



Amazing Grace: Luther's Lectures on Romans

By Nicos Kaloyirou

After receiving his doctorate in Theology in 1512, Luther was appointed professor of Moral Theology in the University of Wittenberg. He started his lectures on *Romans* in 1515, after spending three years lecturing on the *Psalms*.

These lectures, which were originally prepared by Luther in Latin, were not a formal commentary on Paul's epistle but comprised of a series of lectures delivered to students.

In these lectures, Luther cites Augustine (especially his book *On the Spirit and the Letter*) more than any other Church Father in interpreting the text of *Romans*. However, Luther goes beyond Augustine to the original writings of Paul to sound the depths of the gospel of Christ.

Luther begins his Lectures on *Romans* by contrasting the 'power of God' with the power and knowledge of men which has been annulled by the cross, as the gospel reveals the righteousness of God (Rom.1.16-17). Here 'the righteousness of God' must not be understood as that righteousness by which God is righteous in himself, but as that righteousness by which God imparts in order to declare men righteous (justified). This righteousness must be distinguished from the righteousness which Aristotle discusses in his *Ethics*, which follows upon and flows from actions. God's righteousness precedes works, and works result from it.

God's righteousness is from 'faith unto faith' and involves growth, to greater clarity and apprehension so that the believer 'who is righteous can be justified still' (Rev.22.11).

In expounding *Romans* 12.2, Luther describes the process by which the grace of God awakens the soul, sanctifies and renews the mind. Our deliverance from a legal viewpoint is immediate but from the experiential, it comes in stages, like the blind man's

healing at Bethsaida (Mk.8.24).

The first stage is *not being*, everyone is unrighteous and this means having nothing. This unrighteousness is imputed to us on account of a defect in our nature. As a result of the Fall, in breaking God's Law, humanity's trajectory changes because Adam's disobedience made the whole world guilty and contaminated everything. I was conceived without righteousness because I lost it through Adam as if I was there at the same time. So sin began to rule in me before I began to be. For God reckons all to be unrighteous on account of the sin that is transferred by the first parents. "Our natures do pursue us like rats," said Shakespeare.

The second stage is *becoming*. Becoming is justification. For by repenting, the sinner through 'being acted upon by God' (the new birth), moves from being unrighteous to being righteous and becomes a new creature in Christ. Justification is purely the action of God alone. A man becomes righteous by God covering his sin or by God not reckoning it to him because of his faith, not his good works. Luther explains imputation as a double action on the part of God. In the act of forgiveness God not only imputes (reckons) His righteousness in His mercy, He simultaneously does not impute the guilt of sin to us (Psalm 32.2).

The final stage of transformation is *being*, 'through the renewal of the mind'. The Greek says 'Be reformed by the renewing of the mind'. There is a strength and stayability in simply 'being' a disciple, after grace comes and we are regenerated. 'Faith makes the dwelling but Christ the shadow and the secret place'. God, by His mercy, enters and seals the centre of my being and re-writes his Law on my heart and gifts me His Spirit without measure

so that I come into fellowship with Him who inhabits eternity, whom the heaven of heavens cannot contain. 'Christ is eternal. He is our life: through faith He flows into our life by the rays of his grace and remains in us.' This is the 'royal road' and the way of peace in the Spirit.

If I am walking in the light there will be oneness of action according to a complete and perfect oneness of direction with Christ my head, a harmony of character and consciousness. As I am being changed by the Spirit and my mind is being renewed day by day, all my actions will be changed (II Cor. 3.18) and I will be able to prove and know the will of God.

Luther explains the outer effect of the Law (Rom.4.9-13). Those to whom it is given deserve God's wrath because it cannot be fulfilled by the wisdom of the flesh. The Law convicts all of sin and proves them guilty and therefore unworthy of the promise. 'For the promise that he should be the heir of the world, was not to Abraham or his seed through the Law but through the righteousness of faith'(Rom.4.13). It is not physical generation (descent) but spiritual generation (John 1.12,13) that comes from faith which makes men righteous and worthy of the promise (i.e. *believers* are now the heirs of salvation).

What Luther sees happening in Paul's theology (Rom.4.11) is that the external thing i.e. circumcision is not the efficacious means by which God's people find their acceptance but rather, it is the efficacy of Christ's sacrifice appropriated by an inward faith in the heart. Righteousness came before circumcision. Abraham let himself be circumcised to show he had been accepted because of his faith before circumcision.

Christ's death is the death of sin and his resurrection is the life of righteousness. Luther says, Christ's death and resurrection

affects the life of righteousness in us by an *ex nihilo* creation. Salvation is being brought back from the dead as Christ was (Rom.4.17; Isa.48.3).

Luther expounds 'the grace of God' in Romans 5.15: It is the grace of God which is in Christ as in its origin, just as the sin of man is in Adam and the gift which Christ pours out from the Father upon those who believe in Him.

Luther explains that the 'justification of God in his words' (Rom.3.4) and the trusting belief in God are one and the same. God's word was made flesh (John 1.14) and is outside human understanding. It is comprehensible only through a supernatural understanding just as Christ is only knowable, by revelation. For then certainly there is conformity between the word and the believer i.e. in truth and righteousness. God thus causes me to enter into myself, and by making himself known to me, He causes me to 'know myself'.

The majesty of the Law was broken and dishonoured by Adam's sin. In becoming a man, Christ voluntarily placed Himself on the same level of obligation to keep the Law as was the case with Adam. Christ did this according to His divine capacity which is infinite thereby making amends for the damage that was done through the Law. Jesus' sacrificial death satisfies the justice of God (Rom.3.26) and makes it possible for God to forgive the sins of all who truly repent and believe in His Son so that they can be redeemed and live for the purpose for which they were created, to please God and to do His will, thereby fulfilling the Law out of love.

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