

Justified by Faith Alone

Here I Stand: Foundations of the Faith

Romans 3:21-4:5

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From Trouble to Peace

Martin Luther died a man at peace. He preached his last sermon in 1546 just weeks before his death. He preached on Psalm 68:19 which says, “Blessed be the God who daily bears us up. God is our salvation.” And on John 3:16, which tells us God’s salvation comes through Christ. Luther understood the blessing and peace of God. But Luther was not always a man at peace. And he didn’t always see God as the blessed God who saves us. In fact, at one point Luther hated God.¹ His early years brought him more struggle than rest.

What was it that led to Luther’s troubled soul? And what was it that brought him peace? These are the questions I want to answer this morning, as we come to our third Sunday in our study of the core teachings of the Reformation. And I think you will see that the comfort that Luther came to experience is available to us as well.

To divide our time this morning, I want to start by considering Luther’s story of trouble. Then I want to look at one of the key Scriptures that gave him comfort. Romans 3-4 teaches us about justification by faith alone. Luther called it “the summary of all Christian doctrine” and “the article by which the church stands or falls.”² At the end, I’ll show how justification gives us hope.

STORY

Luther’s story of trouble can be divided into two main parts. The trouble of his conscience (or the terror of his soul) and the trouble with God (or the terror of God).

Troubled Conscience

The terror in his soul started early in his life. Luther was born on November 10, 1483, in Eisleben Germany. His father Hans wanted a better life for his family. So he sold the family farm and became a miner. He did well as a miner and gained esteem for his family. As the oldest son, it was Martin’s job to continue to establish his family.

He had a bigger brain than most people.³ So he was sent to Erfurt to study law. He did very well in school. But even though he was doing well as a student, he experienced intense struggles in his soul. He wanted to earn favor with God.

In July 1505, as he was returning to the University after a trip home, he was caught in a violent thunderstorm. A lightning bolt struck so near to Luther that it knocked him to the ground. The prospect of judgment was too terrible to consider. So as he hit the ground and the air was forced from his body, he made a vow. He cried out, “St. Anne, help me and I shall become a monk.”⁴ He

¹ Nichols, Stephen J. “A Gracious God and a Neurotic Monk,” in *The Legacy of Luther*. Eds Sproul, R.C. and Stephen J. Nichols, Orlando, Fla: Reformation Trust, 2016, pp. 13-14.

² George, Timothy. *Theology of the Reformers*, Nashville, Tenn: B & H Academic, 2013, p. 63.

³ Reeves, Michael. *The Unquenchable Flame: Discovering the Heart of the Reformation*. Nashville, Tenn: B&H Academic, 2009, p. 37.

⁴ Reeves

presumed this storm to be God's judgment on his soul. And the only mediator he knew at that time was St. Anne, the patron saint of miners.⁵ He thought that becoming a monk would deal with his sins and make him right in the eyes of God.

Luther was a man of his word. And so he fulfilled his vow to become a monk, at the derision of his father, Hans. He joined the Augustinian order in Erfurt. And he was a good monk. He later said, "If ever a monk could get to heaven through monkery, I was that monk." But becoming a monk didn't bring Luther peace. In fact, his struggles intensified. He tried to gain peace through torturing himself with prayers and fasting, and depriving his body of all comfort. But the more he did, the more troubled he became.⁶

He also tried to deal with his sin and guilt through confession. Sometimes he would confess up to six hours a day. Luther believed that the only way his sins could be forgiven is through true heartfelt confession of all of his sins. He confessed so much because he was afraid that he might have forgotten something. At one point his confessor said to him,

*Look here, brother Martin. If you're going to confess so much, why don't you go do something worth confessing? Kill your mother or father! Commit adultery! Quit coming in here with such slummary and fake sins!*⁷

Luther confessed to the head of his order, Johann von Staupitz. And Staupitz was sympathetic. He tried to help Luther by pointing him to Christ. He reminded him that the blood of Christ was shed for the remission of sins.⁸ And later in Luther's life, he expressed his heartfelt gratitude for Staupitz. He said, "If I didn't praise Staupitz, I should be a damnable, ungrateful, papistical ass...for he bore me in Christ. If Staupitz hadn't helped me out, I should have been swallowed up and left in hell."⁹

But at this time in his life, Staupitz' advice wasn't working. Luther didn't see Christ as a loving redeemer. Luther saw Christ as an avenger of blood and an awful Judge.¹⁰

What's your view of God today? Is it of a gracious loving father who sent his only Son for your sins? Or is it of a hateful God who wants to strike you with lightning?

When Staupitz saw that his counsel and consolation were not working, he devised another plan. He told Luther that he was sending him to Wittenberg to get his doctorate and become a preacher and a professor of theology and Bible. Staupitz reasoned that as Luther looked to the Bible itself he would find the comfort he needed. Luther protested that the course of study would kill him. But Staupitz persisted and said "Quite all right, God has plenty of work for clever men to do in heaven."¹¹

Trouble with God

Luther set to his work as a professor with the same vigor with which he had devoted himself to monkery. But his study of the Bible, at first, didn't give him peace either. His trouble just took on

⁵ Nichols

⁶ Nichols; Reeves

⁷ George, p. 65; cf. Bainton, Roland H., *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther*. New York: Meridian, 1995, p. 41.

⁸ Bainton, p. 44-45

⁹ George, p. 64

¹⁰ See Bainton, p. 45

¹¹ Bainton, p. 45

another terror. He became terrified by the righteousness of God. His hatred shifted—from a hatred of self to a hatred of God.¹²

This happened as he studied the book of Romans and came across Romans 1:17, which speaks of the righteousness of God. Or as Luther understood it, the justice of God. Luther trembled under the thought that God would punish the unjust. You see, even though he was a godly man, he had come to see, through his study of the Bible, that he was a sinner at the core. Until then, he thought his individual sins were the problem. But he was coming to see that it was his sin nature that was the problem.

He saw this in passages like Romans 3:10-16. “None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God. All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one...the way of peace they have not known.” All are sinners. Even pious monks. And so, Luther knew that God would judge him as a sinner. He said it this way:

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 didn't love a just and angry God, but rather hated and murmured against him.¹³

But he didn't give up on Paul's teaching in Romans. He said, “I clung to the dear Paul and had a great yearning to know what he meant. Night and day I pondered...”¹⁴

And as he poured over Romans night and day, the clouds began to break. The literal clouds of the thunderstorm had served as a metaphor for his whole life up until this point. He lived his life under the cloud of guilt and the cloud of God's judgment. But then the clouds broke and he saw the light of the gospel. This is how he describes the shift:

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.¹⁵

SCRIPTURE

What was it specifically that Luther learned about justification that gave him comfort? I want to point out two things he learned. But before I do, I want to read the critical passage on justification by faith alone.

Romans 3:21-4:5¹⁶

²¹But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it-- ²²the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction: ²³for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, ²⁴and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, ²⁵whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to

¹² George, p. 66

¹³ Bainton, p. 49

¹⁴ Bainton, p. 49

¹⁵ Bainton, p. 49-50

¹⁶ Scripture quotations are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version® unless otherwise noted.

show God's righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins. ²⁶It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.

²⁷Then what becomes of our boasting? It is excluded. By what kind of law? By a law of works? No, but by the law of faith. ²⁸For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law. ²⁹Or is God the God of Jews only? Is he not the God of Gentiles also? Yes, of Gentiles also, ³⁰since God is one—who will justify the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through faith. ³¹Do we then overthrow the law by this faith? By no means! On the contrary, we uphold the law.

^{4:1}What then shall we say was gained by Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh? ²For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. ³For what does the Scripture say? "Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness." ⁴Now to the one who works, his wages are not counted as a gift but as his due. ⁵And to the one who does not work but believes in him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness.

This is the Word of the Lord.

Passages like this, led Luther to two conclusions about justification.¹⁷ Each of these conclusions went against the teaching of the Roman Catholic Church in Luther's day and in our day as well. And so as I explain the theology that Luther believed, I'll also try to explain the theology he was reacting against.

Imputation, Not Infusion

First, justification is by imputation, not infusion. The Roman Catholic Church says that in order to be justified, we must first be sanctified to the point that we exhibit a righteousness that's acceptable to God. And the way we're sanctified is through the sacraments.

Catholics believe that at baptism we're put in a state of grace, but when we sin that grace is removed. And it must be restored through the other sacraments.¹⁸ As a person participates in the sacraments of the Eucharist and penance, for example, grace is infused into them and they are made increasingly righteous. The sacraments are like an injection of grace that we need over and over again.

And as the medicine of the sacraments does its work in a Christian, then they will do works of charity. And those works are necessary for a person to be justified before God at death.¹⁹ A person is *made* righteous through the sacraments.

The Reformation recovered the notion that we're *declared* righteous, not *made* righteous. (You might want to write that down.) In justification, God declares us "not guilty." The Reformation recovered a *legal* understanding of justification, over a *medicinal* view of justification. It's not our gradual righteousness that eventually justifies us. It's not a righteousness that is *in* us that justifies. It's a righteousness that is *outside* of us. Luther distinguished between an internal or proper righteousness and an external or alien righteousness.²⁰

¹⁷ Each of these comes from George. He lists a third: *simul iustus et peccator*. I deal with this third conclusion in the first.

¹⁸ Sproul, R.C. "Justification," in *Are We Together?: A Protestant Analyzes Roman Catholicism*. Orlando, Fla: Reformation Trust, 2012.

¹⁹ Waters, Guy Prentiss. "By Faith Alone," in *The Legacy of Luther*.

²⁰ See, Luther, Martin. "Two Kinds of Righteousness," in *Luther's Works, Volume 31*. Ed Grimm, Harold J. Philadelphia, Penn: Fortress Press, 1957.

This comes out clearly in Luther's writing in 1520 on *The Freedom of the Christian*.²¹ He says that our outward appearance often contradicts our inward reality. We can *appear* righteous on the outside and *be* unrighteous on the inside. Or we can *appear* unrighteous on the outside but *be* righteous on the inside. There's nothing in us that can affect our standing before God. What makes the difference is not the infusion of grace through the sacraments. It's the imputation of Christ's righteousness through faith.²²

When we place our faith in Christ, his righteousness is imparted to believers. And our unrighteousness or sin is imparted to Christ. It's what Luther called the great exchange. A believer's sins are passed to Christ and Christ's righteousness is passed to the believer. As Romans 3:21-22 says, "But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law...the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe." And Romans 4:4-5 says, "Now to the one who works, his wages are not counted as a gift but as his due. And to the one who does not work but believes in him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness."

All of this shows that the righteousness of God is *manifested* in Christ. And it's *imputed* to us through faith. What is Christ's, is now ours through faith. Romans 3:24-25 says, that sinners "are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith."

All of this shows that our sin was imputed to Christ on the cross where he paid for our sin. Or as 2 Corinthians 5:21 puts it, "For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God" (see also Rom. 5:12-21).

For the Reformers, there's a difference between internal righteousness and external righteousness. We're not judged based on our internal state. We're not judged based on our sin. If we place our faith in Christ, we're judged based off of his righteousness, and his sacrifice, which is *outside* of us. God looks on him and pardons us.

I like the way Carl Trueman puts it:

*As Christ died on a cross not because he was intrinsically sinful but rather because our sins were imputed to him, so the believer is declared righteous not because he is intrinsically righteous but rather Christ's righteousness is imputed to him.*²³

It's not our righteousness that makes us right before God. And there's nothing we can do either good or bad that affects our standing before God. If we believe in Christ, it's Christ's righteousness that makes us right before God. That's really good news. The doctrine of justification by faith is at the core of a right understanding of the gospel!

The fact remains that until Christ returns, and we're glorified, we'll remain sinners. But if we place our faith in Christ, we're at the same time justified. That means we're declared righteous and have a firm standing before God.

Luther called this *simul iustus et peccator*,²⁴ "at the same time righteous and sinners."

²¹ Luther, Martin. "The Freedom of the Christian," in *Luther's Works, Volume 31*.

²² Trueman, Carl R. "Justification," in *Luther on the Christian Life: Cross and Freedom*. Wheaton, Ill: Crossway, 2015.

²³ Trueman

²⁴ George, p. 72

For those of you struggling in sin, take comfort in this truth. Cling to Christ and his righteousness, not to your own righteousness or lack thereof. If you trust in Christ, you have been acquitted of your sins and are always righteous.

Faith Alone, Not Works

The second conclusion that Luther came to is similar to the first, but distinct. Justification is by faith alone, not by works.

For Rome, one of the critical sacraments that restores grace to a sinner is the sacrament of penance. It's critical to the Catholic's view of forgiveness. And as you'll see, it is a system that is diametrically opposed to justification by faith.

Penance involved three steps.

1. Confession: A person must confess their sins to a priest.
2. Contrition: Their confession must be genuine; it must be full of contrition.

Many Protestants get really fired up about all of this. They say, "I don't have to confess my sins to anyone. I can just confess to God. But the issue between Protestants and Catholics is not confession. Ever since the Reformation, Protestants have been confessing their sins and even given the assurance of pardon through the gospel.

The big issue between the Protestants and Catholics comes with the third step in penance.

3. Satisfaction: The Roman Catholic Church says that in order for the sacrament to be complete, the penitent must do works of satisfaction which satisfy God's demand for justice. For example, the priest may tell a penitent to say X amount of Hail Marys or Our Fathers. Or if the sin is bad enough, they may have them make a pilgrimage or give alms.²⁵

These acts of satisfaction give merit, according to Rome. Luther's first major problem with the Church in the early sixteenth century had to do with a particular form of satisfaction—the sale of indulgences.

What is an indulgence? According to R.C. Sproul, an indulgence is a transfer of merit. If you die lacking enough merit to be justified, you have to go to purgatory where you'll be purged from your sins and made righteous. But Rome says that they have the authority to give merit to those who lack it and shorten their time in purgatory.

Where does this merit come from? It comes from people who do more than God requires during their life (e.g. martyr's or saints). These holy people leave a credit of merits at their death that form a treasury of merits. Catholics also believe that the church has the authority to tap into the treasury of merits to give an indulgence to a person in need of merit.²⁶

Luther rejected the system of indulgences. Originally, he rejected it because it short-circuited the need for true repentance. It let people buy their repentance. That's why in the first thesis of the 95 Theses he said, "When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, 'Repent,' he willed the entire life of

²⁵ Sproul, "Sacraments," in *Are We Together?*

²⁶ Sproul, "Sacraments"

believers to be one of repentance.”²⁷ But as Luther’s theology developed he saw a bigger issue; an issue that cut at the heart of the entire sacrament of penance.

He saw that there is *nothing* we can do to merit God’s favor. Our works will do nothing to give us a right standing before God. We’re not justified by any work; not even the work of satisfaction in penance. We’re justified only by faith in what God has done for us in Christ.

For Rome, the sacraments were the instrument whereby we *become* increasingly righteous. For the Reformers, faith is the instrument whereby we are *declared* righteous.²⁸ Rome doesn’t deny that faith is needed for justification. Rome denies that faith *alone* is needed. They say we need faith *and* works, grace *and* merits.²⁹

The Reformation recovers the notion that we’re declared righteous apart from any work that we do. It’s only by faith that we’re justified. Romans 3:20 says, “For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin.” Romans 3:22 says, “The righteousness of God [is] through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe.” Romans 3:26 says that God passed over our sins, “to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.” And Romans 3:30 says that both the Jew and the Gentile are justified by faith.

So we’re justified by faith alone. And even faith is not considered a work. At its core, faith is grounded in relationship, not religion. Faith is all about trusting God. It’s trusting in what God has done for us in Christ, not trusting in anything that we do. For medieval Catholics, faith was seen as a virtue, along with hope and love. Luther came to see that faith is not a virtue. Faith has everything to do with relationship with God.³⁰ It’s not a work to earn relationship with God.

Luther said, “If faith is not without all, even the smallest works, it does not justify; indeed it is not even faith.” For even faith, as Ephesians 2:8 says, is a gift of God. Faith is not a work. If it were, then we would be able to boast.³¹

Properly speaking faith does not justify. Faith is simply the receptive organ of justification. Luther said, “the ears alone are the organs of a Christian man, for he is justified and declared to be a Christian, not because of works of any other member (of his body), but because of faith.”³² Luther said that the ears are the organs of the Christian, because faith comes by hearing the Word.

Conclusion

So this is the doctrine of justification as Luther saw it, and as we see it as evangelicals today. Justification comes to us through imputation, not the infusion of grace. We’re declared righteous, not made righteous. And this justification is by faith alone, not works. The Reformation covered this core theological truth, a truth that stands at the center of a right understanding of the gospel.

²⁷ Luther, Martin. *Luther’s Works, Volume 31*. Ed Grimm, Harold J. Philadelphia, Penn: Fortress Press, 1957, p. 25.

²⁸ Trueman; Sproul, “Justification.”

²⁹ Sproul, “Justification”

³⁰ George, p. 71

³¹ George, p. 71

³² George, p. 55

But why does it matter for us today? In his commentary to the Galatians, Luther said the doctrine of justification can never be taught enough. He said that if it's lost, all of life and salvation is lost. If it flourishes, all of life flourishes.³³

The reason this was so important for Luther was because he believed that there's no comfort of conscience so firm as understanding the doctrine of justification.³⁴ That's how he moved from trouble to peace. And that's how you can move from trouble to peace.

There's nothing that we can do to earn God's favor. Our standing before God has everything to do with what God has done in Christ. If we want to live gospel-centered lives, we have to abandon trying to *earn* God's favor. We have to *receive* God's favor.

Luther wants to comfort you this morning with the comfort he received by learning about justification. Are you feeling bruised this morning? Are you feeling oppressed by God's demands? Are you feeling terrified by your sin? Are you thirsty for comfort? If so, it is time to remove out of your sight the righteous requirements of God. It's time to set before you the gospel of Jesus Christ. Receive his perfect righteousness. Receive his perfect sacrifice for your sins. Trust in God by believing in the gospel.³⁵

It's only as you trust what God has done for you in Christ that you can have assurance of salvation and hope for eternal life. And this becomes the foundation on which we live the Christian life, which we'll learn more about next week. As the hymn says, if you are in Christ, you are dressed in his righteousness alone, faultless to stand before the throne. When darkness hides God's lovely face, rest on his unchanging grace. When your troubles are high in the stormy gale, may your anchor hold within the veil. His oath, his covenant, his blood, will support you in the whelming flood. The doctrine of justification reminds us that it is on Christ the solid rock we stand. All other ground is sinking sand.

³³ Dillenberger, John. *Martin Luther: Selections from His Writings*. New York: Anchor Books, 1962, p. 100.

³⁴ Dillenberger, p. 101

³⁵ All paraphrased from Luther in Dillenberger, pp. 102-104.