

O DEATH,
**WHERE IS
THY STING?**

COLLECTED SERMONS

JOHN MURRAY

With a foreword by SINCLAIR B. FERGUSON

And an introduction by K. SCOTT OLIPHINT

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The Power of God unto Salvation

For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ: for it is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth; to the Jew first, and also to the Greek. For therein is the righteousness of God revealed from faith to faith: as it is written, The just shall live by faith.

—ROMANS 1:16–17

O God, who dwellest in thy holy temple, who art high and lifted up but who also dwellest with the humble and the contrite, do thou grant unto us that we may have a profound sense of thy glory and of thy presence. May the knowledge of the Lord captivate our minds and our hearts, and may we have an all-pervasive sense that thou art the Lord God Almighty—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Grant us thy presence in thy sanctuary in accordance with thy promise that where two or three are gathered together in thy name, there thou art in their midst. May we, O Lord, have the experience of this inestimable grace. And may the words of our mouth and the meditations of our heart be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, our strength and our Redeemer. Amen.



It might appear to us that the apostle would have drawn the curtain of concealment over the things that he described in the latter part of this chapter, because these sins, which he enumerates in the latter part of this chapter (Rom 1:24–32), are in that class of which it is written elsewhere that it is a shame even to speak (cf. Eph 5:12). But instead of drawing over the curtain of concealment, the apostle Paul draws the curtain aside, and he opens to our view the abominations of moral and religious degeneracy into which the nations of the world had fallen. And we can very readily see the reason. Because it is only in the context of that degeneracy, which the apostle depicts in this chapter, that we can appreciate the word that is the keynote of this epistle: “I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ because it is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth” (Rom 1:16; cf. KJV).

Now you might think that this is a rather weak way of expressing his confidence because the apostle Paul in other places, where he abounds in confidence regarding the efficacy of the gospel, uses rather different language. In the companion epistle, the Epistle to the Galatians, he says, “God forbid that I should glory, save in the cross of the Lord Jesus Christ, by whom the world is crucified unto me, and I unto the world” (Gal 6:14; cf. KJV). And in another epistle, he says, “Thanks be unto God, that always causeth us to triumph in Christ, and maketh manifest the savour of his knowledge by us in every place” (2 Cor 2:14; cf. KJV). And so you might think that what he says in Romans 1:16 is a rather weak and negative way of expressing his confidence: “I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ.”

But if we remember the reproach with which the enemies of the gospel encountered its message, if we bear in mind the scorn that was oftentimes placed upon the gospel as it confronted the pomp of Roman political power and as it confronted the pretended wisdom of the Greeks, then we can discover, in Paul's particular way of expressing his confidence, the undertones of exultant assurance. "I am not ashamed of the gospel because it is the power of God unto salvation" (Rom 1:16; cf. KJV). With reference to the worldly pomp that was manifest in the Roman political power, he said, "I am ready to preach the gospel to you that are at Rome also" (Rom 1:15). With reference to all the degeneracy that the apostle Paul portrays in verses 24 to 32 of this chapter, he says that the gospel is "the power of God unto salvation," reaching down to the lowest depths of degradation and lifting men and women from the dunghill, placing their feet upon a rock, establishing their goings, and putting a new song in their mouths (cf. Ps 40:2–3; see also Ps 113:7).

What is the gospel of which the apostle here is speaking? We must always remember that the gospel is a proclamation. It is a message, and it is of that message that the apostle Paul is speaking when he says, "I am not ashamed of the gospel." I am not ashamed of the gospel message. I am not ashamed to proclaim it. We must never forget that that Word of proclamation is the Word of power. It is the Word that transforms men, and it is that Word *alone* that transforms them, that translates them from darkness to light and from the power of Satan unto God.

It is true enough that this Word of the truth of the gospel is never efficacious unto salvation except as it is accompanied by the demonstration of the Spirit and of power. As Paul says in an-

other epistle, “Our gospel came not unto you in word only, but also in power, and in the Holy Spirit, and in much assurance” (1 Thess 1:5; cf. KJV). But we must likewise remember that it is the gospel that the Holy Spirit witnesses to. It is only through the gospel that the Holy Spirit is working unto salvation. And where that gospel is absent, then there is not the regenerating and sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit. It is the gospel, after all, that Paul says in this passage “is the power of God unto salvation.” Therefore, he is drawing our attention to this great pronouncement that it is the gospel that is the Word of reconciliation and the Word of salvation unto a lost and perishing world.

Why is the gospel so powerful? Why is the gospel the omnipotent power of God operative unto salvation? Just for this reason: that it is the Word *of God*! And the Word of God is never void of power! “The Word of God is living and powerful, and sharper than any twoedged sword. It pierces to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit . . . and is a discernment of the thoughts and intents of the heart” (Heb 4:12; cf. KJV). The Word of the gospel is the Word of God, and it isn’t a dead word; it’s a living voice! It’s the living voice of God as surely as those who heard the Word of God the Father on his Holy Mount, witnessing to his own Son, “This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased” (Matt 17:5; cf. 2 Pet 1:17).

So, let us never be deceived by the allegation that is so frequently made that the Word of the gospel itself is a dead word. If we do not hear it as the living voice of God, it’s precisely because the god of this world has blinded our minds lest the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ should shine into our hearts (cf. 2 Cor 4:4). The Word of the gospel is

the omnipotent power of God operative unto salvation—salvation from sin in its defilement, in its degradation, in its guilt, and in its power. It lifts men out of the degradation and squalor of iniquity and makes them the sons and daughters of the Lord God Almighty, clothing them with righteousness, and establishing them in the ways of integrity.

Why does the apostle Paul say, “I am not ashamed of the gospel”? Because it is the power of God unto salvation. And *why* is the gospel this omnipotent power of God operative unto salvation? “For therein is the righteousness of God revealed from faith to faith.” The gospel is the power of God unto salvation just *because* there is revealed in it the righteousness *of God* that is operative unto salvation. So, you have this combination of power and righteousness.

It is well for us to appreciate this combination in the gospel because the gospel is never simply bare omnipotence. Bare omnipotence, as exercised by God himself, could never save a single soul. If we emphasize the omnipotence of God to the prejudice of his righteousness, then we fail to appreciate what is at the very center of the provision of God’s grace. Bare omnipotence could, indeed, create this mighty universe. God created the world simply by the command of his will. “He spake, and it was done; he commanded, and it stood fast” (Ps 33:9). “By the word of the Lord were the heavens made; and all the host of them by the breath of his mouth” (Ps 33:6). But not so with salvation. There are certain exigencies that are at stake in this matter of salvation so that salvation can never be wrought by the exercise of bare omnipotence.

Two considerations explicit in this very context draw attention to that fact. There is, first of all, the degradation, the squalor

of iniquity that the apostle Paul describes in the latter part of this chapter. We must remember what that involves. What is, after all, the essence of sin? People will say sometimes that sin is selfishness. Well, that's a woefully inadequate definition of sin! All selfishness is sin, but sin is not simply selfishness. There's something far more serious about sin than the fact that we are absorbed in ourselves. Sin is the contradiction *of God*. When sin came into the world, something came into the world that was the very contradiction of God—the contradiction of his sovereignty, the contradiction of his authority, the contradiction of his holiness, and yes, the contradiction of his righteousness. And that contradiction of God is what exists in all the description that the apostle gives in Romans 1 of the degradation and degeneration of the world. When God created the heavens and the earth, when he created all creatures at the beginning, there was no contradiction at all; there was nothing that existed that was in contradiction to God because there was nothing that existed *but* God himself. When he spake and it was done, when he commanded and it stood fast, there was no contradiction at all. Therefore, God could create simply by the command of his will.

The second consideration in the context of this passage that points to the impossibility of salvation simply by the exercise of God's omnipotent power is the wrath of God. You see, the very next verse to our text is, "For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who hold the truth in unrighteousness" (Rom 1:18). The wrath of God, of course, is God's necessary reaction to that which is the contradiction of himself. There *must* be the wrath of God wherever there is sin because sin is the contradiction of God!

Again, when God created the heavens and the earth, there was no wrath of God. There was no need for it. There was nothing that was a contradiction of himself, and so God wasn't pouring out his wrath upon anybody. The creation in its primitive perfection didn't call forth the wrath of God. But now there is the reality of the wrath of God, and it is inseparable from the degradation and degeneracy that the apostle Paul depicts. Consequently, when we come to this matter of salvation, what is indispensable is *righteousness* and *nothing less than* the righteousness of God. The only thing that can meet human degeneracy is the righteousness of *God!* And the only thing that can meet God's *own* wrath is his *own* righteousness.

You see what a situation there is! It's a situation for God himself, you see. It's an exigency, it's a demand, that God *himself* cannot waive. If there is going to be salvation, then there must be righteousness—righteousness to meet the contradiction that sin offers and righteousness to meet even his own wrath. Oh, how magnificent is the apostle's explanation! "I'm not ashamed of the gospel." Why? "Because it is the power of God unto salvation." And why is it the power of God unto salvation? "Because therein the righteousness of God is revealed." Oh, my friends, do appreciate that sequence because we're getting to the heart of that which is the most precious thing for human beings in this whole universe! It is the supreme manifestation not only of the *grace* of God but of the *wisdom* of God, and it is something that will cause the eternal ages to ring with joy! Don't fail to get hold of the glory of this: "Therein is revealed the righteousness of God."

What is this righteousness of which Paul is speaking in this

instance? You might say, “Oh, the righteousness of God is simply his attribute of justice: that God is just, ‘that justice and judgment are the habitation of his throne’ (Ps 97:2; cf. KJV), ‘that he is just in all his ways and holy in all his works’ (Ps 145:17; cf. KJV).” It is quite true that there could be no salvation except as the demands of divine righteousness were fully met. There cannot be any salvation but the salvation that completely comports with the righteousness of God. Perfectly true! And Paul draws our attention to that in this very epistle when he says,

Whom God hath set forth to be a propitiation through faith in his blood, to declare his righteousness for the remission of sins that are past, through the forbearance of God; to declare, I say, at this time his righteousness: that he might be just, and the justifier of him who believeth in Jesus. (Rom 3:25–26; cf. KJV)

It’s a great truth that there could be no salvation except a salvation comported with the righteousness of God. But that is not the righteousness that the apostle is speaking of in this instance. It’s not the *attribute* of righteousness that is here called “the righteousness of God.” It’s very closely related to the attribute of righteousness, but it’s not the attribute of righteousness itself. Why isn’t it the attribute of righteousness? It’s very easy to discover the reasons in this epistle and elsewhere.

First of all, this is a righteousness that is made over to us (that is, to those who fall into this category). In Romans 3:21–22 we read, “But now the righteousness of God without the law is manifested, being witnessed by the law and the prophets; even

the righteousness of God which is by faith of Jesus Christ unto all and upon all them that believe.” Don’t you see, there is a righteousness that is by faith of Jesus Christ *unto all* and *upon all* them that believe. It’s a righteousness that is made over to men and women. Now men and women don’t come to possess God’s attribute of righteousness, just as they don’t come to possess his attributes of omnipotence or eternity or immutability. They don’t become divine. So, this righteousness that is made over to us must be something different from God’s attribute of righteousness.

Secondly, Paul teaches us in another epistle that this is a righteousness that we have: “Not having mine own righteousness, which is of the law, but that which is through the faith of Christ, the righteousness which is of God by faith” (Phil 3:9). Then again, in another epistle, he tells us that it is a righteousness that we *become*, not simply a righteousness that belongs to us or that we have: “He gave him to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might become the righteousness of God in him” (2 Cor 5:21; cf. KJV). We *become* the righteousness of God. And of course, then, another consideration is that it is the righteousness that is appropriated by faith: “righteousness . . . from faith to faith,” as Paul says in Romans 1:17.

So what is this righteousness? It is something very different than the attribute of righteousness. It’s a righteousness that belongs to men. It’s a righteousness that they *have*, it’s a righteousness that they *become*, and it’s a righteousness that is *mediated to them* through Jesus Christ and that becomes theirs in actual possession by faith. And yet, my friends, we must not tone down that which the apostle here calls it, “the righteousness of God.”

It's a God-righteousness, a divine righteousness, after all. It's not the attribute of righteousness in God, but it nevertheless is a righteousness with divine attributes, qualities, and properties.

And oh, my friends, don't fail to get that grand lesson, because it's the central theme of this epistle! If there is any book in the Bible that portrays to us the gospel, it's the Epistle to the Romans. And the great central theme of the epistle is just precisely this: the righteousness of God that becomes ours by faith, a righteousness that is not the divine attribute but that nevertheless has divine properties. It's a God-righteousness, and, oh, that's the magnificent thing about the gospel. Don't you see that *that* is something that will meet the awful exigency of our sin and even the exigency of the wrath of God—a righteousness that is divine?

Remember, also, that this righteousness of God is contrasted not simply with human unrighteousness but with human righteousness. Do you know that the greatest enemy of the gospel is not human unrighteousness? The greatest enemy of the gospel is not that degradation and degeneracy that the apostle Paul portrays in the first chapter of Romans. But the greatest enemy of the gospel is human *righteousness*! When Paul says in the Epistle to the Galatians, "God forbid that I should glory, save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom the world is crucified unto me, and I unto the world" (Gal 6:14), he wasn't there talking about outward, notorious iniquity. Paul was never given to that—never. Paul had never been a notorious person; he had always been a person who was outwardly above reproach: "Circumcised the eighth day, of the stock of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of the Hebrews; as touching the law, a Pharisee; concerning zeal, persecuting the church; touching the

righteousness which was in the law, blameless” (Phil 3:5–6; cf. KJV). That’s the character of the apostle Paul. So, when Paul says, “God forbid that I should glory, save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom the world is crucified unto me, and I unto the world,” he means that he was crucified unto his own righteousness, crucified unto self-righteousness.

That’s the greatest contradiction to the gospel: human righteousness offered to meet the contradiction of sin and the wrath of God. Oh, what a complete insult to God to offer human self-righteousness to the contradiction of sin and to the wrath of God. But in the gospel we have a righteousness that is divine, and that’s the righteousness that can go down to the deepest depths of our degradation and can lift us up from the dunghill and place us among princes and princesses (cf. 1 Sam 2:8). That righteousness alone is equal to our situation.

So what exactly is this righteousness of God that is made over to us—that we have, that we become, and that is mediated to us through faith? The apostle tells us in this passage that it’s nothing else but the righteousness of Christ. And Christ’s righteousness is “the righteousness of God” because he *himself* was God. It’s a righteousness that’s made over to men, that they come to have, and that they become just because *Christ* becomes theirs. That’s the gospel: “therein is revealed the righteousness of God,” the righteousness of the Redeemer. Paul says in a later part of this epistle, “As by one man’s disobedience many were made sinners, so by the obedience of one shall many be made righteous” (Rom 5:19). That’s the grandeur of the gospel: we become the righteousness of God *in Christ*! “Him, who knew no sin, he made to be sin for us that we might become the righteousness of God in

him” (2 Cor 5:21; cf. KJV). The marvel is that everything that belongs to Christ becomes the possession of the person who is united to him. And he becomes even this righteousness.

Now this righteousness is not simply something that *grounds* the justifying act of God, but it’s something that *demand*s the justifying action of God. The righteousness of Christ cannot meet with anything else than God’s approbation. Wherever there is a sinner, however degraded, who is united to Christ in *his* righteousness, that sinner possesses a righteousness that God must justify because it is a righteousness that is undefiled and undefilable. It is a righteousness that reaches down to the deepest depths of human degradation and rises to the highest heights of divine approbation, a righteousness that covers to the fullest extent the righteous wrath of God and the unrighteous contradiction of men! I ask you, my friends, to consider *this righteousness* because it stretches to the utmost confines of reality. That is why the gospel is the power of God unto salvation.

Now you will ask me, “Oh, well, if the gospel really is the power of God unto salvation, then why isn’t it the power of God unto salvation *to everyone?*” It is a question that cannot be evaded. If the righteousness of God is all that I have said it is, why doesn’t it take the whole of humanity into its grasp? The reason is in our text. First of all, it is the righteousness of God *revealed*. When Paul here uses that word *revealed*, he’s not talking simply about that which is made known to us for information. He’s using the word *revealed* in the sense that you find frequently in the Old Testament and particularly in the prophet Isaiah: the Word of God in saving action. “My salvation is near to come, and my righteousness to be revealed” (Isa 56:1). These two are the same

thing; it is the righteousness of God revealed, or brought to bear upon us, in effective action! It isn't efficacious simply because it is made known to us for information, not simply because it is made known to us in the word of proclamation; it's the righteousness of God *revealed in saving*, effective action.

So then we must ask the question: in whom is this righteousness of God revealed in saving and effective action? The apostle Paul tells us in verses 16 and 17: The gospel is "the power of God unto salvation to *every one that believeth*," and this righteousness of God is "revealed *from faith to faith*." We must not allow our minds to escape that this righteousness of God is operative unto salvation *only for this faith*! Don't for your life disjoin that which God has placed together. It's a righteousness of God revealed *from faith to faith*. The gospel is the power of God unto salvation *to every one that believeth*. That's the line of discrimination defined in this text, and with that line of distinction all great issues—tremendous issues—are bound up. And don't let us escape the greatest.

Now, faith is a very simple thing. Oh, it's not simple to the person who is imbued with his own self-righteousness; it's the very contradiction of self-righteousness. But faith is a very simple thing after all. And faith in its essence is simply self-commitment; it's entrustment. When the apostle speaks of faith here, as elsewhere in this epistle, he is speaking of that faith by which we become joined to Christ in self-commitment and self-entrustment. When Christ becomes the only one who can stand between us and the degradation and contradiction of sin, when Christ becomes to us the only one who can stand between us and the holy wrath of God, *then* he has become all and in all to us. We have

committed ourselves to him, we have entrusted ourselves to him, we have become united to him. And being united to him, we become the righteousness of God in him. That is the gospel that is implicit here when Paul says it is “the righteousness of God revealed from faith to faith.”

Now, that’s very precious. Here is a sinner, and he knows that he’s a sinner, and he’s perhaps very deeply convicted of his sin. (You know a person who is not yet regenerated can be very deeply convicted of sin.) And his reply is, “Well, I could never hope or expect to be the recipient of salvation. I’m just too far gone and beyond repair. I’m so utterly bound to sin and so utterly degraded in my own iniquity that I can’t entertain any hope.” My friends, here there is a very great, important lesson conveyed to us, and it is contained in that very little expression “from faith to faith.” This righteousness of God is operative unto salvation through *faith*, and it is operative unto salvation to *everyone* who has faith. It is necessary to emphasize both. It is by faith, and by faith alone, that we are justified in God’s sight. And everyone who has faith, however weak that faith may be, is just as effectively united to Christ and to the righteousness of God as is the person who is strong in faith. That’s the great truth expressed in “from faith to faith”: this righteousness becomes ours by faith and it becomes the possession of anybody who is exercising faith.

Oh, my friend, however degraded you may feel yourself to be, however bound in the bondage of sin you may feel yourself to be, however great may be your consciousness of the contradiction that you are to the gospel and to that which God demands of you, remember that the greatest insult you could offer to God is to offer insult to the sufficiency and the perfection of his

righteousness! People sometimes think that they're doing God great honor by pleading their own degradation, their own corruption, their own wickedness, and all that. They think they're doing God great honor by pleading *that* as a reason why they should not commit themselves, in the simplicity of faith, to the righteousness of God in Christ. That's the greatest insult because you are offering insult to that which is sufficient for the deepest depths of human degradation and meets the highest demands of God's glory. There is nothing in this universe that offers greater contradiction to God than to offer contradiction to the overture of his righteousness in Christ Jesus! "This is the condemnation, that light is come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil" (John 3:19). And, my friend, however deeply involved in the contradiction you may be, remember that the gospel is the power of God unto salvation and that the righteousness of God is operative unto salvation to *everyone* that believes.

On the other hand, I have every confidence that there are a lot of people in this congregation who are very well advanced in the knowledge of the Lord, who are a long way on the pilgrimage to "the city which hath the foundations, whose builder and maker is God" (Heb 11:10; cf. KJV). Such people, the more they pilgrimage to the city which hath the foundations, the more they are being convinced of their own utter helplessness and their own utter vileness. You might think that's a contradiction, but it is always the case that wherever there is the true advance in holiness, in sainthood, that person becomes more and more deeply convinced of his own utter depravity. That was true with the apostle. When Paul penned later in this epistle these words, "O

wretched man that I am! Who shall deliver me from the body of this death?” (Rom 7:24), and when he says, “I see another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity to the law of sin which is in my members” (Rom 7:23), he was far along on the way of advancement to the celestial city. And he was imbued then with a profound sense of his own depravity and his own utter helplessness.

What is it that the saint of God can continue to offer as he is confronted with the demands of God’s holiness and righteousness upon him? What is it that he can present to God in order to offset the awful liabilities that are his because of his degradation and sin? It’s simply the righteousness of Christ mediated through faith. This is the gospel for the person who has never known the power of God unto salvation, and it’s also the gospel for the saint who is a long, long way in his pilgrimage and who is just about to enter into the celestial city. It’s the gospel for saints as well as for sinners! I know nothing that I can present with greater confidence as I am confronted with the demands of God’s holiness and with the liabilities of my own iniquity. What can I present to God as my plea? My friend, it’s just this righteousness—this righteousness that is divine, this righteousness that meets not only my unrighteousness but my self-righteousness, and this righteousness that meets all the demands of God’s holiness and justice and truth.

This is the grandeur of the gospel. I have the confidence that as I make this righteousness my plea, I have not simply something that God will justify, but I have something that God *cannot but* justify, because it is the righteousness of the Redeemer, a righteousness that is undefiled and undefilable. Remember, my

friend, though your faith be at the lowest ebb of a possible exercise, though it be the weakest faith that exists, nevertheless, if it is a faith that looks to Christ as the only plea against human sin on the one hand and God's wrath on the other, then that is the righteousness that is the power of God unto salvation. It's yours just as fully with the weakest faith as it is yours with the strongest faith. It is a righteousness of God from faith to faith to everyone that believes.

Are your hearts drawn by the irresistible appeal of the gospel of God's provision? Oh, how can we be indifferent as we are confronted with the greatest thing that can occupy the minds of rational beings? How can we be indifferent as we are confronted with that which is the supreme manifestation of the wisdom, grace, and righteousness of God? What an awful commentary upon the depravity of human nature when we can be unmoved and indifferent in the presence of that grand thing that will be the preoccupation of the saints of God throughout eternal ages. Oh, may our hearts be drawn by that irresistible appeal of the glory of the gospel of God's power and of God's righteousness.



O Lord our God, do thou grant unto us that our hearts may be drawn irresistibly to the Redeemer in all his glory and perfection, and that we may each be united to him in the bonds of enduring and abiding faith, for Jesus's sake. Amen.