

# (Postmodern Times) Faith in the Cross of Christ

by D.A. Carson

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*The gospel addresses our sin and rebellion against God, and offers justification through faith in Jesus Christ.*

**Duration:** 1:04:00

**Scripture:** Romans 3:21-25, Romans 3:27-28, Romans 3:30

**Topics:** "Postmodern"

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## Description

In this sermon, the speaker discusses the Israelites' journey from Egypt to the Promised Land as described in the Bible. He highlights how the Israelites, despite witnessing numerous miracles and displays of God's power, constantly struggled with doubt, disobedience, and rebellion. The speaker emphasizes the importance of understanding the big picture of the Bible's storyline in order to comprehend the Gospel. He then focuses on a passage from the book of Romans, which he describes as a condensed and powerful exposition of the cross. The sermon concludes with a prayer for a deep understanding of these teachings and a desire to share the Gospel with others.

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## Transcript

Turn with me please in the Scriptures to Romans chapter 3 and I shall read from verse 21 to the end of the chapter. Romans 3, 21 to the end of the chapter. Let us listen then to what the Word of God says.

The Apostle Paul writes, But now a righteousness from God apart from law has been made known, to which the law and the prophets testify. This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God and are justified freely by His grace through the redemption that came by Jesus Christ.

God presented Him as a sacrifice of atonement through faith in His blood. He did this to demonstrate His justice because in His forbearance He had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished. He did it to demonstrate His justice at the present time so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus.

Where then is boasting? It is excluded. On what principle? On that of observing the law? No, but on that of faith. For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from observing the law.

Is God the God of Jews only? Is He not the God of Gentiles too? Yes, of Gentiles too, since there is only one God who will justify the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through that same faith. Do we then nullify the law by this faith? Not at all. Rather we uphold the law.

We ended this morning by insisting that there are certain non-negotiables that have to be communicated as part of the Gospel. Most of this weekend has been devoted to laying out the framework, the Bible's whole storyline. So important in an age and generation when people have lost that big picture and without that big picture the Gospel itself is simply incoherent.

But I thought that for this last session it would be useful to return to a passage that lies at the very centre of what we understand the Gospel to be just the same. And so we come to what Martin Luther called, and I quote, the chief point, the very central place of the epistle to the Romans and of the whole Bible. Here we find one of the most stunning expositions of the cross in all of Holy Scripture.

And it is a condensed passage. You have to keep watching the text closely. It is tightly tied together.

But perhaps we can unpack it in three steps. First, we are condemned apart from the cross of Christ. That's the first point.

We are condemned apart from the cross of Christ. That is really the burden of chapter 1 verse 18 all the way to chapter 3 verse 20. In other words, it provides all of the setting for this passage.

When you turn back to chapter 1 verse 18, you begin with this note. The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness, since what may be made known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. For since the creation of this world, God's invisible qualities, His eternal power and His divine nature have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse.

Now that's Paul's flag right at the very beginning of this section. What he says, in effect, is that God has demonstrated His existence and His power, at least those two things, by the created order. And if, in fact, we had discovered or manufactured, produced all kinds of complex theories to explain the created order apart from God, that is already a terrible sign of our deep rebellion, a tragic thing.

And then he unpacks what this means. He shows that what we start to do is to worship created things rather than the Creator Himself, or we worship self and all that panders to self, rather than worshipping the One who has made us, so that in due course God hands us over, He passes us over to do what we want to do. And what we do is suppress the truth in unrighteousness.

And then there are entailments for this. The entailments are nasty. They are spelled out in verses 29 and following.

We become filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, greed, depravity. We become full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, malice. We become gossips, slanderers, God-haters, insolent, arrogant and boastful.

We invent ways of doing evil. We disobey our parents. We become senseless, faithless, heartless, ruthless.

In fact, we then begin to applaud and approve those who do the same thing. Now that's chapter one, and it gets worse. Chapter two pictures the religious person.

The religious person doesn't really find any help in religion either, not even the Jews and their God-given religion. For at the end of the day, we discover enough from religion only to discover how bad we are, how far we fall, how quickly we move away from the text. And then in chapter three, Paul says that nevertheless there are some advantages to being a Jew, but at the end of the day, the culminating point is in chapter three, verses nine to twenty.

What he basically argues there is that Jew or Gentile, it doesn't really make much difference. We are really a renegade lot. Paul is not arguing that each person is as bad as he or she could be, but that whether we have the revelation from God in the law, or whether we have the revelation that is stamped on our heart by virtue of the fact that we've been made in the image of God, we don't even do what we know we should do, let alone doing all the things that God wants.

So that if our knowledge is about here, our performance is about there. And if our knowledge is about here, then our performance is about there or there. But we never even live up to what we know, let alone what we don't know.

And so Paul pulls together from the Old Testament a whole catena of passages with this negative overtone. There is no one righteous, not even one. There is no one who understands, no one who seeks God.

All have turned away. They are together, become worthless. There is no one who does good, not even one.

Their throats are open graves. Their tongues practice deceit. The poison of vipers is on their lips.

Their mouths are full of cursing and bitterness. Their feet are swift to shed blood. Ruin and misery mark their ways and the way of peace they do not know.

There is no fear of God before their eyes. Now it is easy, I suppose, in this generation to say, come on, Don, that really is a bit negative, isn't it? It's not the way most of us think about ourselves most of the time. So we pause and ask, do we not think of ourselves this way because we really aren't that way? Or do we not think of ourselves that way because we're already so far removed from God's standards, we're parading on the curve all the time, so inevitably we come out well.

Isn't that what we do in just about every sphere? Everything depends on our standard of comparison, doesn't it? When you start feeling sorry for yourself because of how hard up you are, do you compare yourself with the poorest of the poor in India? Or do you compare yourself with somebody who has just a little bit more than you do? Do you remember what Henry Ford was asked when, how Henry Ford rather answered when he was asked, how much money do you want? How much money do you need when he was already fabulously wealthy? His answer was very insightful. He said, just a little bit more. And so we always want to compare ourselves with those who have a little bit more so that we can feel sorry for ourselves and a bit complaining and cast a slightly green eye without being too rude.

And likewise, when we compare ourselves with other people and want to pat ourselves on the back, then we compare ourselves with those who are a little worse. You know, I'm not as good as some people, but better than that one. I mean, they don't know anything in church.

You know how they gossip? Well, I mean, maybe I'm gossiping. You know how they distort the truth? You know how they're really not very disciplined at all? They're really quite lazy, besides they're not too smart. They don't have as much education as I have and so forth.

You can always pat yourself on the back by finding somebody who's a little bit worse, can't you? But supposing you start looking at things from God's point of view, what would it be like never ever to have told a lie or distorted the truth? What would it be like never ever, not once, to have gossiped? What would it be like never once to have been jealous or envious? What would it be like not once to have been bitter and to nurture bitterness, especially when we've been hurt? What would it be like never ever to have lost it? What would it be like always, always to have loved God with heart and soul and mind and strength? What would it be like always to have loved our neighbor as ourselves? What would it be like always to have walked in the fear of God? Paul is simply telling the truth, that's all. And he tries to play the truth out both for religious people and for irreligious people, both for people in a biblical tradition like Jews and for people who are complete pagans and have none of this background. And he says the sad fact of the matter is we lay a pretty sad plot line for ourselves.

The conclusion, verse 20, no one will be declared righteous in God's sight by observing the law. No one. Because the fact of the matter is those who have the law don't always observe it.

What the law really does is make us aware of sin. Through the law we become conscious of sin. So in fact those of us with more advantages are in a worse situation in some ways.

Isn't that what Paul says in effect in Matthew, what Jesus says in effect in Matthew chapter 11? He speaks to some of the towns in Galilee in his own day and he says, woe to you, Canaan. Woe to you, Bethsaida. For if the miracles performed in you and if the sermons preached in you, if the gospel announced to you had been done up the coast of the pagan cities of Tyre and Sidon or two centuries ago back in the time of Sodom and Gomorrah, those places would have lasted to this day because they would have repented.

And you haven't. It's as if God comes to Shonto and says woe to you, Shonto. For if your heritage in the gospel, your heritage of churches and Christian literature and available Bibles and gospel preaching for the last three centuries or four centuries had all taken place in Kabul, Afghanistan, it would be a lighthouse to the world.

Woe to you, Shonto. So that even all of our relativizing judgments begin to look bleak. Oh, God knows how to keep the books.

He takes into account not only what we are, what we might have been. His judgment is absolutely just. And so far as he discloses it all in Scripture, the answer is there is no one righteous, not even one.

Now it is absolutely essential to identify this problem aright if we are to understand the next verses. One of the things I have kept trying to say over this weekend is that we cannot get the gospel right if we do not get the problem right. One of the things that happens when there are many competing worldviews all around us is that there is no agreement in those different worldviews as to what the problem is.

If people think the problem is primarily one of alienation from the sort of deep force power in the universe, then obviously the gospel that you proclaim in that text is not the gospel of Jesus Christ. If people think that the deepest problem of life is bound up with our alienation from one another, or perhaps the deepest problem in our life is that we are not sufficiently green, then the gospel that we should preach is not the

gospel of Jesus Christ. Not for a moment am I suggesting, therefore, that Christians ought to be irresponsible in matters of ecology.

Far from it. We are stewards of God's creation. But it is to say, in the strongest possible terms, that our analysis of the problem is tied to our understanding of the solution.

And until we see for ourselves and explain to those whom we are evangelizing what the problem is, we cannot see the sheer glory of the cross of Christ. Now this was understood at various points in church history very well, and it has been lost on many occasions. There is a very famous letter from John Wesley, two and a half centuries ago almost, to a young man who wrote to him and asked him how to preach the gospel when he first went into a new town.

And Wesley, in his letter, writes back and says, when I preach the gospel in any place, I begin with a general declaration of the love of God. And then he says, I preach the law, that men may feel its burden and guilt. Then he says, I preach more law, that men may see themselves as God sees them.

When he says I see that there are some people who are beginning to weep in despair for their many sins, I preach yet more law, that men may see they are under the judgment of God. And when many are crying, then he says, I quote, I admit, it's a little grace. And then he says, when many in the congregation do see their guilt before God, then he says, I preach grace fully and freely, that men may see the pardon that is in Christ Jesus and him alone.

And then quickly he says, do I admix law, lest men should presume. Now that's a bit over the top. I acknowledge that.

But the point of rightness in it is, you can't understand the solution until you understand the problem. You can't appreciate the glory of Romans 3, 21 and following unless you know you are guilty before God. You cannot appreciate it.

And Paul himself, dare I mention it, spends two solid chapters laying out sin and six verses laying out the atonement. And so we now turn to the second point. The first is, we are condemned apart from the cross of Christ.

The second, we are justified because of the cross of Christ. This takes us to the heart of verses 21 to 26. The controlling expression in this paragraph is the righteousness of God, which can equally be rendered the justice of God or even the justification of God.

There is one word behind all such expressions. It primarily refers to God's justifying activity, that is, how somehow he prepares us for his own standards. But constantly lurking in the background is the sheer justness of God.

We shall get at the heart of this paragraph by reflecting on four elements in it. First, the revelation of God's righteousness and its relationship to the Old Testament, verse 21. But now a righteousness from God apart from law has been made known to which the law and the prophets testify.

But now, he begins, what does that mean? In the flow of the argument, this now is talking about where we are in redemptive history. He's not saying now in my experience or now in your experience or now that you feel properly guilty or anything like that. He's saying across the sweep of redemptive history God has done a variety of things, and now at this point in redemptive history something has taken place.

What is it? This is not two eras, one of wrath. In the past God gave us his wrath, but now at the end of the age he has given us his mercy. It doesn't work like that.

Many have argued that the God of the Old Testament is, shall we say, a tad harsher. In fact, I recall a year and a half ago I was speaking at a mission in Durham, England, a university mission, and we run these sessions that we call Grilla Christian, where we put two or three people up at the front and the people in the crowd can fire questions at them on anything to do with religion and Christianity and so on, Grilla Christian. And one of the questions that came up was, you say that the God of the Old Testament is the same as the God of the New Testament, but the God of the Old Testament is full of war and genocide and hate and extermination, and Jesus comes along in the New Testament and says, turn the other cheek and stuff like that.

Now he says, how can you possibly say that they're the same God? Isn't the God of the New Testament, to say the very least, a gentler, kinder God? Now most of us would not put it quite in those terms, but deep down we've sort of had some suspicions, haven't we? We know that it has to be the same God, but it does make us a little nervous once in a while, doesn't it? But I'd be prepared to argue this is a pretty massive misreading of Scripture. In the Old Testament there are two driving themes that pulsate onward and forward. On the one hand there is this theme of failure and judgment.

Think through the history of the Old Testament quickly. God creates the race in his image. Men and women know him and love him.

Then there is the Fall, and because of that death the next generation commits murder. It only takes one generation to move from hate and resentment and cruelty and God-defying idolatry that you come to the terrible judgment of the Flood. And after the Flood, what's the first thing that happens? Noah gets drunk.

After that, what happens? People decide they're going to build a big ziggurat, a big tower up to heaven to preserve them from any conceivable disaster in the future, a place of utmost stability and safety. The Tower of Babel, and people are dispersed, and God calls Abraham. Lot comes along as well.

Lot, we're told by Hebrews, is a righteous man, and yet he is sufficiently greedy that he chooses the cities of the plain, and pretty soon everything is destroyed, he's lost his wife, and he's having incestuous relationships with his two daughters, and the last we hear of him, he's drunk and living in a cave. Abraham? Well, there's a man of faith, although he lies quite a bit, and within three generations, four generations, this is a major dysfunctional family, with brothers selling one brother off to slavery, and that, so as not to kill him! And then a few people go down into slavery, and when God hears their cries and rescues them, does this mean that they are instantly obedient and loving and grateful? No, the whole wilderness wandering is one pastiche of disappointment and defiance and rebellion after another. One month after the crossing of the Red Sea, they're building a golden calf, and then there's whining and complaining and murmuring and bickering, and people are ready to stone Moses, and this goes on for years! They come up to the first entrance to the Promised Land, and most people can't remember that God has just led them through these ten plagues, and all the miracles of the crossing of the Red Sea, and his gracious self-disclosure and power in the giving of the law, they can't remember any of that, all they can see is that there's some pretty big blokes in the Promised Land, and they're scared witless.

And as a result, they spend forty years in the back side of the desert, going round and round in circles. And when they come in again, it's not long before they're Gedizim and Ebal, promising to obey God, with the curses being shouted antiphonally across the valley. And what happens? You enter the period of the

Judges, which cycles down and down and down and down, until you get to the last three chapters of the Book of Judges, and you can't even read them in public, they're so grotesque! So God raises up a kid.

And what happens to the Davidic dynasty? It declines in debauchery, in sheer rebellion and idolatry, until you get the exile. And then you get the return from the exile, a small motley crew, and it takes several prophets to whip them into shape until they build a temple that they came there to build in the first place! That's the Old Testament. Themes of sin and defection and failure and God's judgment returning again and again and again.

That's one theme. The other theme is God pursuing his people again and again and again, so that after the terrible defection of Eden, God promises one day that the seed of the woman will destroy the serpent. And after the flood, God promises that he will no longer destroy the race the same way again until the very end.

God pulls out an Abraham and promises in this land children as many as the stars of the heavens, and he promises that through his offspring all the nations of the earth will be blessed. God pulls his people out of misery. God raises up a Joseph when his brothers are selling him off for terrible reasons.

God raises up a Moses. God gives the law at Sinai. God chastens his people as a father chastens his children.

God comes after his people again and again. So you find, pulsating through the Old Testament, these two themes rushing toward one another, closer and closer and closer, an uncertain climax until finally you have the wrath of God on the people of God and the love of God and where shall it end? And it ends. Righteousness and peace kiss each other.

Do you want to see the wrath of God? Do you want to see the love of God? Look at the cross. And meanwhile, the same new covenant that lays out the glory of God's love on the cross also presents all the terrors of final judgment. Which person in the New Testament speaks most graphically of hell? It is Jesus.

If you are so convinced that the God of the New Testament is a kinder, gentler God, read Revelation 14, verses 6 to 20. Then come and tell me that the God of the New Testament is a kinder, gentler God. The truth of the matter is that as you move from Old Testament to New, the disclosure of God's wrath becomes progressively clearer.

And as you move from Old Testament to New, the disclosure of God's grace becomes progressively clearer. And it is an immense perversity on our part to say that God's wrath is clear in the Old Testament and God's grace is clear in the New. That is very convenient for us.

But it is not what the text says. No. What is at stake when Paul writes, but now something has happened? Is not, but now there is forgiveness? But now there is righteousness over against the wrath of the Old Testament.

Paul's point is clear if we see that the little phrase, apart from law, is not in the original connected with righteousness of God, but with is made known. Let me explain. We are not reading, but now a righteousness from God apart from law has been made known.

But rather, but now a righteousness from God has been made known apart from law. That is, a righteousness from God apart from law has been made known. That's the way it reads.

Which is to say now that there is something that has come about now in redemptive history apart from the law covenant, apart from the law covenant with Moses. Something has happened. Something has come.

This righteousness from God has been disclosed apart from the law covenant. That is, apart from the entire structure of what was laid down by Moses on Sinai. But this does not mean that it comes completely independently of the law.

For the text then goes on to say, but now a righteousness from God apart from law has been made known, to which the law and the prophets testified. Do you see what is being said? The law of Moses and the prophets, the Old Testament scriptures as a whole, bear witness to, they testify to, this righteousness that has now come at the end of the age apart from that covenant. The law covenant had many good things connected with it.

It demanded righteousness, it provided all kinds of patterns and pictures, but the righteousness that has finally come to men and women has come apart from that law covenant. But that doesn't mean it has come as a brand new thing in God's mind, or a brand new thing in the Bible, something that was never thought of before. No, those Old Testament scriptures bore witness to it.

They testified to it. Isn't that what we discover? The Old Testament temple system portrayed, in fact, what Hebrews lays out in the New Testament as a kind of picture of the heavenly temple, in which Jesus, the high priest, enters into the most holy place and offers up his own blood. The Old Testament high priest is now pictured in Jesus himself, who is the ultimate high priest, the one who mediates between God and human beings, and the Old Testament king.

Well, God knows we need a king. We need a king who will reign over us and rule over us and teach us in righteousness. But now Jesus is our king, and we have entered the kingdom of Christ, the kingdom of God, so that at every level there has been a witness born to this culminating victory, this culminating righteousness, this culminating triumph, this culminating solution that has been found, which itself lies apart from the law covenant, but that to which the law covenant bears witness.

Thus, in the first place, the revelation of God's righteousness and its relationship to the Old Testament are unpacked for us. Now, righteousness from God has been made known to us apart from law, to which the law and the prophets testify. The second point of this paragraph is this.

The availability of God's righteousness to all human beings without distinction is made clear. Verses 22 and 23. This righteousness from God, we're told, comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe.

Now, I don't know what versions of the Bible you are using in this church, but there are some versions of the Bible here who render this righteousness from God comes through the faith of Jesus Christ, that is, the faithfulness of Jesus Christ, which does make good sense. Jesus was faithful to his Father in going to the cross. He obeyed him.

Thus, even in Gethsemane, he cries, if it be possible, take this cup from me, but if not, then not as I will, but as you will. He was obedient, Hebrews says, and Paul says in Philippians 2, even unto death he learned the obedience of the Son. So there is a sense in which our entire grasp of the Gospel, the entire crossword of Christ, turns on the faithfulness of Jesus Christ.

But with all respect, I don't think that's what it means. I think that the NIV has it entirely correct here. This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ, that is, Jesus Christ is the object of our faith.

The point is that faith throughout chapter three all the way through chapter four regularly refers to the active faith of the people of God, and the object of our faith throughout these chapters is Jesus Christ. The availability of God's righteousness to all human beings comes to us without distinction by faith in Jesus Christ. Now let us press on.

This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. In fact, people say, that really is a very strange expression, for in the original it reads something like this, faith in Jesus Christ to all who have faith. Isn't that a bit topologous? Isn't it saying the same thing sort of twice? We've made it easier in the English versions by changing faith to believe, but strictly speaking the text says this righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who have faith.

Well, you've said that already, in the faith of Jesus Christ. Why do you even bother saying it? And the answer, of course, is in that wonderful little word, all. If I had to translate literally, this righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ, dash, to all who have faith in Jesus Christ.

That's the point of the repetition, to stress the all. And then it's explained for us, in case we haven't picked it up yet. There is no difference.

That is no difference between Jew and Greek, Jew and Gentile. That has been the whole burden of the preceding two and a half chapters. There's no difference.

For the fact of the matter is, all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God and are justified purely by his grace. Now, if you're a Christian at all, what I've said is merely by way of review. You know this.

But it is something we need to review pretty often, because there is something deep down in the heart of most of us that somehow accepts the forgiveness of God by faith at the beginning, and then after that somehow surreptitiously wants to switch into brownie points at the end, so as to impress God with ourselves. But Jesus insists that even if we're so good, and ever so righteous, we're reduced to saying at the end of the day, we're still unprofitable servants, because we ought to be good, and we ought to be righteous. It's not as if we're doing God any favors when we're doing good.

And what about the times we're not good? That's why we still sing, My hope is built on nothing less than Jesus' blood and righteousness. I dare not trust the sweetest prayer, but holy lead on through his name. Not only you who are not Christians, but you who have been Christians for 10 years, or 20 years, or 40 years, it's very important to remember that God does not accept you because you've been a Christian for 40 years, or because you've been active in the church, or because of your Christian heritage, or because you've tried hard and raised a family.

Oh, I know, at a certain kind of gut level, we don't think like that at all. We just don't say that sort of thing. But deep down, a fair bit of our sense of well-being is often tied to our sense of accomplishment in the moral arena.

Isn't that the case? Whereas throughout history, throughout the whole history of the church, what you find instead is that people who draw closest to God are most aware of their own sin and shame and guilt, and confess it to Him again and again, and cast themselves upon God, receiving His forgiveness in faith. That's all we've got, and it is enough. Now the third point in this paragraph is this.

If the first verse depicts the revelation of God's righteousness and its relationship to the Old Testament, and verses 22 to 23 depict the availability of God's righteousness to all human beings without distinction,

the next two verses, or verse and a half to be more precise, depict the source of God's righteousness in the gracious provision of Christ Jesus as the propitiation for our sins. A lot of big words there, but they're important. What do we read? Verse 24 and the first half of 25.

We have been told that this righteousness from God has come through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe, for there's no difference. Jew, Gentile, we're all sinners, we all need help. And, verse 24, we are justified, we're told, freely by His grace, through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.

We are justified. Now what the word means here, what this verb means, without exception in Paul, is that God has declared us to be just. It is very important to understand that this does not mean that God is just.

God has not by His grace made us just. God has declared us to be just. That is, the verb is used in the cases of decisions by the court.

In the Old Testament, when the court judge, whether the king or someone else, says, not guilty, then the judge has justified the defendant. The difference here is that God Himself has come to us, and because of the death of His Son, has turned to Don Carson and said, not guilty. Not guilty of sin, at the risk of a bad pun.

Did you see? Which is why the Reformers speak of justification in their favorite Latin phrase, simul justus et peccator, that is to say, simultaneously just and a sinner. Because God declares me just, and yet I am a sinner. Now, this made the Roman Catholics, at the time of the Reformation, exceedingly angry.

They thought that what this did was free people up, in fact, to become antinomians. That is, people who didn't give a rip about righteousness. If you can be forgiven and declared by God to be justified, when in fact you're still living like a trooper, you're a sin and you mock, then what's to stop you from continuing in your sin? Simul justus et peccator, how could that be? If you're a sinner, then you're a sinner, you're not just.

Biblically speaking, the answer, of course, is that bound up with our salvation is more than justification. That's not something that Paul goes into right away here, it comes a little later. The more that is bound up with our justification is, amongst other things, regeneration.

Because God regenerates us, he transforms us. Because God pours out his spirit upon us, he gives us a heart to want to follow him. Or, to use the language of the prophet Jeremiah, for seeing these things six centuries before, he says, God will write his law in your hearts.

So that besides justification, there are other things going on. God does renew us, he does transform us. So if somebody says, I believe I'm justified, and continues to live like the world and the flesh and the devil, you have every reason, biblically speaking, to put a great big question mark over the claim.

Because those who are truly justified will also be truly regenerated. Oh, I know that there can be terrible backsliding and slips and all the rest, yes, I know that happens. But the course and the tendency of life must be in a certain direction where we have every right to put this question mark over people.

When people are genuinely justified, they are in the first place free from the curse of God. They are in the first place free from the condemnation of God. That's the thing that is first of all necessary.

But that's not all that God does. He transforms us. He regenerates us.

He bequeaths his spirit to us as the down payment of the promised inheritance, so that we should be getting ready for the glories of the new heaven and the new earth. But that is not to be confused with justification. God declares us to be just.

Ah, the other side has said, but this is surely just a legal fiction. No, it is a legal reality. It is a legality.

That is to say, this itself is not the transformation. This is God's legal pronouncement, God's legal declaration. But it is not a legal fiction.

It would be a legal fiction if he said, Don Carson, not guilty. But nobody would pay for my sin. Please turn to side B now.

But if he says, Don Carson, not guilty, and someone has paid for my sin, that's not a legal fiction. That's a legal reality. So we read.

We are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. The language of redemption was used with the language of buying back slaves, setting them free. Somebody has paid enough to set me free.

And then, lest we have not quite understood it, it is unpacked for us in verse 25. Verse 25 unpacks how God effected this liberation by Christ. We read, God presented him, that is Christ, as a, the NIV that I'm reading says, sacrifice of atonement through faith in his blood.

The King James Version says through propitiation. The RSV says through expiation. All big words.

What do they mean? There is a long discussion here that I will summarize very briefly. In the pagan world, the notion of sacrifice is very much bound up with propitiation. Propitiation is merely that act by which a god, or the gods, or in the Christian world, God himself, it is merely that act by which the gods become propitious, that is, favorable.

What sacrifice is it that makes the gods propitious, that is, favorable? In the pagan world the idea was you offer sacrifices to make the god of reproduction propitious so that your wife has a fat baby. Sounds reasonable. You try to make the god favorable, so you propitiate the god.

The act is propitiation. Now in this kind of model of things, I am the sacrificer, I am the propitiator. God, or the gods, are the propitiated.

So along came an English scholar, a Bible scholar from a more liberal perspective, in the 1930s by the name of Dodd. C.H. Dodd. Now Dodd eventually went down such a track of liberal theology that eventually somebody said of him, when he said just too many blasphemous things on one day, he said, There once was a professor called Dodd, whose name was exceedingly odd.

He spelt, if you please, his name with three d's, while one is sufficient for God. Which is a quintessential British put-down that has nothing whatsoever to do with the issue, but is a put-down nonetheless. Now what Dodd argued was that this cannot be propitiation here, because in the Bible we don't find God being the angry one over there, and Jesus being the friendly one.

It's not as if we're propitiating God by offering Jesus, and surely, surely, God so loved the world that he gave his Son. If God so loved the world that he gave his Son, how can we speak of the Son propitiating the Father? God already gave the Son to us in the first place, so how can we speak of propitiation? Much

better, he said, therefore, to speak of expiation. That is, the cancelling of sin.

God cancels sin in the cross, but that doesn't mean that God's wrath is turned away by it or something like that, does it? So along came some people by the name of Roger Nicole and Leon Morris and others who wrote some very important books. If you want to read a wonderful book on the Atonement, and all serious readers could read it, you don't have to be a technical guru to handle this book. There's a very important book by Leon Morris written more than 30 years ago called *The Apostolic Preaching of the Cross*.

Worth its weight in gold. No minister should be without it, no serious Christian reader should be without it. *The Apostolic Preaching of the Cross* by Leon Morris.

Now, what Morris points out is that when this talk of propitiating God is found in the Bible, it's found in the Bible. C. H. Dodd tried to argue that God's wrath is really just an impersonal way of saying that sin works out that way, but God isn't personally angry. Well, if God isn't personally angry, why should you say he's personally loving either, for that matter? When you actually read the surrounding context here, how does it begin? In the flow of the argument from chapter 1, verse 18 on, the wrath of God is revealed from heaven.

Ah, people have said, but even so, how can God both be the one who loves us so much he sends his son, and the one whose wrath is turned away by his son? If he loves us so much, why do you have to turn his way as his wrath? In other words, how can God be both the subject and the object of propitiation? And the biblical answer is, of course, but that's the way it is. That's the very glory of the cross. You see, the fact of the matter is that God does stand against us in wrath, but his wrath is not bad-tempered whimsy.

It's not that he's in a bad mood. His wrath is principled justice. It stands over against us in condemnation.

But, although God stands over against us in wrath, he loves us so much anyway that he sends his son to bear our sin, and by bearing our sin, thus takes away the concern that his own justice has about our guilt. Supposing God were the kind of God who said, instead, Mao Zedong knocked off 15 million Chinese. I don't give a rip.

Some people do those things. Hitler, the Holocaust. Oh, nasty piece of work, but I don't care.

That's human problems, not my problem. Would that be a better God? That would be an amoral God. Or a cruel God.

Or a God who thinks that the actions of us as created beings are just jokes, insignificant. Does that help? Oh no, God must stand over against us in justice and condemnation precisely because he is a holy God. He stands over against us in wrath.

But the glory of the Gospel is that though he stands over against us in wrath, he loves us anyway. Not because we're so lovable, but because he's that kind of God. When I say, I love you, to my wife, one of the things I mean is, I find her lovely.

But when God says to sinners, I love you, he does not mean, I find you so lovely I can't bear to live without you. For the source and motivating power of God's love is not the object loved, but God himself. So God stands over against us in justice and therefore in wrath because we are guilty.

But he stands over against us in love because he's that kind of God. That's the glory of the Gospel. God disclosed his love to us in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.

While we were yet sinners. So in the Christian way of things, it's not that we are the subjects who propitiate God. It's not even that Jesus propitiates God exactly, for Jesus does the Father's will.

I know that Hebrews can speak of the Son turning away the Father's wrath. There is a sense in which exactly that takes place. But it does not take place because God is against us only in wrath and Jesus is for us only in love.

No. God so loved the world that he gave his Son. God set forth Jesus to be the propitiation for our sins.

God set forth Jesus to be the one who would absorb the curse and the guilt and the shame and the suffering in his own body on the tree to satisfy both God's justice and to set us free. Now that is the basis for our being declared just even though we're not. And this we accept by faith because our works certainly aren't going to win it.

Which brings us to the last point. The demonstration of the righteousness of God through the cross of Jesus Christ. The demonstration of the righteousness of God through the cross of Jesus Christ.

25b and 26. We're told that God did this. That is, God set forth Christ as a sacrifice of atonement in his blood, received through faith.

That is what is meant. And he did this, we are told, to demonstrate his justice. Because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished.

That is, the sins committed before the cross finally unpunished. They still were not adequately required. All those people who had gone on to heaven.

But who had paid for their sins? Some little lamb that's been butchered before an altar? Does that pay for sin? He had left them finally unpunished. But now God has raised up a propitiation. And God did this to demonstrate his justice.

Not simply his love, his justice. God cares about what is right and what is wrong. Because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished.

And then Paul repeats the point. He did this to demonstrate his justice at the present time so as to be just. And the one who justifies the ungodly, there is the glory of the gospel.

God does not come to us and simply say, I forgive you. I forgive you. Without someone paying for it.

Or else God would be amoral. On the plane ride here I read a book that I've been meaning to read for some time. It's a book written by Marsha Whitten called, All is Forgiven.

The secular message of the gospel in American Protestantism. And the thesis of the book is that in a great deal of American Protestant preaching today, there is so much emphasis on God's loving us and God's forgiving us and God making us feel good and telling us what wonderful people we really are deep down inside of us. That what we lose, amongst other things, is the sheer grandeur and justice of God.

But the cross of Jesus Christ not only is the basis of our forgiveness, but of the placarded demonstration that God is just and the one who justifies the ungodly. And that brings me to the last point. Verses 27-30 I may summarize very briefly.

Clearly the emphasis in these verses, 27-30, is on faith. We are saved by faith. Where then is boasting? It is excluded.

On what law and what principle? On that of observing the law? No. But on faith. For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from observing the law.

Now I wish I had time to unpack this at length, but I will give you some meditation to do for homework. You will understand verses 27-30 well if you recognize that the three sub-points that these verses make are then expounded in the next chapter. Let me give you the parallels and then you can meditate upon them at home.

Chapter 3 verse 27 is paralleled by chapter 4 verses 1 and 2. The question is, on what ground is boasting excluded? Down in chapter 4, how was Abraham justified? Did he boast about his works? In fact, if Abraham was justified by his works, verse 2, he had something to boast about. I'm a pretty good chap. But not before God.

No, no, that's not what happens at all. Abraham is justified by faith. Then, verse 28 is paralleled in chapter 4 by verses 3-8.

Verse 28 reads, we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from observing the law. And chapter 4 verses 3-8 go on to insist that when a man works, verse 4, his wages are not credited to him as a gift but as an obligation. That is, if you get what you work for, like karma, then you get what you deserve.

Nothing more, nothing less. However, to the man who does not work but trusts God who justifies the wicked, his faith is credited as righteousness. That is the argument here.

And this is necessary, this text goes on to say, to preserve the freedom of God's grace. At the time of the Reformation there were three massive solas. Sola fide, sola gratia, and sola scriptura.

That is, faith alone, grace alone, and scripture alone. Now, when I was a boy, I thought, this is dumb. How can you have three alones? If you've got three alones, not one of them is alone.

But when I got a little older, I realized that they were all alone in a separate dimension. Sola scriptura, scripture alone, in the dimension of revelation and authority, we bow finally before neither tradition, not even Baptist tradition, but scripture. That is our binding authority.

Sola gratia, grace alone, because it is not on works. It is of God's goodness. The source of our redemption, the source of this propitiation, the source of our justification lies in God's grace.

And sola fide, faith alone, describes the sole means by which we appropriate that grace. Authority, source, and means. One authority, one source, one means of appropriation.

Now what this text is saying at this point is that we must have faith alone, or ultimately grace alone is jeopardized. For you see, if it's faith plus works, then it's not grace that's actually giving it, it's what we deserve. Whereas if we receive God's forgiveness and his justification by faith, then it is of grace.

It's not because we deserved it, or earned it, or attracted it, or won it. Thus faith and grace get tied together. And finally, the last two verses, chapter 3, verses 29 and 30, occupy thematically all of chapter 4, verses 9 and following.

Is God the God of Jews only? Is he not the God of Gentiles too? Yes, of Gentiles too, since there is only one God who will justify the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through that same faith. That is what the text says. Paul ends this paragraph with one final observation, verse 31.

Does this mean then that we're nullifying the law, the whole law, covenant, all of Moses' teaching and so on by this faith? Are we saying that none of that matters? All you have to do is have faith? Not a whit of it, he says. Not at all. Rather, we're actually upholding the law.

What does he mean by that? To understand how we uphold the law by faith, it is important to see that faith in Scripture is not the same thing as faith in our contemporary culture. Faith in our contemporary culture often has to do with personal preference. Well, you know, I have a certain kind of religious faith, you have your faith, I have my faith.

Faith is not based on facts, it's not based on revelation, it's just a religious preference. It's not based on truth or facts. But for Paul, faith is that God-given gift by which you trust the promises and provision of God in Christ Jesus.

You trust the truth of the gospel. You trust Christ and his death on your behalf. You have faith.

Now, he says, does that get rid of the law? Does that abolish the law? No. No, he says. The whole purpose of the law was to look forward to, to use the language of verse 21, to testify to this culmination of God's gracious self-disclosure in the gospel.

Thus, we're upholding the true purpose and direction of the law from beginning to end when we insist that because of this faith, we have peace with God. We have been reconciled to God. We are justified by God.

And because we trust him also, we are increasingly transformed from glory into glory until we increasingly are so conformed to the likeness of his Son that people take knowledge of us that we have been with Jesus. And all the demands of the law that we could not meet are met by this Christ. And meanwhile, all the demands of the law that we ought to meet, increasingly by the transformation of the sons of God, we risingly meet.

Not out of the law covenant, but out of God's grace received by faith. Brothers and sisters in Christ, these are the non-negotiables of the gospel. There are others, but these are non-negotiables of the gospel.

And in our presentation of the gospel to friends and neighbours, these things need to be learned by us and then reproduced in fairly simple forms so that people understand what the heart of the gospel is. This is non-negotiable. The other four sessions that I have had this weekend have tried to lay out the framework that is necessary to make sense of this gospel.

But do not spend all of your time in the framework and then neglect the cross. Let us pray. Lord God, many of these things are merely review for those who have walked with you for a long time, and yet we recognize, merciful God, that all of us need these things reviewed from time to time.

For we too can find our hearts growing dumb or dull, or drifting off with other priorities. Sharpen up our own thinking and grasp of these matters and our instant obedience to them so that we may with boldness articulate the gospel to many, many, many people around us, from day to day, from week to week, and month to month. Oh Lord God, make these things so precious to us that they inevitably, as it were, bubble out of our mouths, rising out of the overflow of our gratitude to you, who has declared us just by grace,

because you have placarded your Son as the propitiation for our sins.

Grant to us the grace of faith that we may trust you wholly, for Jesus' sake. Amen.

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