

Romans Chapter 3

Verses 1-8

In continuing his argument from the previous chapter (2:11), that there is no favouritism with God regarding the Jews possession of the law (2:17-24), and circumcision (2:25-29), Paul's point is that it is not that there are no advantages to being a Jew, because there are, but it is that their disobedience to God that disqualifies their advantages. The Jews were, after all, given oracles from God in the O.T. through the prophets concerning Jesus as the messiah. But their response of unbelief in these oracles doesn't take away from God's faithfulness to the promises in His Word. In Vs. 5-8, Paul raises the question of God's right to act on unrighteousness. Paul says that if unrighteous acts cause God to act righteously, then is it unrighteous of God to judge unrighteous people? No, of course not, if God is to judge the whole world then His judgement must be just. What Paul is doing is using a form of argument known in his day as *Reductio ad absurdum*, which is a form of argument that tried to establish that an argument must be accepted because its rejection would be indefensible (absurd). For example: If that's so, then I'm a monkey's uncle, or, if that is true, then pigs can fly. This style of reasoning has been used throughout the history of mathematics and philosophy and was popular in Greek debates. So Paul's argument is that if God sees unrighteousness as a means to show His mercy, then why would He not welcome our unrighteousness? This is a ridiculous argument because it would require God to have a sinful mindset, which is 'absurd'. God's grace and mercy in no way reflects the sinful nature of man, this is demonstrated in Gen. 50:20, when Joseph tells his brothers, "*As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good.*",. It seems though from Vs. 8 that, as absurd as this conclusion is, some people were accusing Paul of teaching it.

Verses 9-20

Even though they had received the oracles and special revelations of God, the Jews had joined the Gentiles in their unbelief and disobedience. This rebellion against God has left them liable to God's condemnation. "*As it is written,*" is a common phrase used in Paul's time to appeal to the authority of scripture and was used by Jesus in His temptation in Matthew 4, where Jesus uses the authority of Deuteronomy against Satan. Paul now supports his argument with a list of O.T. scriptures (see: Ps.14:1-3; 5:9; 36:1; 140:3; 10:7; Prov. 1:16; Is. 59:7-8), all these scriptures taken together show the universal sinfulness of mankind. Vs. 18 reflects the O.T. attitude to God and the word 'fear' is used to describe a devout reverence to God, rather than being scared or frightened of Him. On the contrary, God delights in fellowship with His people now as He always has from the beginning (see Gen. 3:8; Zeph. 3:17; Ps. 147:11). In Vs. 19 we can see how Paul equates all O.T. scripture as '*the law*' since he uses this list of O.T. scriptures and Paul, by using the term "*the law says,*" is showing his belief in scripture as the living Word of God. "*Under the law,*" is another reference by Paul to the O.T. revelation that the Jews received. Gentiles are condemned because the law is "*written on their hearts*" (2:15), and through general revelation, and Jews have possession of the law through special revelation yet both are accountable and have no excuse for transgression against the Law of God. No one has any grounds for appeal to God, and The Jews cannot claim favour because of their possession of the law, all are guilty in God's eyes. So this raises questions for us, how relevant is the law now in the Christian life, and, is there some way we are still bound under the law? In order to answer that we have to understand the intention of the law.

The law has many aspects to it and one of the main use of the law is like a mirror, it is intended to reflect the character and perfect righteousness of God because it reflects His standards and moral outlook. But, by showing us God's character it highlights our sinfulness and need for grace, in this way it serves to drives us to find strength in Jesus. Another use of the law is to restrain evil. In and of itself the law cannot change the human heart, but it can offer a limited amount of protection from injustice, at least until the final judgement.

A further use of the law is that it reveals to us what pleases God. As children of God the law serves to show us what is pleasing to God in order that we might serve Him better. Jesus said, "*if you love me, keep my commandments.*" (John 14:15). by studying and understanding the law of God we learn righteousness and we learn what pleases God, and what offends God. When Jesus died on the cross He obtained our redemption, but redemption from what? From the curse of the law! We are justified not because we are obedient to the law, but in order that we may become obedient to the law because to love Jesus is to keep His commandments, and to love God is to obey His law. In our passage of scripture here, the Jews consider their possession of the law to be proof of their position before God. In reality the law is uncovering their sin and pushing them toward seeking God's grace. Ultimately, their argument of a privileged position before God will be futile before a just judge.

Verses 21-26

In this passage Paul explains how the righteousness of God that is needed by both Jews and Gentiles is provided by Jesus and laid out in the gospels.

Paul explains that the righteousness that brings salvation comes "*apart from the law,*" because the law cannot save. The gospel serves to compliment and not contradict the O.T. law because it was proclaimed through both the law and the O.T. prophets. This is what Paul means in his opening statement of this passage (Vs. 21), God's righteousness is realised in the person and work of Jesus, who was foretold of in the O.T. and came in fact in the N.T. Through His ministry on earth Jesus upheld the law of God through His perfect obedience, now, while we cannot achieve God's righteousness by obedience to the law, it is fulfilled in the renewed lives of God's children through the Holy spirit. The righteousness of God has been "*manifested*" in the person of Jesus, therefore those who trust in Him and recognise His Lordship receive the righteousness of God in their obedience to Him, whether they are Jew or Gentile. Man was made in the image of the glorious God but, through sin, we exchanged that glory for idolatry and chased after our own desires (1:23). Now we are both morally and spiritually disfigured and depraved in our desires, but God's grace renews us and restores that lost glory in believer's.

In Vs. 25 we find one of two words that we come across in the bible but we may not be sure of their meaning, Propitiation and Expiation, but what do they mean? We read here that God put forward Jesus as '*a propitiation*', for us, and I would like to look at these two words for a moment.

Let's beginning with the word *Expiation*. The prefix *ex* means "out of" or "from," so expiation has to do with removing something or taking something away. In biblical terms, it has to do with taking away guilt through the payment of a penalty, or the offering of an atonement such as we find in the O.T. sacrificial offerings. *Propitiation* has to do with the object of the expiation. The prefix *pro* means "for," so propitiation brings about a change in God's attitude, so that He moves from being at enmity with us, to being in favour of us. Through the process of propitiation, we are restored into fellowship and favour with Him. In a sense, propitiation has to do with God's being appeased.

Expiation is the act that results in the change of God's disposition toward us. It is what Jesus did on the cross. The result of Jesus' work of expiation (taking our guilt) is propitiation (satisfying God's anger), God's anger is now turned away from us. Together, expiation and propitiation make an act of placation or satisfaction. Jesus did His work on the cross to placate, or appease, the wrath of God. Now, we need to be very careful in how we understand the wrath of God. The concept of placating the wrath of God here has to do with the nature of salvation. Jesus' supreme achievement on the cross is that He placated, or satisfied, the wrath of God, which burns against us unless we are covered by the blood sacrifice of Jesus on the cross. As people who are covered by the atonement, we are redeemed from the supreme danger of God's wrath. Jesus warns us in Luke 12:5, "*But I will warn you whom to fear: fear him who, after he has killed, has authority to cast into hell. Yes, I tell you, fear him!*" The writer of Hebrews tells us that it is indeed a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of a holy God who is wrathful (Heb. 10:31). But the good news is that there is no wrath for those whose sins have been paid. This Vs. 25, may be one of the most important verses in the bible because it teaches us about justification by faith.

As with a lot of Paul's writings, the roots of this paragraph reach throughout the bible itself and in two key places in particular. The first takes us back to Exodus, and the second comes near the end of John's gospel.

First, let's look at Ex. 25:22. This verse specifically concerns the description of the key piece of furniture in the tabernacle, the ark of the covenant. We remember from our study on the Tabernacle how the high priest, once a year on the Day of Atonement, would enter the Holy of Holies in the tabernacle where the Ark was kept. The priest would sprinkle the blood of a sacrificed animal onto the Mercy Seat to appease the wrath and anger of God for past sins committed. The mercy seat was on top of the ark and on either end are two cherubim (Ex. 25:18-19). Here at the mercy seat, God says in Ex. 25:22, "*There I will meet with you.*" The connection to Romans 3 concerns the Greek word used for the Hebrew word for mercy seat. The Greek translation of the O. T., (known as the Septuagint) uses the word *hilasterion*, to translate the Hebrew word *kapporet*. This Greek word, *hilasterion*, usually gets translated as *propitiation* in the New Testament. The word *Propitiation* only occurs a few times in the New Testament and one of those times is here in Vs. 25, where Paul says that God put forward Christ "*as a propitiation.*" Jesus is the acceptable, wrath satisfying sacrifice on our behalf.

Now look at John 20:12. Mary Magdalene had come to the tomb of Jesus only to find it empty. As she stooped down to look in, "*She saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had lain, one at the head and one at the feet.*" Now look back in Ex. 25, two carved angels took their places at either end of the mercy seat. God desires to meet with his people, and the blood of the spotless lamb is the only means by which that meeting is made possible. The mercy seat of the O. T., and the blood sprinkled on it by the high priest, foreshadowed Christ to come. Well, Jesus did come, and Jesus did make the sacrifice, and Jesus was raised from the dead, these are historical realities. The tabernacle was real. The ark of the covenant was real. The mercy seat was real. The cross was real. The empty tomb was real. And a real woman stooped to look at real angels. Jesus is our mercy seat. There, in and through Jesus, God meets us.

How does God meet with us? He meets us at the cross where Jesus atoned for our sins and we received God's gift of faith in Him. This is the meeting place where we are eternally linked to the righteousness of Jesus through faith. Our faith serves as the instrument and not the basis for our justification. Jesus' perfect obedient life and His propitiating death serve as the grounds for our justification. God's righteousness as our judge is shown in the gospel.

In the O.T., forgiveness was offered through the sacrificial system and as Heb. 9:11-15, tells us these sacrifices were no substitute for man's sin. The significance of those sacrifices was that they pointed towards Jesus, through whom God would deal with man's sin in an appropriate and final way. Looking forward to Jesus' obedience on the cross, God could now righteously "*pass over former sins.*" This is how God is able to justly forgive the sins of the O.T. saints, for example Abraham and David, which Paul discusses in the next chapter, because they believed the promise of a redeemer who was to come.

The redeeming work of Jesus shows us both the justice of God in how He punishes sin in the person of Jesus, and the righteousness of God's salvation which is by "*faith in Jesus*" as Paul tells us in Vs. 26. In His dealing with Jesus as both the sin bearer and the human sinner, God doesn't compromise either His holiness, or the necessity for sin to be atoned for. In His grace, God provides man with a salvation that he is incapable of obtaining for himself.

Verses 27-31

Paul now goes back to the point he was making in chapter two that both Jew and Gentile are under the wrath of God for their sins. Since the law of God neither excuses or saves the Jew, and the gospel exposes a Gentile's sin, neither can escape the judgement of God. So then, our boasting “*is excluded*” because our justification is by faith alone, and not by any human achievement.

Justification is the act by which unjust sinner's are made right in the eyes of our just and holy God. Our lack of righteousness is supplied to believer's by Jesus on our behalf through grace and not anything we can do. Our justification is by imputation, God transfers to us the righteousness of Jesus through faith. When we become God's children, God accounts to us the actual, real merit of Jesus who is now our Lord and saviour. Our faith is real, the righteousness of Jesus is real, and the imputation is real.

Because, as we discussed before, possession of the law doesn't bring salvation, this implies that salvation is open to others as well as Jews. Paul confirms this in Vs. 30, when he appeals to the O.T. by stating that God is one. In Deut. 6:4, we have the opening statement of what became known as the *shema*, which is Israel's confession in a monotheistic faith. *Shema* comes from the initial Hebrew word “*hear*” and is recited by Jews in both their morning and evening prayers, it was also quoted by Jesus in Mark 12:29. Paul emphasises to his audience again that justification comes to both Jew and Gentile in the same way, by faith alone.

It is a mistake for us to separate the O.T. as a covenant of law and the N.T. as a covenant of grace. The O.T. stands as a testimony to God's amazing grace towards His people. In a similar way to the old, the N.T. is filled with commandments. Although we are not saved by the law, we do demonstrate our love for Jesus by obeying His commandments as He says in John 14:15, “*If you love me, you will keep my commandments.*” But Christianity is far more than a list of rules, at it's heart is a deeply personal relationship with Jesus Himself. Although we do have rules that obviously include do's and don'ts, Christianity never gives a person the right to do what is right in their own eyes. We have to build on our relationship with Jesus and, as we grow in our faith, we try to uphold His commandments, we never have the 'right' to do what is wrong. Our faith and justification gives us liberty and freedom but, only within the commandments and will of God.