AWWOP Monday.17

AW WOP

FLAG: WOP/Monday

HEAD: The Ground of Our Salvation

SUBHEAD:

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By Hans Heinz

*“All at once I felt that I had been born again and entered into paradise itself through open gates”* (Martin Luther).

The doctrine of justification by faith alone is the “sanctuary of the Reformation.”1 When Martin Luther understood the marvelous promise of the sinner’s justification through trust in the Crucified, it was as if the Reformer had already entered into Paradise.

**Soul Struggle**

As monk, priest, and theology professor Luther had struggled for years with an understanding of Paul’s sentence: “In [the gospel] the righteousness of God is revealed” (Rom. 1:17). Day and night his thoughts revolved around that phrase. In his own words he hated the expression “righteousness of God” because he understood it philosophically, according to the church fathers and scholastics, as justice, which God demands, but which the sinner cannot produce and consequently falls under God’s judgment.

**“The Holy Spirit unveiled the Scriptures for me in this tower.”**

In 1545, a year before his death, the former Augustinian monk and later Reformer looked once again back to the turning point in his life, belief, and practice. This turnaround was the breakthrough to the realization that the “righteousness of God” is not a demand, but a gift: the passive righteousness that God imputes to everyone who believes in Christ. According to him, he had realized this in the tower room of the Black Monastery in Wittenberg: “The Holy Spirit unveiled the Scriptures for me in this tower.”2

**Biblical Righteousness**

“Deliver me in Your righteousness” (Ps. 31:1). Already in the Old Testament, God’s righteousness is the righteousness that saves the sinner. When Abraham received the promise of his future descendants (Gen. 15:5), he was not a “superhuman,” but a sinner, as we all are. But because he trusted the promise of God, God counted it to him as righteousness (verse 6). This means that God considered Abraham as “righteous” because of his trusting faith. As the “wicked” in the Bible does not represent an atheist in the modern sense, but a general “sinner” (Ps. 1:1; Prov. 11:31), so also the “righteous” is not the “sinless one,” but the “believer” (see Hab. 2:4). This allowed the apostle Paul to ascertain that even under the Old Covenant people were justified not by works but by faith (Rom. 4:6-8). So He who “justifies,” who “declares righteous,” or “counts someone as righteous,” is God alone: “The Lord [is] our righteousness” (Jer. 23:6).

Thus, justice in the Bible is a religious, not a moral or political, term. People who follow state and government laws, who abide by the rule of law, are not exceptional in this world. But a person who claims to be righteous before God falls prey to a fateful mistake, because even the psalmist in the Old Testament knows that “no one living is righteous” before God (Ps. 143:2).

So if a person wants to come “right” before God, they need God’s righteousness. This is why the psalmist says: “Deliver me in Your righteousness” (Ps. 31:1; 71:2). This righteousness is primarily redemptive righteousness, salvation, not punitive justice.

In the light of the New Testament, this means that the God who assumes the guilt and the judgment of the wicked world (John 1:29), pays for that guilt in the judgment that takes the life of His righteous, sinless Son on the cross. Because of that same sacrifice He can forgive the unjust, accept them, work in them a new way of thinking as well as a new life, and give to them the hope of a new, just world (2 Peter 3:13). Only those who reject this gift will fall under condemnation for their personal iniquity (Heb. 10:29, 30).

**They Did Not Know**

“Since they did not know the righteousness of God” (Rom. 10:3, NIV). The Old Testament prophets clearly taught that humanity’s need of salvation cannot be supplied by mere human virtue (Isa. 64:5). Human salvation requires God’s righteousness—through His forgiveness and merciful acceptance. This truth did not remain clear during the centuries following the conclusion of the Old Testament.

During that period oral teachings intended to interpret the biblical texts came to be regarded as equivalent to the revealed Word of God. Thus Scripture combined with oral tradition became the foundation of faith. The Law, the Torah, was supplemented by many instructions on how to execute it, some of which even substituted (Matt. 15:1-6) and changed it (Rom. 9:31, 32). What was intended as “instruction for life” was converted to the “way of salvation.” This misconception led to the religious formalism (Matt. 23:23) and even religious arrogance (Luke 18:9-14) among the Pharisees of Jesus’ day.

Knowledge of the necessity of God’s grace was not completely lost, as illustrated by the Old Testament Apocrypha.3 But more and more there was an emphasis on the value of one’s own works, which were thought to atone for sins4 as well as claim merit before God.5

The whole life became a “yoke of bondage,” and the Pharisees strove to “make a show of their piety,” a “glorification of themselves,” believing that their righteousness would serve as a “passport to heaven.”6

**Lost People and Our Loving God**

Jesus counters this doctrine of salvation with a clear “No.” He maintained and taught a fundamentally different image of God and humanity. He searched the nature of humankind much more deeply than any of His contemporaries. The individual, from whose heart “evil thoughts” arise (Matt. 15:19), is completely unable to do works that are good before God. It requires a radical conversion and faith in the gospel (Mark 1:15). But even if one has become a disciple, one has to completely depend on God, for we are always “empty-handed” before God (Matt. 5:3), and what we do in following Jesus does not provide any merit but is the natural fruit of His abiding presence (Luke 17:10).

God, our merciful Father, loves His lost children unceasingly; He is ever forgiving the penitent and gladly accepting them back (Luke 15:20-24). We, His disciples, have been called to work. But the reward we receive for our efforts is not a due we can demand from or charge to Him, because He always gives us more good things than we deserve (Matt. 20:15). The reward God gives is not something He owes, but only one more gift of His goodness.

What gave Martin Luther the advantage over his opponents lay in the fact that he had not only acquired this knowledge but also experienced it. Through many struggles with himself, with the theology of his time and its proponents, he had understood what needs to be the foundational experience of being a Christian: “Righteousness means to recognize Christ.”7

**QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND SHARING**

1. What is the difference between the popular understanding of “righteousness” and what the Bible calls “God’s righteousness”?

2. How might God’s righteousness be more important than the world’s righteousness? How can we explain this to our contemporaries, both young and old?

3. How did Jesus’ understanding of God and humanity differ from the current thought of His and our time?

(Endnotes)

1 Wilhelm Dantine, *Die Gerechtmachung des Gottlosen* (Munich: Christian Kaiser Verlag, 1959), p. 248.

2 Martin Luther, *Tischreden,* 3, 3232c.

3 Baruch 2:19, 27.

4 Tobit 12:9.

5 H. L. Strack and P. Billerbeck, *Kommentar zum Neuen Testament aus Talmud und Midrasch* (Munich: Beck, 1961), Vol. IV/1, p. 491.

6 Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1898), pp. 204, 612, 409, 309.

7 Martin Luther, *Luthers Schriften: Weimar Edition* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 2005), vol. 31/II, p. 439.