

# Romans 1:16-17: The Thesis

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[ 0 : 00 ] of your pew Bibles. Again, that's Romans 1, 16 and 17 on page 914.

Please stand for the reading of God's Word. For I am not ashamed of the Gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.

For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith. As it is written, the righteous shall live by faith. This is the Word of the Lord.

You can be seated. We won't neglect the power of God as we come to the verses in the stupendous summary of Paul.

A short time ago, I was asked by a blogger to summarize the message of the entire Bible in a single sentence.

[ 1 : 27 ] No easy task. In fact, you might argue on very good grounds, impossible. Unless, of course, you want to destroy the beauty of its constituent parts.

But, for any who would attempt something like that, two things become immediately clear. One, really important stuff would be left out.

And two, the words or phrases that you choose must not only be strong enough to carry the freight of the whole, but, and of necessity, and the point to which the opening illustration is moving, the selected words and phrases must possess a bit of ambiguity, by which I mean elasticity.

For without ambiguity, the fullness of your words would be at best misunderstood, or worse, partially understood, and therefore, not understood at all.

There remains a certain beauty and strength to ambiguity in language. It allows the writer a decent chance at making a summary, which in turn enables him or her an opportunity to enlarge upon that summary in a variety of ways until a more complete understanding can emerge.

[ 3 : 06 ] And this is really the problem with people who are taught to write today the way I was taught to speak back in the day. You know, first, tell them what you're going to tell them.

Second, tell them. Third, tell them what you told them. Well, those are the most boring of all messages.

And in written form, they're the worst of all papers. Why? Because a good thesis statement or summary is not merely to be reiterated all along the way with the same words and the compass of meaning and ideas.

No! Words should be selected which can be recast. Words should be present so that other unspoken words must emerge.

Those make the best papers of all. Now, there's little doubt that Romans 1, 16-17 stands as the summary statement for Paul.

[ 4 : 20 ] Even if it took him two sentences in the original to complete rather than one. They embody his thesis and they provide you and me, the reader, the theme of his entire letter.

But realize this, the complete substance of these two verses are going to take him all the way to chapter 15, verse 13 to explore, to expound, to recast and shape and fill out in all of the fullness of his intended complete meaning.

The problem then in coming to our text today is not with Paul's summary, but with overly eager readers and preachers who for centuries have pressed each word and clause so hard for precision in meaning that the fullness of that meaning, a meaning Paul intends to enlarge upon for 15 chapters can be missed.

Now, let me give you an example. Think back on the words we quoted from Martin Luther in our first sermon in this series. He famously said, and I quote, I had greatly longed to understand Paul's letter to the Romans and nothing stood in my way but that one expression, chapter 1, verse 17, the righteousness of God.

Night and day I pondered it. I grasped the truth that the righteousness of God is that righteousness whereby through grace and sheer mercy he justifies us by faith.

[ 6 : 00 ] End of story. For Luther, entrance of the Reformation and therefore 500 years of reading the righteousness of God completely through and solely by that particular lens.

Now, there isn't anything wrong with how Luther defines the righteousness of God in 117 as the status we have before God on account of Christ.

Yet, as you're going to see even in this sermon, let alone in this letter, the phrase is so much bigger than that. It has this incredible elasticity to it.

And in my reading of the letter, I'm convinced that Paul would somehow be a bit disappointed to learn that these critical words in his summary statement, a phrase for him of almost incomparable wealth and riches is only known through the shard of this particular light.

And so, by way of a cautious introduction to what is perhaps the most seminal text in all the Bible, and perhaps as an inducement to have you keep coming back week after week to learn more, I want you to know one of my goals.

[ 7 : 23 ] I want you to give these words room to breathe. I don't want you to press them into some incredibly concretely fixed place at this point in the letter.

Remember, they are a summary. And they cannot be tied to a singular or angular interpretation. Look, I don't want our understanding of Romans 1, 16, and 17 to be true, but incomplete, and therefore not known in its full orb'd gospel beauty.

The letter will give us time for that. So, as we begin to peer into the matchless verses of Romans 1, 16, and 17, if the verses were to walk their way into the room here today, I would ask you, give them a seat by the window.

They need space. They need time, like a visitor. You'll need to get to know them over time. So, let's take a crack at it.

In arriving at the thesis statement for the letter, Paul somehow managed to boil it all down into four grammatical clauses.

[ 8 : 46 ] The first of which is the opening line of verse 16, for I am not ashamed of the gospel. So, here we are, 16 verses in, and we're already getting an immediate sense of what this letter is going to be about.

It's going to be about the gospel. Do you remember in verse 1, Paul declared from the time of his calling he had been set apart to the gospel? Literally hemmed in?

He had gone on to define the gospel in verses 3a and 4 as that which considers God's son including Jesus Christ our Lord. From there he spoke of his life work, his entire life work in terms of service in the gospel.

And it might be interesting for you to know in chapter 1 verse 9 that the term there for service is the word from which we get liturgy which in some sense means that for Paul the gospel was the very thing that provided order structure and direction for everything he did in life and he wasn't done then not only hemmed in by it not only concerning God's son in it not only do I serve it but he went on in verse 15 to say last week he was eager to preach it upon his arrival in their midst and now one line later because I'm not ashamed of it Paul is entirely about the gospel and he wants you the reader to know that this letter is going to be about it as well no what's curious in this first phrase isn't so much what Paul is on about but why he chose to speak about it in this way that's what you ought to be thinking when you begin to read verse 16 why the word choice in his summary

I am not ashamed it's worth considering for starters I can think of at least three reasons why he might choose to speak in terms of not being ashamed one cultural context two gospel content three the condition of the human heart let's just briefly take a look at them could there be something about the pressing nature of the cultural context of a place like Rome that might contribute to a Christian sense of gospel shame I think perhaps I mean remember by the time of Paul's announced visit and letter to Rome the city had already functioned as a facade to the world's true superpower the days of Greece with all the Athenian ideals and Roman not Roman but the Greek Republic it was now centuries in decline and by the time even of this late date its replacement the

[ 11 : 52 ] Roman Senate had had its powers whittled away by senatorial compromise and convention and the true power and pride of Rome lay not in the hands of the people not really anymore the so called parliamentarians it lay elsewhere those were dangerous times and they were joined with a deft ego that became dancing partners that somehow placed the rule of the world increasingly into the hands of one man one ruler Augustus literally the revered or illustrious one and that title carried more religious connotation than political for according to Roman religious beliefs Augustus symbolized his right of imprimatur over all of humanity even over the power of nature these are ideas that went way beyond the leader that was outlined in

Rome's constitution so what's the possible connection between this context and Paul's words against shame simply this in a place like Rome the gospel of Jesus is controversial by nature why because the Roman world already had a ruler a Caesar who stood in the line of Augustus and he lived in Rome not in heaven Paul's gospel on the other hand puts forward Jesus as the sole one to be revered the illustrious one who according to the cross and resurrection story has earned his place as the rightful ruler over all humanity including as we will see later in chapter one including rule over all natural created order so in Rome Christians that were in these house congregations were rubbing shoulders every day with people whose faith was already resting in a ruler and he was not

Jesus of Nazareth he was the one who controlled the seat of power in Rome now take that context and the ambiguous phrase not ashamed becomes the perfect choice to emboldened Christians who are living under the kingly robes of worldly influence and power what about gospel content a second reason Paul might have chosen not ashamed for his summary could be due to the very content of the gospel itself after all the message of the gospel can become an embarrassment to followers of Christ especially followers of Christ who are drawn to the wisdom and the power of this world put it this way in the gospel what are you given you're given a king who has been humiliated beyond recognition in the gospel your ruler dies as a common criminal in the gospel your savior is powerless impotent and by the time of

Paul's impending visit to Rome gone from the scene add to that in Paul's day the gospel's most ardent followers were continually subjected to suffering ever without influence ridiculed on every side and in the case particularly of Paul misunderstood and as we learn later in the letter slandered at every point you have reason to see how the Romans could succumb to being ashamed of the gospel and yet are we not all familiar with Paul's admonition to Timothy fan into flame the gift of God do not be ashamed of the testimony about our Lord nor of me his prisoner but share in suffering for the gospel cultural context content of the gospel what about the condition of the heart this third reason

I feel that Paul may have chosen to hang part of his thesis statement on not ashamed actually this is the reason I think most adheres at least in the closest way to the internal evidence of the letter as it will later work its way out the condition of the human heart Paul is well aware that in Rome as in Chicago as in everywhere humanity suffers from a condition of the heart that likes to boast!

[ 16 : 53 ] in its own achievements and boasting as the letter will bear out is at odds at every point with the very gospel that he is going to proclaim our best efforts add nothing to the gospel our works no matter how good are inconsequential when it comes to the power of the gospel and our boasting as if we can somehow bring anything at all to the table of salvation is something that Paul will combat at every turn in other words Paul may be saying I am not ashamed of the gospel because the human condition continually says let me tell you what I'm proud of not ashamed filled with ambiguity a perfect choice of words for his opening he's got our full attention truth be told he wants all of those meanings in play in the mind of the reader if you begin to define it any tighter than that you are going to miss it all together and so let's come to some application on the basis of this first clause in his thesis statement let me ask you some questions write them down think about them during the week talk about them in your neighborhood group meditate upon them does anything about our cultural context cause you to be ashamed of the gospel are you embarrassed by other

Christians who speak out openly and often of Jesus particularly in public places do you find yourself at Eduardo's or the snail or other places speaking with a muffled voice when the conversation must be about the Lord does the content of the gospel make you wish you could reshape Christian faith in some way that would cast it in a better light do you keep a belief in the pre proclamation of the gospel by the prophets as he argued earlier under wraps in other words do you not want people to know that you believe the bible is the very word of god because somehow it's going to mean that that whole prophetic discourse is going to raise the questions of this vindictive out of control god who hates humanity messes it up and then blames it on us

Paul says I'm not ashamed of the gospel nor of the pre proclamation of it are you put off by the gospel's claim that you have nothing good to bring to god except your own sin and your persistent rebellion Paul is getting ready to write about the gospel of god in all of its fullness yet he knows us all too well he opens his thesis with I am not ashamed of the gospel precisely because when push comes to shove many of us are just that well let's look at a second phrase that he employs that he thinks somehow is large enough to hold his gospel theme but elastic enough to allow enlargement later for it is the power of

God for salvation to everyone who believes to the Jew first and also to the Greek now notice don't miss the interlocking simplicity of his thought take a look Paul is eager to preach the gospel 115 in part because he's not ashamed of it 116 a and he's not ashamed of it because it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes 116 to the Jew first and also to the Greek what an interesting phrase that is to the Jew first and also to the Greek and if you're wondering why would he throw that in well then you're reading well I mean that's ambiguity at its best it certainly reveals to us the readers that even at this early point in the letter there must be something about the order of things which is important to Paul and then when you begin to think about his immediate audience a set of house congregations in

Rome that are comprised of some Jews but mostly Greeks and with the Greeks holding the upper hand at present well suddenly then you're aware that there are hidden things in this phrase to the Jew first and also to the Greek and that needs room to breathe later on the words were intentionally ambiguous and we're going to leave them so today because later he's going to have a lot to say about this just wait till you get to chapter 3 and 4 or the fullness of 9 through 11 or even the implication in 13 through 15 to the Jew first and also the Greek but no more said here today it's enough if we restrict ourselves to the first part the gospel is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes I love that little phrase everyone don't miss it all I mean even that word is particularly chosen to be expanded upon throughout the letter this is a gospel for everyone for all peoples for

[ 23 : 13 ]    Greeks the most educated and sophisticated among us and for barbarians those who don't speak the language for the wise and the foolish for the Jew and the Gentile the gospel is the power of God for all who believe this is going to be very important to Paul!

But what is meant by the power of God?! I mean we've heard these verses so many times we just assume we know what it means is that merely a way of speaking about God's power?

! Is it God's power? Is it in other words saying that God who is all powerful? Or are we to understand that even God Himself could not have saved us if He didn't have this attending power that could be put to use?

The text isn't going to tell you! But what we do know is that the gospel, and by that we've already learned, by way of definition, all that He has said in verses 2-4, is the power of salvation.

So notice, this is huge. In Paul's first words on the gospel, verses 2-4, he defined the gospel for us.

[ 24 : 39 ]    But now, in our verses, we're given a second definition of the gospel. But the first definition of the gospel is concerned with what the gospel is.

Our definition is concerned with what the gospel does. And what does it do? It's the power of God for salvation to all who believe.

But what does that mean? Salvation.

We normally think of it in terms of being rescued from some imminent danger. On a huge spectrum of ideas, we use this word salvation, don't we? So if you and I walk out after the service today, and I notice that there's a car parked alongside of 53rd, and it's just covered with salt.

I mean, salt like you can't believe salt. And I notice as we're walking that you're getting rather close to it, and you have on a nice little coat. And I see that you're going to brush up into it, and all the salt is going to be transferred from the car to your coat.

[ 25 : 44 ]    And I grab you by your shoulder and say, hey, watch out, there's a lot of salt in there. Oh, man, you saved me from that. Saved? Hello, Pastor Helm, my truck won't start today.

Oh, really? Yeah, I wonder if it's the battery. Do you have any jumper cables? Certainly I do. Could you come over and get it? No problem. Be right there. Car jumps.

Oh, boy, you really saved me today. Saved? Really? Well, yes, in some sense. Is that...

What does he mean here? He hasn't told you yet. He just tells you it's the power of God for salvation. We normally consider it to be some measure of imminent danger.

But why do we need salvation? He hasn't laid that out yet. And you and I live in a world where very few people need salvation. So we ought to at least give Paul the time to demonstrate the need.

[ 26 : 48 ]    From what are we being saved? Believe me, it's not going to take him long.

I mean, all you've got to do is get through next week's sermon on verses 18 through 32 of chapter 1. Or hang around for a couple of sermons that walk us through chapter 3 all the way to 320.

And you're going to know about this term salvation. All I can say to you today by way of advertisement to the greatness of the gospel is that when you begin to see what it is we are saved from, and when you begin to understand why it is we needed saving, and when your mind begins to grasp, perhaps for the first time in your life, our universal need of it, our inescapability of being rightly positioned without it, our full culpability even before we had ever heard it, when you begin to hear that, see that, understand that, grasp that, your heart is going to explode in praise to God, and you will come back to this verse in three weeks' time, and you will in the time of singing, hear in the text and the texture of language, the fullness of the gospel, and you will praise God for the gospel because it is the power of God for salvation.

It's indescribable. What a treasure. How do we apply it today?

Even before he's begun to explain any of that. Well, let me have you take note of these questions. Have you ever embraced a biblical gospel by faith?

[ 29 : 00 ] Come back for two or three more weeks, and if you haven't, I think your journey to embracing Christ will be short because the magnitude of the salvation that has been brought is stunning.

How much play does the gospel get in your conversation? And more importantly, what might that tell you about where you think true power really rests?

I mean, Paul claims that it is the power of God for salvation. Where do you think power lies?

Do you think power lies in your relational connectivity and in your ability to take your friend to Jimmy's and share a pint know what another?

If the gospel is not coming forth from our lips, what do we really believe is the power? I love the way Paul puts it in...

[ 30 : 23 ] I didn't want to jump out of the text too much today, but how can you beat this? For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved, it is the power of God.

For consider your calling, brothers. Not many of you were wise according to worldly standards. Not many were powerful. Not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise.

God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong. God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God.

He is the source of your life in Christ Jesus, whom God, our wisdom, our righteousness, and sanctification and redemption. Therefore, as it is written, let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.

Why? Because Christ, the power and wisdom of God. Do you share the gospel regularly with those who are not in a good way with God?

[ 31 : 27 ] When was the last time? What other things compete with the gospel as the center of what our life ought to be together?

Imagine this congregation seriously, joyfully, fashioning our entire life around the power of the gospel.

What an exercise! Well, in the interest of time, we forge ahead. We look at the third clause in Paul's thesis statement.

Verse 17 begins, For the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith. Now notice the interlocking pattern of Paul's speech remains. He's eager to preach the gospel, 115, in part, for he's not ashamed of it, 116a.

And he's not ashamed of it, for it is the power of God for salvation to all who believe, 116b. And if you want to know how it is that the gospel is the power of God for salvation, well, for the righteousness of God is revealed in it from faith to faith.

[ 32 : 39 ] Now the righteousness of God, I mean, that phrase, oh, that phrase, is without depth. And you and I are going to see it time and time again in the coming weeks.

And so all I want to do today is make the briefest of comments about it. It is the phrase that Luther interpreted with so much force that he single-handedly removed all ambiguity for it.

And for him, and therefore for centuries of Christians ever since, the righteousness of God simply refers to the action by which our status before God is changed on account of Christ.

And yet, as true as this is and must be, the phrase as put forward by Paul in Romans means so much more. I mean, what could it mean? The righteousness of God.

Just even grammatically, could it be speaking here of one of his attributes? The righteousness of God.

[ 33 : 42 ] The way you speak of the mercy of God. The way you speak of the love of God. Or the creativity of God. Is that what it means? Does it mean that there is some attribute of God that somehow is at work in the Gospel which explodes this powerful work of salvation?

Is Paul meaning for you to take it this way? He hasn't told us! Yet. Or, could the term refer not so much to status, as Luther would have it, or to an attribute, as others would have it, but to the right working just activities of God which bring salvation about.

Does the Gospel contain God's activity to secure salvation on our behalf? Well, I tend to think that this latter third is certainly going to be a major component of what Paul is really saying.

that in the Gospel, you have God's righteous actions poured out, particularly through His Son.

But look at that phrase, from faith for faith. I mean, that's a curious expression. Another incredibly ambiguous term. There's a host of options. I can't even get into them today. I mean, from faith to faith.

[ 35 : 14 ] Is this God's fidelity that then is transferred to ours? Is it from God's fidelity and faithfulness to our faith? Is it from Paul's faithfulness to those that he is preaching?

There's certainly a good reason to take it as a literary convention in the way that it's used elsewhere in the Bible with this sense of movement. Take a look real quickly at 2 Corinthians 2.16.

You'll see almost the exact kind of thing going on. This word, and then in, or out of, or from faith, to faith. In a different context, 2 Corinthians 2.16, to one, a fragrance from death to death.

And then it does it again, to the other, a fragrance from life to life. In other words, this gospel had a fragrance that, well, for some, it was beginning, they were in a state of death, and by the end, there's still death.

For others, it's from life to life that's got this movement to it. So my own view, you can find it also in Jeremiah 9, in chapter, verse 2, where he says, Oh, that I had in the desert a traveler's lodging place.

[ 36 : 34 ] Is it 9.2? That I might leave my people and go away from them, for they are all adulterers, a company of treacherous men.

And don't ask me why I brought you there, because it's not there at all. So you'll have to find it yourself. I'm not doing all the heavy lifting. Evidently, I'm not capable of it.

But from faith, for faith, or from faith, to faith, I take it, I like the translation that kind of goes from faith to faith, meaning from the beginning, from the first to the last.

I mean, at least at the moment. This also could explain somewhat that ambiguous phrase we saw at the beginning where Paul was given a commission to bring about the obedience of faith in all the nations.

Did it mean that he was concerned with their obedience that faith brings about or was their obedience actual faith? Well, when you look at our phrase, from faith to faith, it's the latter that seems to be in play, that Paul was commissioned to bring about the obedience, namely, your faith.

[ 37 : 43 ] Faith from first to last. Faith from beginning to end. For in it, the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith. But we move to the last phrase, the final and fourth clause of his thesis statement.

As it is written, the righteous shall live by faith. We could spend a half an hour here and we'll spend three minutes. The final clause is a quote fashioned from the original by Paul for the express purpose of proving his point.

In other words, he's saying that what I'm telling you about the gospel, well, I'm grabbing this back there to tell you that proves my point in some way. But unlike the Westminster Divines, it's certainly a lot more than a footnote or a proof text.

It's not merely a proof text. I think he's grabbing this Habakkuk 2.4 for its entire context. But what does this mean, the righteous shall live by faith?

It certainly comes from Habakkuk 2.4. but a slightly altered form. The Hebrew Bible and it's slightly altered from the Greek Septuagint. In the Hebrew Bible, there's a pronoun attached to this which makes the relationship to faith more explicit.

[ 39 : 05 ] In other words, it's the faith of the people. But in the Septuagint, the pronoun God is used to make it mean more like the righteous life that comes from God's faith.

Paul omits all pronouns, throws them on the side of the road, and I think intentionally leaves you in the realm of ambiguity. He just says, the righteous shall live by faith.

Does he want us to read it to mean that the righteous by faith shall be made to live? Or does he want you to read it, the righteous shall live by their faith? And does he mean it now?

Or does he mean it later? Because the word itself is future and passive. Could he really mean that the righteous at the very eschatological day, the final day of judgment, will be made to live by faith at the very end?

There are rooms to explore here. And they all point to the glory of the Gospel. What's often overlooked in this quote is the broader context from which the quote comes.

[ 40 : 17 ] Remember, it comes from Habakkuk, this prophet who is wrestling with the righteous activity of God and why it is that he does not save his people.

Habakkuk 1.2, he actually says, you will not save? In Habakkuk 1.4, he says, justice, or the same term in our language here, righteousness is going forth perverted.

To which God says, Habakkuk, you ain't seen nothing yet. I'm going to bring the Assyrians to judge my people. To which Habakkuk says, are you kidding?

What is righteous about that? How can that be saved? Salvation. They're worse than we are. To which God says, hey, quiet.

Quiet. Write this down. for in the future, I'm going to do something and the righteous will live by faith.



[ 41 : 18 ] To which then, Habakkuk realizes that God is coming in judgment on all the world. In fact, the language of Habakkuk is extraordinary. Three times he uses the word shame.

That all these people have been so proud of their lives. God is going to shame them. He's going to shame them. He's going to shame them. How? How? Because once where righteousness went forth perverted, in Habakkuk, it actually says, God is going to go forth.

And in his righteous activities, he says in 3, 4, his brightness like the light raised flash from his hand and there he veiled his power.

God's power is coming upon the world in wrath, verse 8, in anger, verse 8, when this is the day of salvation, verse 8.

Habakkuk says, you went out for the salvation of your people, verse 13, for salvation of your anointed you crushed the head of the house of the wicked. The whole letter affirms the righteous activity of God in bringing about salvation so that Habakkuk closes, I will rejoice in the Lord.

[ 42 : 30 ] I will take joy in the God of my salvation. salvation. I think Paul wants all of that. In the gospel, God is going to act and in wrath and in fury judge all disobedient, yet in that same act, save his own that he might be both just and the justifier of all who would take refuge in him.

Amen. So you've made it through the summary of Paul's opening introduction.

His thesis statement is done. So let me say two things in closing. I hope that in some measure, the extraordinary nature of the letter we're in this year is grabbing your heart.

And I hope you begin to see the value of ambiguity, at least for thesis statements, as a benefit. You know, some people, when they hear ambiguity from the pulpit, they think it must be a cloak for making the Bible say less than it really wanted to say.

Actually, in this point, I want to say we embrace ambiguity for precisely the opposite reason. I want to know and understand all that these words have to offer.

[ 43 : 57 ] I don't want to miss anything this year. for only then will we know the fullness of the meaning that only the gospel brings. So we close.

Are you ashamed of the gospel? What do you understand about the power for salvation? What consideration have you given recently to the righteous activities of God and its relationship to your faith?

Our Heavenly Father, we thank you for these words. They are massive and certainly beyond us, beyond me, and yet we glory in them.

I pray in the coming weeks that our praise, even in our weekly singing, just as it's been doing all year long, would just rise, rise with a swelling of anticipatory joy for all that you have done for us in the gospel.

We commit it to you in Christ's name. Amen.