

## Lesson 16 at StudyRomans.org

### Romans 1:17, Continued

**Romans 1:17** — For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, “The righteous shall live by faith.”

When we ended last week, we had started looking at the word “revealed” in verse 17, and we saw that it can be understood in two different ways.

- First, the word “reveal” can simply mean to make something known.
- Second, the word “reveal” can mean to create something new that did not previously exist so that it can now be seen or heard.

So which is it here? Does the gospel just tell us about the righteousness of God? Or does the gospel both create the righteousness of God and then show it to us?

Well, we can’t answer that question until after we have answered our next question: what is meant in verse 17 by the righteousness of God?

The first thing we should note about the righteousness of God is that it is certainly a key phrase in the book of Romans. Paul uses that phrase nine times in his epistles, with eight of those nine occurrences found in Romans.

So what does “the righteousness of God” mean? There are three primary views. (And you can see all of our various options on the Hand-out for Lesson 16.)

First, the righteousness of God may refer to an attribute of God, to some quality inherent in God’s character such as his righteousness.

**Psalm 119:142** — Your righteousness is righteous forever, and your law is true.

Second, the righteousness of God may refer to a gift or a status that is given by God, such as the righteousness that comes from God.

**Philippians 3:9** — And be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, **the righteousness from God** that depends on faith.

Third, the righteousness of God may refer to some activity done by God, such as the salvation done by God.

**Isaiah 46:13** — **I bring near my righteousness**; it is not far off, and my **salvation** will not delay; I will put **salvation** in Zion, for Israel my glory.

So what then is the meaning of the righteousness of God here in verse 17?

Once again, I think we should look at another question before we answer that one. Let’s get all the cards out on the table before we start defining things!

Before we define “reveal” and “the righteousness of God,” let’s look at a third phrase from verse 17: “from faith for faith.” What does that mean? There are six primary views.

Actually, there is a seventh view not shown on the Handout. But we know that this seventh view is not a correct view, and so we will not include it on our list of possibilities.

And what is this seventh view? It is the view that “from faith for faith” is just Paul’s way of saying “by faith alone” as that phrase is used in most of the denominational religious world.

Those who hold this position use that phrase “by faith alone” to drive a wedge between faith and obedience, but we know that view is false. Paul has already told us that back in verse 5 with the obedience of faith. We know that a saving faith is always an obedient faith.

And we also know this seventh view is false because of what James tells us. In fact, the book of James is the only book in the Bible where we find that phrase, “faith alone.” Given that, you would think that this verse would be the favorite verse of the “faith alone” crowd — but, of course, it is instead their least favorite verse!

**James 2:24** — You see that a person is justified by works and **not by faith alone**.

**James 2:26** — For as the body apart from the spirit is dead, so also faith apart from works is dead.

There could be no clearer statement than that as to what happens when you try to peel faith and obedience apart. What you end up with

is a dead faith! It would be just like trying to peel the body and spirit apart — you would end up with a dead body.

So what is the solution? Luther's solution was to throw James out the window. But I think a better solution is to throw Luther out the window, or at least his false views.

Whatever Paul means here by the phrase “from faith for faith,” we can be sure that he is not contradicting what James tells us or what Paul himself told us in verse 5 about “the obedience of faith.” So, although it is a popular view, this seventh view is a false view, and so it is not on the list of six possibilities shown on the Handout for Lesson 16.

The first view on that list is that “from faith for faith” may refer to the fact that we are saved through faith only in God. We are not saved through faith in ourselves or faith in our achievements or faith in our good deeds. We are saved through faith only in God.

As we have said, faith is trust and reliance in God, and a saving faith is an obedient faith. We trust God, and we obey God. That is the path to salvation. If we trust in ourselves and rely on our own righteousness, we will die in our sins. We must trust in God and only in God — that is faith: complete trust and reliance in God and only in God.

The gospel is a system based on faith; not a system based on human works. And perhaps this phrase “from faith for faith” is just Paul's way of saying that. In effect, perhaps Paul is just saying that the gospel is all about faith, from beginning to end. That is the first view on our list.

Second, “from faith for faith” may refer to God’s faithfulness (from faith) and man’s faith (for faith). Elsewhere, Paul tells us about the faithfulness of God.

**2 Timothy 2:13** — If we are faithless, **he remains faithful** — for he cannot deny himself.

**1 Thessalonians 5:24** — **He who calls you is faithful**; he will surely do it.

**2 Thessalonians 3:3** — **But the Lord is faithful**. He will establish you and guard you against the evil one.

Third, “from faith for faith” may refer to the progression from faith in the Old Testament to faith in the New Testament. This view has the advantage of being supported by the immediate context — the Old Testament verse we would quote first as evidence for this view is quoted by Paul himself right here in verse 17!

**Habakkuk 2:4** — Behold, his soul is puffed up; it is not upright within him, **but the righteous shall live by his faith**.

Fourth, “from faith for faith” may refer to the faith of the Jews (which came first) and the faith of the Gentiles (which came second). This view has a similar advantage to the previous view — support in the immediate context. The verse that we would quote first as evidence for this view of verse 17 is verse 16!

**Romans 1:16** — 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**.

Fifth, “from faith for faith” may refer to the faith of the preacher and the faith of the hearer. This view also has the advantage of support in the context — but here it is not the *immediate* context. We have to look ahead to Romans 10.

**Romans 10:15,17** — And how are they to **preach** unless they are sent? As it is written, “How beautiful are the feet of those who **preach** the good news!” ... So **faith** comes from **hearing**, and hearing through the word of Christ.

Sixth, “from faith for faith” may refer to the growth of our own faith from our first faith in God when we obey the gospel to a more mature faith as we grow spiritually in our walk with Christ. Paul describes that path to maturity elsewhere.

**Ephesians 4:13** — Until we all attain to **the unity of the faith** and of the knowledge of the Son of God, **to mature manhood**, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ.

**Hebrews 6:1** — Therefore let us leave the elementary doctrine of Christ and **go on to maturity**, not laying again a foundation of repentance from dead works **and of faith toward God**.

So, after looking at our options for “reveal,” our options for “the righteousness of God,” and our options for the phrase “from faith for faith,” where are we?

- We have two possible views for “reveal.”
- We have three possible views for “the righteousness of God.”
- We have six possible views for “from faith for faith.”

If we do the math, then what that means is that, if we wanted to examine all of those various combinations, we would have to look at 36 different views for the meaning of verse 17! But that would take too much time — even for us! So, instead, let's see if we can narrow our options down a bit.

What about that word “reveal”? Is God just informing us about something here, or is God creating something and then showing it to us here?

I think the next verse, verse 18, is helpful in answering that question. And so let's briefly look ahead to the next verse.

**Romans 1:18** — For **the wrath of God is revealed** from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth.

I think the word “revealed” in verse 18 is clearly in our second category — it is describing something that is created and then shown to us.

God's wrath is not just something about which the ungodly are being informed; instead God's wrath is caused by the ungodly and is then shown to the ungodly. The ungodliness of man brought about the wrath of God as a response to their sin. Paul tells us that elsewhere:

**Ephesians 5:6** — Let no one deceive you with empty words, for **because of these things** the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience.

**Colossians 3:6** — **On account of these** the wrath of God is coming.

What is being revealed in verse 18 is something that came about *because of* and *on account of* something done by the disobedience of mankind. That disobedience caused the wrath.

And I think that use of the word “revealed” in verse 18 suggests that we should view the same word in the same way in verse 17.

And, if we adopt that second view of “reveal” in verse 17, then what does that say about our list of potential views for the righteousness of God? Are there any options for that second term that we can drop from our list based on our view of the first term?

Yes, I think we can rule out the first view — that the righteousness of God refers to an attribute of God’s nature. Yes, that view is a popular view, but I don’t think it is the correct view.

Why not? Because God has always been righteous. God’s righteousness is not something that could have been caused by the arrival of the gospel. If “reveal” in verse 17 means the same thing it does in verse 18, then I do not think that the “righteousness of God” in verse 17 can refer to God’s righteous nature.

That leaves us with two options: the righteousness of God refers to a gift or a status given by God, or the righteousness of God refers to some activity done by God.

Which of those two remaining options should we choose? To answer that question, I think we should look at how this same phrase will be used again later in Romans to describe the Jews.



**Romans 10:3** — For, being ignorant of the **righteousness of God**, and seeking to establish their own, they did not submit to **God's righteousness**.

The distinction in Romans 10:3 is between the righteousness that we seek to establish ourselves versus the righteousness that comes from God through our submission to the gospel of Christ. That righteousness from God is a gift from God. It is the gift from God that is given when we obey the gospel.

**Philippians 3:9** — And be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, **the righteousness from God** that depends on faith.

Paul refers to this “righteousness of God” elsewhere as something we become.

**2 Corinthians 5:21** — For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become **the righteousness of God**.

I think the righteousness of God in Romans 1:17 and 2 Corinthians 5:21 is the righteousness from God in Philippians 3:9 and is the righteousness of God in Romans 10:3 about which the Jews were ignorant, seeking instead to establish their own righteousness.

And that view fits perfectly with our understanding of “reveal” in verse 17. This righteousness of God is revealed by the gospel in the sense that the gospel gives God the power to make sinners righteous. This power was created by the gospel and then shown to mankind by the proclamation of the gospel. This righteousness was “revealed” to us.

And I think that view of “the righteousness of God” agrees with how that same phrase is used elsewhere in Romans. For example:

**Romans 3:21-22** — But **now** the **righteousness of God** has been manifested apart from the law, although **the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it** — the **righteousness of God through faith** in Jesus Christ **for all who believe**. For there is no distinction.

Notice the word “now” in that verse — “now” the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law. Again, that suggests we are looking at something new here — something that had not been shown to us before, but that has “now” been shown.

And notice the phrase “through faith” in that verse. Again, that phrase suggests that we are not looking at some attribute of God here, but rather we are looking at something that we received from God through faith, and this gift from God is “for all who believe,” keeping in mind all that we said about that word “believe” in our prior lesson.

And, finally, those verses tell us that the Law and the Prophets bear witness to the righteousness of God. We are reminded of what Jesus said:

**Luke 24:44** — Then he said to them, “These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you, that everything written about me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled.”

Likewise, I think this “righteousness of God” in verse 17 is something about Jesus that was written in the Law and the Prophets and that had “now” been fulfilled.

The righteousness of God is the righteousness that comes only from God and that comes only through the gospel of Christ. The righteousness of God is the righteousness that we receive as a free gift from God when we obey the gospel of Christ.

Don't we sing about this righteousness of God?

“When he shall come with trumpet sound, O may I then in him be found: dressed in his righteousness alone, faultless to stand before the throne.”

In the gospel is revealed a plan by which God makes men righteous. And, so, with that understanding of the righteousness of God, how should we interpret the phrase “from faith for faith?” Which of our six options is the best choice? Here, again, is the list from the Hand-out for Lesson 16:

- “from faith for faith” refers to our salvation only through faith in God rather than through faith in ourselves and our own good deeds; we will never be able to work our way to heaven; the gospel is all about faith, from beginning to end.
- “from faith for faith” refers to God’s faithfulness (from faith) and man’s faith (for faith).
- “from faith for faith” refers to the progression from faith in the Old Testament to faith in the New Testament.
- “from faith for faith” refers to the faith of the Jews (which came first) and the faith of the Gentiles (which came second).
- “from faith for faith” refers to the faith of the preacher and the faith of the hearer.

- “from faith for faith” refers to the growth of someone’s faith from his first faith to a more mature faith.

Which should we choose? The short answer is that any of these options could be what Paul meant by the phrase “from faith for faith” in verse 17. They are all Biblical ways to describe faith. We looked at the verses earlier.

The phrase is ambiguous. And, any time I see an ambiguous phrase like that in the Bible, I wonder whether God meant for us to see many different meanings in that phrase.

Perhaps, here in verse 17, God wanted us to see all six of these meanings. Perhaps Paul did not intend only one meaning, and, if so, we should not choose only one meaning. We can find all of these meanings elsewhere in the Bible — why not also see them here in verse 17?

But, if I were forced to choose only one, I would likely lean toward the last option on our list — that “from faith for faith” looks to the first step of faith that we show when we obey the gospel (from faith) and also looks to our life of faith as we walk in the light, zealous for good works, and as we remain faithful unto death (for faith). We start with faith, and we continue with faith. That option fits well with the quote at the end of the verse — faith is how we live; faith is how we walk.

But, given the support in the immediate context for two of the other options, I lean more toward the opinion that this phrase was intended to include all of these various Biblical possibilities.

In short, the Bible tells us that there are many facets to how the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, and I do not think that Paul's intention here was to include only one of those many ways to understand that description of faith.

And, with that, we are halfway through verse 17! Now let's read the second half:

as it is written, "The righteous shall live by faith."

Where would you turn if I asked you to name the Old Testament book that teaches us the most important thing in the Old Testament about faith?

Some might wonder if there's *any* Old Testament book that teaches us about faith. Isn't faith just a New Testament concept? Wasn't the Old Testament focused only on works? And didn't God suddenly focus on faith only under the New Covenant?

Not at all. God has **always** been focused on faith. And Paul's quotation here from Habakkuk proves that.

**Habakkuk 2:4** — "Behold, his soul is puffed up; it is not upright within him, but the righteous shall live by his faith."

And so, I ask again — what Old Testament book tells us the most important thing in the Old Testament about faith? It may be Habakkuk.

Why do I say that? Because the New Testament repeatedly quotes the verse we just read when explaining the role of faith in the gospel of Christ. We see one example of that right here in verse 17, but there

are two other places where this same verse from Habakkuk is also quoted:

**Galatians 3:11:** Now it is evident that no one is justified before God by the law, for “The righteous shall live by faith.”

**Hebrews 10:38:** But my righteous one shall live by faith, and if he shrinks back, my soul has no pleasure in him.

For those who think that Paul wrote Hebrews, this verse from Habakkuk is a major piece of their evidence.

But, to understand what Habakkuk’s statement means in Romans 1, we first need to understand what Habakkuk’s statement meant in Habakkuk.

We don’t know much about Habakkuk the person, but we do know that his prophecy is very different from most of the other prophetic books. Instead of speaking **to the people** for God, Habakkuk speaks **to God** for the people.

But why? What caused Habakkuk to speak to God? The answer is that Habakkuk looked around and did not like what he saw. And so he boldly confronted God with his concerns and with his questions. Habakkuk saw a world that was in a mess, and he wondered why that was so, and he wondered why God wasn’t doing anything about it. We see all of that in the opening verses of his book.

**Habakkuk 1:2-4** — O LORD, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not hear? Or cry to you “Violence!” and you will not save? Why do you make me see iniquity, and why do you idly look at wrong? Destruction and violence

are before me; strife and contention arise. So the law is paralyzed, and justice never goes forth. For the wicked surround the righteous; so justice goes forth perverted.

In short, Habakkuk was wondering how God's people could ever live in such a world? How could God's people know that God had not turned his back on them and on his promises to them — when, at least on the surface, it looked like God had done both of those things. Had God deserted them?

And God's answer? God's answer to Habakkuk is found in the same verse that Paul quotes here in Romans 1:17. God's answer to Habakkuk is that the righteous shall live by faith. God's answer to Habakkuk is faith. Faith is the answer to those questions — it was the answer in the days of Habakkuk, it was the answer in the days of Paul, and it remains the answer in our own day. The answer is to rely on God and to trust in God.

But before we leave the pages of Habakkuk, let's pause and consider three great lessons from this wonderful Old Testament verse: "The righteous shall live by faith."

### **Lesson 1: Faith Is Not Just a New Testament Concept**

The first thing Habakkuk teaches us is that people were **always** saved through faith, even under the Old Covenant. Why? Because the only alternative to salvation by faith is to live a perfect life — and only Jesus was ever able to do that.

Romans 3:23 will later remind us that all have sinned. We can never come to God on the basis of our own merit. We must come to God

trusting only in him and relying only on him. We must come to God in faith, and that has always been true.

Yes, there are enormous differences between the Old and New Covenants, but the faithfulness of God's obedient children is not one of those differences. Faith has always been the way to God — and that faith has always been a **living, active, obedient faith**. That is the only kind of faith that saves.

And God's people have always been a faithful remnant — an active, working, trusting, obedient remnant. We see that faithful remnant all throughout the Old Testament, and we see that faithful remnant today in the church.

And that remnant is just that — a remnant. We should never expect to be in the majority. In fact, in the history of the world, God's people have been in the majority only twice — right after the creation and right after the flood. Other than that, we have always been a distinct minority — a remnant.

And, yes, that faithful remnant today is the church. But there was also a faithful remnant prior to the church. We see that faithful remnant all throughout the Old Testament — people trusting in God and relying on God as they walked in faithful obedience to God. Hebrews 11 gives us many examples of such faithful people. The people of God have always been a faithful remnant.

And that faithful remnant is saved only by the blood of Christ, both under the New Covenant and under the Old Covenant. We see that in Hebrews 9:15; 10:4; 10:14.

## **Lesson 2: Faith Is a Way of Life**



Habakkuk 2:4 tells us that “the righteous shall **live** by faith.” That word “live” tells us at least two important things about faith.

First, that word “live” tells us that faith is not just a single one-time event. Instead, faith is how we live.

For our physical life, we might say that the healthy shall live by oxygen. Absent oxygen, our health will end very quickly. Likewise, spiritually, the righteous shall live by faith. And, with oxygen, one breath is not enough. We must continue to breathe every moment of our life. That is what faith is like — we must live by faith just as we must live by oxygen. Faith is the path to life — the only path to life. If we want to live, we must live by faith.

The second thing we learn from that word “live” is that faith is our **way of life**. Faith is **how** we live. Faith is **how** we walk with God. Faith is **how** we follow Christ.

To see that, let’s look at the contrast between this verse from Habakkuk and the very next verse in Habakkuk.

**Habakkuk 2:5** — Moreover, wine is a traitor, an arrogant man who is never at rest. His greed is as wide as Sheol; like death he has never enough. He gathers for himself all nations and collects as his own all peoples.

There is a stark contrast between the righteous man in verse 4 and the sinful man in verse 5. The sinful man is a drunkard, the sinful man is arrogant, the sinful man is greedy, and the sinful man is proud. But, and here is the crucial point, that contrast is not just a contrast about how they **think** — it is also a contrast about how they **live**.

What is the difference between those who live by faith and those who do not? Is it just that one group is thinking the right things? No. It is more than that. Yes, they are thinking the right things — but they are also **doing** the right things.

The righteous do not live as the proud live. Instead, the righteous live by faith. They walk by faith. They think by faith. They act by faith. They speak by faith. Faith is their way of life in everything they think or do.

**Colossians 3:17** — And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

That is the walk of faith — whatever you do, in word or deed. That is what it means to be the people of God. Faith is not just what we believe — faith is how we walk, faith is how we live. Faith is our way of life.

### **Lesson 3: Faith Is a Two-Way Street**

A saving faith involves both **our faithfulness** and **God's faithfulness**. And, as we saw, that is one possible understanding of the phrase “from faith for faith” in verse 17.

God is faithful to his promises. When we have faith in God what that means is that we have placed our trust only in God and we are relying only upon God. And we can be certain that our trust in God is not misplaced. We can entrust our very souls to God.

**1 Peter 4:19** — Therefore let those who suffer according to God's will entrust their souls to a faithful Creator while doing good.

A saving faith involves both our faithfulness to God and God's faithfulness to his promises. But how does Habakkuk teach us that?

To answer that question, we need to take a step back to see the entirety of Habakkuk's book. When we do that, I think what we will see is that the central theme of his prophecy is **living by faith in light of the faithfulness of God**.

Habakkuk knew that God loved his people. Habakkuk knew that God could not tolerate evil. And Habakkuk knew that God would be faithful to his promises.

And, yes, Habakkuk asked God some tough questions, but Habakkuk did not ask those tough questions because he **doubted** God's faithfulness. Habakkuk asked those tough questions because he was **certain** of God's faithfulness. That is why Habakkuk was so puzzled.

If Habakkuk had doubted God's faithfulness, then there would have been no reason for Habakkuk to wonder why the world was in such a mess. He would have simply concluded that God must have turned his back on his promises.

But Habakkuk knew that wasn't the answer. Habakkuk had no doubt about God's faithfulness — and that certainty about the nature of God was what drove Habakkuk to ask God those tough questions: "Where are you? Why aren't you doing anything to stop this? Are you seeing this?" The entire book of Habakkuk is all about the faithfulness of God.