

John Wesley

and

THE LETTER TO THE

ROMANS



Wesley's Journal, May 24, 1738

Luther's Preface to Romans

Wesley's Translation of Romans

Wesley's Explanatory Notes on Romans

“Sola Christus”

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The John Wesley Collection

Andrew C. Thompson

Executive Editor

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SOW FOR A GREAT AWAKENING

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PUBLISHER'S FOREWORD

John Wesley's profound legacy and impact on world Christianity in his lifetime and since can be viewed through several lenses. The revival that arose under his leadership changed the social and political structure of eighteenth-century England as the poor and lost found hope in the gospel of Jesus Christ rather than in revolution against the crown. The influence of Wesley's Spirit-inspired teaching continued unabated as the Methodist movement spread scriptural holiness across the American continent and lands far beyond.

Wesley's influence as a publisher represents an astonishing record in its own right. Wesley lived in a time when Gutenberg's invention of movable type, which had immediately preceded Luther's reformation, had coalesced into specialized printing trades in London. Typefounders and printeries offered exciting new pathways for the spread of the gospel through inexpensive printed text.

Perhaps more than any other figure of his day, Wesley embraced this new technology and issued sermons, tracts, commentaries, abridgments, biographies, and a host of other items that he considered relevant to the spiritual growth of maturing Christians.

Wesley was vitally driven by the reality of the inner witness of the Holy Spirit. His teaching on entire sanctification, or Christian perfection, is the capstone of his legacy. He worked tirelessly to abridge and republish seminal works by historical figures of

previous generations, reaching as far back as the apostolic fathers of the first-century church. He constantly curated voices that communicated the work of the Holy Spirit in bringing believers into the fullness of salvation and lives of holy love.

These writings resourced the early Methodists in their quest to spread the gospel by providing the intellectual and spiritual moorings for the messengers of the movement. Seedbed believes these writings are as relevant today as they were in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

With great joy we present The John Wesley Collection. In the years ahead, Seedbed will reissue selections from this vast collection, which includes his fifty-volume Christian Library, some 150 sermons, countless items from his journals and letters, as well as innumerable tracts, hymns, poems, and other publications, most of which have been out of circulation for decades, if not centuries. We encourage you to enter these texts with determination. Readers who persevere will soon find themselves accustomed to the winsome tenor and tempo of Wesley's voice and vernacular.

Seedbed's editors are constantly examining the more than 250 years of vital spiritual writing by Wesley and successive generations to find the most relevant and helpful messages that will speak to today's body of believers. We commend this old-new publishing work to you as one ready to be transformed by the latent power of these ancient truths. It is our prayer that these timeless words will add fuel to the fire of an awakening ready to ignite once again across the world.

Sola sancta caritas! Amen.

Andrew Miller
Seedbed Publishing

INTRODUCTION

Of all the events we know about in John Wesley's life, surely none has received more attention among his spiritual descendants than his "Aldersgate experience." It happened on a May evening in 1738 when, upon attending a society meeting on Aldersgate Street, he heard someone reading Luther's *Preface to Romans*. Wesley said that he felt his heart "strangely warmed." He felt a sense of trust in Christ alone for his salvation. He felt a sense of assurance of his justification in Christ and his salvation from "the law of sin and death" (xiii–xiv).

We do not know exactly what part of Luther's *Preface* Wesley was listening to when he had this experience. He told us only that it was "while he [Luther] was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ." It seems likely, then, that Wesley was listening to the first major section of the *Preface*, subtitled in this volume, "The Meaning of Law in Romans." In this section, Luther emphasized that works are not enough to satisfy God, who judges what is in the depths of the heart. Even if one lives quite faithfully within the bounds of the law, our natural desires are corrupted by sin. Therefore we cannot keep God's law from the depths of our heart. "Everyone finds inside himself an aversion to good and a craving for evil," as Luther described it (xvi).

One might be motivated by fear to adhere to the statutes of the law, but that is a different matter than living joyfully in the law

out of one's deepest desires. If righteous acts spring from fear or duty, Luther said, one has not satisfied the law. One only satisfies the law when righteous living springs forth from the depths of the heart. For this to happen, the Holy Spirit must place unconstrained love within our hearts. How do we receive this divine work? Luther wrote, "[T]he Spirit is given only in, with, and through faith in Jesus Christ" (xviii). It is here that Luther described most directly the change in the heart that God works through faith in Christ. Thus, perhaps this was the moment in the reading of the *Preface* during which Wesley felt his own heart strangely warmed.

Aldersgate is important, in part, because it demonstrates so clearly the affective element of faith that Wesley encountered among the Moravians. Faith was not simply a matter of intellectual assent. It was not simply knowing doctrine, participating in the church's rituals, or doing good works, though he surely considered each of these important. Faith involved assurance, a gift of the Holy Spirit whereby one receives the confidence of one's salvation in Christ and a concomitant sense of peace. Yet as Kenneth J. Collins has emphasized, it is "freedom from the power of sin (in conjunction with assurance) which is actually the key to all that took place in Wesley's life at this time."^{*} In other words, Wesley's experience at Aldersgate was one of assurance of salvation, and it was simultaneously an experience of the effects of salvation, namely, freedom from bondage to sin. After this experience, Wesley claimed that he had not really been a Christian prior to it, though he would later temper this assertion. Even after Aldersgate, moreover, Wesley would confront doubts about his own salvation and the working of the Spirit in his life. Aldersgate would drive him to develop a deeper understanding of justification, assurance, and sanctification.[†]

^{*} Kenneth J. Collins, *A Real Christian: The Life of John Wesley* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1999), 62.

[†] On this matter, see Richard P. Heitzenrater, *Wesley and the People Called Methodists* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1995), 80–95.

While Wesley's experience at Aldersgate was triggered by his hearing Luther's *Preface to Romans* read aloud, there are distinct differences between Wesley and Luther. Both believed in the "entire depravity and corruption" of humankind apart from Christ (Wesley, note on Romans 6:6). Both believed in the justifying and sanctifying work of God, and that faith was necessary for these to become efficacious in a particular individual. Yet they differed on the roles of human and divine agency in this process. In other words, they differed in their doctrine of election. According to Luther, the eternal providence of God "is the original source which determines who would believe and who wouldn't, who can be set free from sin and who cannot. Such matters have been taken out of our hands and are put into God's hands so that we might become virtuous" (xxix–xxx). Wesley had quite a different take on the matter. When dealing with Romans 8:30, Wesley was very firm: there are those who are called by God who are never justified or glorified. Believers may fall away and lose their salvation (see p. 44). As he emphasized in his discussion of 9:21, God only hardens the hearts of those who are obstinate in their wickedness. "He *will* show mercy, as he has assured us, to none but true believers, nor harden any but such as obstinately refuse his mercy" (p. 53). For Luther, those who are saved are those whom God has chosen. For Wesley, those who are saved are those who respond in faith to God's call, which is extended to all humankind.

There is rich material in Wesley's notes on the Letter to the Romans. He wrote these, as he did the rest of his notes on the Bible, to make Scripture more accessible to non-specialists—the "common folk" who were not scholars or clergy. Indeed, this was Wesley's passion. He offered Christ to all whom he met, and many he would never meet, including those of us who are blessed by his writings and insights today.

David F. Watson
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United Theological Seminary

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and

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ROMANS



“I FELT MY HEART STRANGELY WARMED”

The account from John Wesley's journal describing the events surrounding his heart-warming experience on May 24, 1738 at Aldersgate Street in London.

Wednesday, May 24—I think it was about five this morning that I opened my Testament on those words, “There are given unto us exceeding great and precious promises, even that you should be partakers of the divine nature” (2 Peter 1:4). Just as I went out, I opened it again on those words, “You are not far from the kingdom of God” (Mark 12:34). In the afternoon I was asked to go to Paul’s. The anthem was, “Out of the deep have I called unto you, O Lord: Lord, hear my voice. Oh, let your ears consider well the voice of my complaint. If you, Lord, will be extreme to mark what is done amiss, O Lord, who may abide it? For there is mercy with you; therefore shall you be feared. O Israel, trust in the Lord: for with the Lord there is mercy, and with him is plentiful redemption. And he shall redeem Israel from all his sins.”

In the evening I went very unwillingly to a society in Aldersgate Street, where one was reading Luther’s preface to the Epistle to the Romans. About a quarter before nine, while he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone, for salvation; and an assurance was given

me that he had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death.

I began to pray with all my might for those who had in a more special manner despitefully used me and persecuted me. I then testified openly to all there what I now first felt in my heart. But it was not long before the enemy suggested, "This cannot be faith; for where is your joy?" Then was I taught that peace and victory over sin are essential to faith in the Captain of our salvation; but that, as to the transports of joy that usually attend the beginning of it, especially in those who have mourned deeply, God sometimes gives, sometimes withholds, them according to the counsels of his own will.

After my return home, I was much buffeted with temptations, but I cried out, and they fled away. They returned again and again. I as often lifted up my eyes, and he "sent me help from his holy place." And herein I found the difference between this and my former state chiefly consisted. I was striving, yea, fighting with all my might under the law, as well as under grace. But then I was sometimes, if not often, conquered; now, I was always conqueror.

Thursday, 25—The moment I awakened, "Jesus, Master," was in my heart and in my mouth; and I found all my strength lay in keeping my eye fixed upon him and my soul waiting on him continually. Being again at Paul's in the afternoon, I could taste the good word of God in the anthem which began, "My song shall be always of the loving-kindness of the Lord: with my mouth will I ever be showing forth your truth from one generation to another." Yet the enemy injected a fear, "If you do believe, why is there not a more sensible change? I answered (yet not I), "That I know not. But, this I know, I have 'now peace with God.' And I sin not today, and Jesus my Master has forbidden me to take thought for the morrow."

MARTIN LUTHER'S PREFACE TO ROMANS

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 this piece are synonymous with the terms "righteous, righteousness, make righteous." Both sets of English words are common translations of German gerecht and related words. A similar situation exists with the word "faith"; it is synonymous with "belief." Both words can be used to translate German Glaube. Thus, "We are justified by faith" translates the same original German sentence as does, "We are made righteous by belief."

This letter is truly the most important piece in the New Testament. It is purest Gospel. It is well worth a Christian's while not only to memorize it word for word but also to occupy himself with it daily, as though it were the daily bread of the soul. It is impossible to read or to meditate on this letter too much or too well. The more one deals with it, the more precious it becomes and the better it tastes. Therefore I want to carry out my service and, with this preface, provide an introduction to the letter, insofar as God gives me the ability, so that everyone can gain the fullest possible understanding of it. Up to now it has been darkened by glosses [explanatory notes and comments which accompany a text] and by many a useless comment, but it is in itself a bright light, almost bright enough to illumine the entire Scripture.

To begin with, we have to become familiar with the vocabulary of the letter and know what Paul means by the words: law,