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# Martin Luther's Account of His Own Conversion



by Martin Luther (1483-1546)

The following selection is taken from the *Preface to the Complete Edition of Luther's Latin Writings*. It was written by Luther in Wittenberg, 1545. This English edition is available in Luther's Works Volume 34, *Career of the Reformer IV* (St. Louis, Concordia Publishing House, 1960), p. 336-337. In the first few lines of this selection, Luther writes, "during that year;" the immediate context indicates he is referring to the year of Tetzel's death (July, 1519). This puts the date for Luther's conversion, in his own view, two years after the posting of the ninety-five theses.

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Meanwhile, I had already during that year returned to interpret the Psalter anew. I had confidence in the fact that I was more skilful, after I had lectured in the university on St. Paul's epistles to the Romans, to the Galatians, and the one to the Hebrews. 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, "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 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." Thus that place in Paul was for me truly the gate to paradise. Later I read Augustine's *The Spirit and the Letter*, where contrary to hope I found that he, too, interpreted God's righteousness in a similar way, as the righteousness with which God clothes us when he justifies us (*Augustine passage included below*). Although this was heretofore said imperfectly and he did not explain all things concerning imputation clearly, it nevertheless was pleasing that God's righteousness with which we are justified was taught.

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### **Selections from Augustine's *The Spirit and the Letter* to which Luther Refers:**

*Chapter 15 [IX.] - The Righteousness of God Manifested by the Law and the Prophets.*

Here, perhaps, it may be said by that presumption of man, which is ignorant of the righteousness of God, and wishes to establish one of its own, that the apostle quite properly said, "For by the law shall no man be justified,"<sup>46</sup> inasmuch as the law merely shows what one ought to do, and what one ought to guard against, in order that what the law thus points out may be accomplished by the will, and so man be justified, not indeed by the power of the law, but by his free determination. But I ask your attention, O man, to what follows. "But now the righteousness of God," says he, "without the law is manifested, being witnessed by the law and the prophets."<sup>47</sup> Does this then sound a light

thing in deaf ears? He says, "The righteousness of God is manifested." Now this righteousness they are ignorant of, who wish to establish one of their own; they will not submit themselves to it.<sup>48</sup> His words are, "*The righteousness of God* is manifested:" he does not say, the righteousness of man, or the righteousness of his own will, but the "*righteousness of God*," - not that whereby He is Himself righteous, but that with which He endows man when He justifies the ungodly. This is witnessed by the law and the prophets; in other words, the law and the prophets each afford it testimony. The law, indeed, by issuing its commands and threats, and by justifying no man, sufficiently shows that it is by God's gift, through the help of the Spirit, that a man is justified; and the prophets, because it was what they predicted that Christ at His coming accomplished. Accordingly he advances a step further, and adds, "But righteousness of God by faith of Jesus Christ,"<sup>49</sup> that is by the faith wherewith one believes in Christ for just as there is not meant the faith with which Christ Himself believes, so also there is not meant the righteousness whereby God is Himself righteous. Both no doubt are ours, but yet they are called God's, and Christ's, because it is by their bounty that these gifts are bestowed upon us. The righteousness of God then is without the law, but not manifested without the law; for if it were manifested without the law, how could it be witnessed by the law? That righteousness of God, however, is without the law, which God by the Spirit of grace bestows on the believer without the help of the law, - that is, when not helped by the law. When, indeed, He by the law discovers to a man his weakness, it is in order that by faith he may flee for refuge to His mercy, and be healed. And thus concerning His wisdom we are told, that "she carries law and mercy upon her tongue,"<sup>50</sup> - the "*law*," whereby she may convict the proud, the "*mercy*," wherewith she may justify the humbled. "The righteousness of God," then, "by faith of Jesus Christ, is unto all that believe; for there is no difference, for all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God"<sup>51</sup> - not of their own glory. For what have they, which they have not received? Now if they received it, why do they glory as if they had not received it?<sup>52</sup> Well, then, they come short of the glory of God; now observe what follows: "Being justified freely by His grace."<sup>53</sup> It is not, therefore, by the law, nor is it by their own will, that they are justified; but they are justified *freely by His grace*, - not that it is wrought without our will; but our will is by the law shown to be weak, that grace may heal its infirmity; and that our healed will may fulfil the law, not by compact under the law, nor yet in the absence of law.

#### *Chapter 16 X.] - How the Law Was Not Made for a Righteous Man.*

Because "for a righteous man the law was not made;"<sup>54</sup> and yet "the law is good, if a man use it lawfully."<sup>55</sup> Now by connecting together these two seemingly contrary statements, the apostle warns and urges his reader to sift the question and solve it too. For how can it be that "the law is good, if a man use it lawfully," if what follows is also true: "Knowing this, that the law is not made for a righteous man?"<sup>56</sup> For who but a righteous man lawfully uses the law? Yet it is not for him that it is made, but for the unrighteous. Must then the unrighteous man, in order that he may be justified, - that is, become a righteous man, - lawfully use the law, to lead him, as by the schoolmaster's hand,<sup>57</sup> to that grace by which alone he can fulfil what the law commands? Now it is freely that he is justified thereby, - that is, on account of no antecedent merits of his own works; "otherwise grace is no more grace,"<sup>58</sup> since it is bestowed on us, not because we have

done good works, but that we may be able to do them, - in other words, not because we have fulfilled the law, but in order that we may be able to fulfil the law. Now He said, "I am not come to destroy the law, but to fulfil it,"<sup>59</sup> of whom it was said, "We have seen His glory, the glory as of the only-begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth."<sup>60</sup> This is the glory which is meant in the words, "All have sinned, and come short of the glory of God;"<sup>61</sup> and this the grace of which he speaks in the next verse, "Being justified freely by His grace."<sup>62</sup> The unrighteous man therefore lawfully uses the law, that he may become righteous; but when he has become so, he must no longer use it as a chariot, for he has arrived at his journey's end, - or rather (that I may employ the apostle's own simile, which has been already mentioned) as a schoolmaster, seeing that he is now fully learned. How then is the law not made for a righteous man, if it is necessary for the righteous man too, not that he may be brought as an unrighteous man to the grace that justifies, but that he may use it lawfully, now that he is righteous? Does not the case perhaps stand thus, - nay, not *perhaps*, but rather *certainly*, - that the man who is become righteous thus lawfully uses the law, when he applies it to alarm the unrighteous, so that whenever the disease of some unusual desire begins in them, too, to be augmented by the incentive of the law's prohibition and an increased amount of transgression, they may in faith flee for refuge to the grace that justifies, and becoming delighted with the sweet pleasures of holiness, may escape the penalty of the law's menacing letter through the spirit's soothing gift? In this way the two statements will not be contrary, nor will they be repugnant to each other: even the righteous man may lawfully use a good law, and yet the law be not made for the righteous man; for it is not by the law that he becomes righteous, but by the law of faith, which led him to believe that no other resource was possible to his weakness for fulfilling the precepts which "the law of works"<sup>63</sup> commanded, except to be assisted by the grace of God.

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