

Luther's Tower Experience: Martin Luther Discovers the True Meaning of Righteousness An Excerpt
From: Preface to the Complete Edition of Luther's Latin Works (1545) by Dr. Martin Luther, 1483-1546
Translated by Bro. Andrew Thornton, OSB from the "Vorrede zu Band I der Opera Latina der
Wittenberger Ausgabe. 1545" in vol. 4 of _Luthers Werke in Auswahl_, ed. Otto Clemen, 6th ed.,
(Berlin: de Gruyter. 1967). pp. 421-428. Translator's Note: The material between square brackets is
explanatory in nature and is not part of Luther's preface. The terms "just, justice, justify" in the
following reading are synonymous with the terms "righteous, righteousness, make righteous." Both
sets of English words are common translations of the Latin "justus" and related words. A similar
situation exists with the word "faith"; it is synonymous with "belief." Both words can be used to
translate Latin "fides." Thus, "We are justified by faith" translates the same original Latin sentence as
does "We are made righteous by belief." Meanwhile in that same year, 1519, I had begun interpreting
the Psalms once again. I felt confident that I was now more experienced, since I had dealt in university
courses with St. Paul's Letters to the Romans, to the Galatians, and the Letter to the Hebrews. I had
conceived a burning desire to understand what Paul meant in his Letter to the Romans, but thus far
there had stood in my way, not the cold blood around my heart, but that one word which is in chapter
one: "The justice of God is revealed in it." I hated that word, "justice of God," which, by the use and
custom of all my teachers, I had been taught to understand philosophically as referring to formal or
active justice, as they call it, i.e., that justice by which God is just and by which he punishes sinners and
the unjust. But I, blameless monk that I was, felt that before God I was a sinner with an extremely
troubled conscience. I couldn't be sure that God was appeased by my satisfaction. I did not love, no,
rather I hated the just God who punishes sinners. In silence, if I did not blaspheme, then certainly I
grumbled vehemently and got angry at God. I said, "Isn't it enough that we miserable sinners, lost for
all eternity because of original sin, are oppressed by every kind of calamity through the Ten
Commandments? Why does God heap sorrow upon sorrow through the Gospel and through the Gospel
threaten us with his justice and his wrath?" This was how I was raging with wild and disturbed
conscience. I constantly badgered St. Paul about that spot in Romans 1 and anxiously wanted to know
what he meant. I meditated night and day on those words until at last, by the mercy of God, I paid
attention to their context: "The justice of God is revealed in it, as it is written: 'The just person lives by
faith.'" I began to understand that in this verse the justice of God is that by which the just person lives
by a gift of God, that is by faith. I began to understand that this verse means that the justice of God is
revealed through the Gospel, but it is a passive justice, i.e. that by which the merciful God justifies us
by faith, as it is written: "The just person lives by faith." All at once I felt that I had been born again and
entered into paradise itself through open gates. Immediately I saw the whole of Scripture in a different
light. I ran through the Scriptures from memory and found that other terms had analogous meanings,
e.g., the work of God, that is, what God works in us; the power of God, by which he makes us powerful;
the wisdom of God, by which he makes us wise; the strength of God, the salvation of God, the glory of
God. I exalted this sweetest word of mine, "the justice of God," with as much love as before I had hated
it with hate. This phrase of Paul was for me the very gate of paradise. Afterward I read Augustine's "On

the Spirit and the Letter," in which I found what I had not dared hope for. I discovered that he too interpreted "the justice of God" in a similar way, namely, as that with which God clothes us when he justifies us. Although Augustine had said it imperfectly and did not explain in detail how God imputes justice to us, still it pleased me that he taught the justice of God by which we are justified.

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