

The Ah-Ha moment Romans 1:17 12/29/02

As we come to the end of another year of ministry I want to take just a few minutes to take you back about 500 years to the university of Wittenberg. In 1512 Martin Luther was awarded the Doctor of Theology degree and announced that from that day forward he would preach the Bible, and secondly, he would spend the rest of his life helping people understand the Bible. And yet within the heart of this 29-year-old professor of theology a fire was raging. The more he taught and preached the Scriptures the further and further away he felt from God. He had done everything he had been taught and promised would make him right with God and yet there was a growing awareness of sin that threatened self-destruction. But it was the text on your bulletin this morning that was used by God. Page 796 ***Romans 1:17 For therein is the righteousness of God revealed from faith to faith: as it is written, "the just shall live by faith."*** Living 500 years after the life of Martin Luther makes it difficult to see why this specific verse changed his life. What hung Luther up, and what has hung up so many seekers of God's truth was that statement "the righteousness of God". To Luther the revelation of God's righteousness only meant condemnation. God's righteousness declared the holiness of God in ways that only heightened his sense of sin and failure. The revealed righteousness of God at work in the coming of Jesus Christ filled him with terror. But on that great day, the Holy Spirit illuminated his heart and mind to understand what God was revealing through Paul. What the passage means is that in and through the gospel God's righteousness is being brought to bear on man's sin problem. The righteousness of God is acting redemptively for sinful ruined humanity. It is God righteousness because He is the author. It is righteousness that must meet God's approval and all the demands of justice. This is the glory of the Gospel, God's power at work for our salvation. And then it goes on to also say this. Faith always receives salvation. No person who truly believes can fear that his faith will not receive the promise of forgiveness and salvation. This was Luther's great moment of discovery. He said later, "It

seemed to me as if I had been born again and as if I had entered paradise through newly opened doors. All at once the Bible began to speak in a different way to me... The very phrase 'the righteousness of God,' which I had hated before was the one that now I loved the best of all. That is how that passage of Paul's became for me the gateway to paradise."

Luther's understanding of salvation by grace and by grace alone began a revolution and a reformation of the Christian faith that recaptured the teachings of Jesus and the early church. When once asked how he now saw himself he replied. "Always a sinner, always sorry for his sins, always right with God." The righteousness of God that once filled his heart with terror was now seen as a righteousness given as a gift of grace given through the finished work of Jesus Christ on the cross. Each month we gather around this table. Each month we seek to remember that the salvation we freely receive came at a terrible cost. Our salvation cost Christ his life. I mentioned Martin Luther today because he, like so many others chose faithfulness to God's Word at great personal cost. Chose to stand against the pressure of society and the church to faithfully proclaim the truth of God's Word.

I do not know what 2003 holds for us as a church. But as we complete this year I want you to know that as a church we are committed to keeping God's Word at the center of all of our decision-making and direction setting. The past several weeks have been filled with tremendous inner turmoil. As the turmoil has increased I have become less and less sure what it could possibly mean. I don't know if it is personal, or my family, or this church. It has led to many short nights, difficulty concentrating, and a huge struggle against fear and panic. Yesterday, in the midst of our uncommonly warm weather I was doing some painting outside around the front windows when I had this overwhelming sense of peace flood over me. There was no clarity as to what was to come in the next season of ministry. No direction of any sort. But a huge sense that everything was going to be OK.

Many, many years ago after spending a large block of time with Henrietta Mears, Dr. Billy Graham, went out onto the property of Forest Lawn retreat center, got down on his knees and promised the Lord that he would give the rest of his life to proclaiming the simple truths of the Bible. That is our desire as a church for 2003. That with clarity, and confidence, we will announce that there is only one gospel. It is the Gospel of Jesus Christ. It is the Gospel of grace given by faith as a gift of God not of works. A Gospel that calls for no boasting on our part because it begins and ends with our great God. ***“I am not ashamed of the Gospel, because it is the power of God for everyone who believes; first for the Jew and then for the Gentile.”***