was from there that Caesar reigned over most of the known world. But now Paul finds himself headed in the opposite direction – back east to Jerusalem. And so he writes to Rome, to the church in Rome, an account of his teachings especially to tell them what most matters to him.

He begins in 1:1 by identifying himself as a servant, literally, a slave, of Christ Jesus, dependent on Jesus, obligated to Jesus, completely at his service, wholly devoted to his cause. He is called to be an apostle or messenger. He is set apart – from the ordinary – for the gospel, the good news, of God. And then he briefly but powerfully tells this gospel: that it had been promised by the prophets, that this was always the intent of God, that the Son of God, human, descended from David, was declared with power to be the very revelation of God by his resurrection from the dead – Jesus Christ our Lord! Through him we receive grace and our mission – to call people from the nations to belong to Jesus Christ, to realize that they are loved by God, to be saints. Paul then touches on his own personal plans and expresses his eagerness to one day preach the gospel in Rome.

And so we come to the great sixteenth and seventeenth verses of Romans Chapter One. “I am not ashamed of the gospel,” Paul begins. Though I stand in the great city of the Caesar, though I be surrounded by the glory of Rome, by all the imperial splendor of the empire, I will not shrink or falter or hold back. I am not ashamed of the gospel. Because the gospel is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes, not some complicated system of doctrine, not some complicated code of behavior, but the gospel, the good news, news so good that when it is really heard, it fills us with joy, it releases us from all fear and worry, it sets our spirits soaring, it proverbially sends us dancing into the streets.

The power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes, first for the Jew, then for the Gentile, that is, for everyone regardless of culture or ethnicity, is in this story of God loving us so much that God comes and lives with us, goes out into the wilderness to find us, runs to us when we are still a long ways off, then dies for us and (get this!) conquers death by resurrection, showing us that death is not the last word. We will live again.

The power is in this story. That’s it. To those worn down by life, to those crushed by disappointment, to those shamed by sin and guilt, to those struggling with illness, even perhaps walking through the valley of the shadow of death, to those confused by all the clashing ideas of this world, the power for salvation is in this story. And for our immediate purposes, that’s the main point. The power for salvation is in the story. That’s what Paul had found out as he traveled the roads of the Roman empire from city to city. That’s what we will find out as we tell the story. The power for salvation is in the story.

But the text goes on, and so will we. Here is the power – that when the good news is really heard, we realize that righteousness from God, being right with God, being accepted, being justified by God, is revealed. It becomes clear to us if the story is told that we are right with God and accepted by God.

Now here’s how it works. It’s a righteousness that is “from faith to faith,” in the literal Greek – in the NIV translation “by faith from first to last.” Now it’s not just a matter of reciting some creed or some statement of fact. It’s not just mental assent. It’s a simple statement that in life trust works, and only trust works. It’s a matter of deep down inside trusting God. It’s trusting that whether or not it’s clear to us things are working out as they should. So whenever we need rescue, whenever we need deliverance, whenever we need healing, whenever we need to be saved and from whatever we need to be saved up to and including from the wrath of God which Paul does later get into, it does come down to trusting God no matter what, thinking through the circumstances we face until we again see the hand of God reaching out to us.

– Dale Pauls

Part Two (of two) next week