

# Romans 2 - 4

by John Nelson Darby

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*The apostle Paul explains the nature of man's need, the righteousness of God, and the means by which we are justified, which is through faith in Christ's death and resurrection.*

**Scripture:** Romans 1:17, Romans 2:6, Romans 3:10, Romans 3:23, Romans 3:28, Romans 4:3, Romans 4:5, Romans 4:7-8, Romans 4:24 - 5:1

**Topics:** "Justification By Faith", "Universal Sinfulness"

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## Description

John Nelson Darby expounds on Romans chapters 2 to 4, emphasizing the universal guilt of both Jews and Gentiles before God due to sin, and the futility of seeking righteousness through the law. He highlights that true righteousness comes through faith, as exemplified by Abraham and David, and is made possible by the redemptive work of Christ. Darby stresses that God's righteousness is revealed apart from the law and is accessible to all who believe, providing a foundation for justification and peace with God. He concludes that believers are justified freely by grace through faith in Christ, who has borne the penalty for sin and offers a new life in Him.

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## Transcript

I take the close of chapter 3 as being the summing up, and application of the apostle's argument, drawn from the sin of the Jews and Gentiles; then in chapter 4 he passes on to another principle, as brought out in the testimony of Abraham and David. But in this first part of the epistle the apostle opens out man's need, and the way in which it had been met by redemption, as that on which alone the soul could rest. Having in chapter 1, from verse 18, gone through the horrible evil of the Gentiles and man generally throughout the world, and shewing that without any subsequent revelation, through the knowledge of God possessed by Noah, and God's dealings with men through the creation, God being to be understood by the things that are made in His eternal power and Godhead, they were left (chap. 1) without excuse, conscience itself telling them what was right and wrong, and that hence, as they did not like to retain God in their knowledge, He gave them up to uncleanness through the lusts of their own hearts; for if a man is left alone of God, he always turns to the lust of his own heart. Thus God in judgment brought upon them, that as they had not discerned what became God, they should not be able to discern what became man.

31 It is God's way, when the light He gives is rejected, to give men up to blindness, and this giving up by God is an act of judgment on God's part; as these Gentiles, not liking to retain God in their knowledge, God gave them over to a reprobate mind. It was so with the Jews; rejecting the testimony God had given

them, God says by the mouth of the prophets "make the heart of this people fat, and their ears heavy," etc.; of the Gentiles it is said, "who changed the truth of God into a lie"; so of the professing church, fallen from the light, God says, "I will send them strong delusion, that they should believe a lie." Thus we see, whether Jews, or Gentiles, or nominal Christians, the effect of man being given up of God - what man is when left to himself, and the judgment of God in his neglect or abuse of light. Natural light was given in the beginning in the testimony of creation, and man began with the knowledge of God as thus dealing with him; but men did not like to retain God in their knowledge. There is the pleading, too, of conscience, for every man has a conscience, distinct from grace. But conscience cannot bring us to God. Conscience is the sense of responsibility, united to the knowledge of good and evil, and this last part acquired in the fall. But we must remember, if the conscience becomes awakened, it is not life and peace, and therefore only drives us away from God, like Adam in the garden hiding himself from God.

As the Gentiles did not like to retain God in their knowledge, God gave them over to a reprobate mind. So the Jews, having been disobedient to God's testimony, sentence is passed upon them by Isaiah seven hundred years before it was accomplished: "Make the heart of this people fat," etc., for such is the patience of God; as Stephen also says, "Ye do always resist the Holy Ghost, as your fathers did [in the past dispensation], so do ye [in this dispensation]." Both guilty of the same sin, and according to Peter's testimony of the witness given to Jesus, those very things by which Christ was testified to have come from God, will be the very thing that will lead the Jews to receive the false Christ in the latter day. "Ye men of Israel, hear these words; Jesus of Nazareth, a man approved of God among you by miracles, and wonders, and signs, which God did by him in the midst of you, as ye yourselves also know," Acts 2:22. Compare this with 2 Thessalonians 2:8, "Then shall that wicked one be revealed . . . with all power [miracles], and signs, and lying wonders." Thus as the Jews rejected what God did in their midst by Jesus of Nazareth; so they will receive what Satan will do by that wicked one; and all this, as the apostle goes on to say, because they received not the love of the truth.

32 As in Romans 1:18-32; and Romans 2:1-16, all the Gentiles are brought in guilty, so, in spite of real privileges, the Jew: from chapter 2:17, and then from Romans 3:9-18, we find all are under sin - the Jew under law, as well as the Gentile without law. Both are alike equally guilty; for if the Gentiles be given over to a reprobate mind, the Jew is proved by his own scriptures, which he boasted belonged to him only, to be just as bad. Thus, there is none righteous, no, not one; there is no understanding; none that seeketh God, the will being gone wrong; blind in mind, and perverse in will, and guilty before God; not only as to the nature being sinful, but as slighting the testimony, rejecting the light which God had from time to time revealed to them. But the God of judgment was there, and now it is proved that by the deeds of the law no flesh can be saved, for by the law is the knowledge of sin. Thus we see how those under the law are brought under condemnation, as well as the heathen they despised; it is useless for a Jew to attempt to get in by his own condition, for the law he boasted in condemns him. If it applied to him, it condemned him it applied to. The Gentiles have no right to put themselves under the law; but we all do so somehow or other; and as a process it may turn to good in the conviction of sin; but as a position, and if we stay in it, see where it brings us! "The Lord looked down upon the children of men, to see if there were any that did understand and seek after God." No; they have all gone out of the way; and the Jew learnt by the law which he claimed, and with reason, to belong to him only, that on his own ground he was utterly guilty, though the apostle does not here bring against them their hardness of heart in rejecting Christ; and thus both Jew and Gentile are alike thoroughly guilty, and every mouth stopped. Such is the end of man's righteousness.

33 But now by grace all is changed. The righteousness of God without law is revealed, and the apostle then develops this truth very fully, as far as its principles go. In point of fact, this joins on to chapter 1:17, the intermediate verses giving the proof of what made God's righteousness necessary. He states the nature of this righteousness in a direct and absolute manner, and in contrast with man's. It is altogether on a different principle; it is righteousness, not even mercy, though the fruit of grace, but it is a righteousness without law at all; it is God's righteousness, and who can give law to Him? Had it been man's righteousness, law would have been the measure and principle of it; but being God's righteousness, it is altogether on a different principle from law, As man stood in sin, God's law only condemned him, and it cannot give life. Put a man under righteous obligation, and it is all over with him, because man is a sinner. Man has a will (I speak practically, not metaphysically), and law brings it out; and man's will never submits, for it would cease to be a will if it did; it is not subject to the law of God, neither indeed can be. God never meant righteousness to be by the law; it would have been cruelly mocking man, who is a sinner, to have proposed it to him. The law was given, that the offence might abound - not that sin might abound, for sin was there before the law was given; but it is not offence, or transgression, until there is a law; and thus it is that the law worketh wrath, for where no law is, there is no transgression.

It is not said there is no sin; but where there is nothing to transgress, there can be no transgression. Thus every mouth is stopped, and all the world becomes guilty before God. And now the righteousness without the law is manifested, not merely it exists, but it is manifested; it existed long before in the counsels of God, none being ever justified otherwise, but it was not manifested till the gospel was brought out and preached; therefore the apostle says, "to declare at this time his righteousness." No sinner ever stood, or ever could stand, in God's presence, from Adam downwards, save in God's righteousness; but it had not been manifested until now. "But now the righteousness of God without the law is manifested, being witnessed by the law and the prophets." Thus the law and the prophets only shewed what God was going to bring in, but did it not in themselves; but the gospel of God on the contrary is founded on God's righteousness, and therefore it is manifested at this time, but witnessed by the law and the prophets; it was witnessed to, before it was manifested.

34 In Romans 3 we get all brought in guilty, and then it shews how we are to get into the presence of God. Can man that is a sinner approach God? No; nor can he make out a righteousness by law, by which he could; but then God's righteousness appears in its stead. Christ has been made a sacrifice for us, He has answered for all we have done in the old man, and as man now He is in the presence of God for us, and we are there in Him, in all the favour and acceptance in which Christ Himself is - always there as He is. This is how man gets the righteousness of God; but in chapter 3 only the former part is distinctly stated. The claims of God against the old man have all been met in Christ Jesus, and we are made the righteousness of God in Him. God's righteousness, though in fact including all, is yet more particularly viewed here as meeting the guilt of the old man. In the end of the chapter we have the answer to God's perfect demands. The sin, whether of Jew or Gentile, is put away by the blood-shedding of Jesus, and God's righteousness manifested in forgiving. This righteousness is now the starting-point of faith: we have met God here. But this shewed the righteousness of God in His patience with, and forgiveness of, the sins of Old Testament believers. The patience had been shewn of old. The work of Christ shewed the righteous ground of this patience. We, or they, are all fully justified by Christ's blood.

In Romans 4 we have another thing, resurrection in principle. Abraham believed God. This is faith in its groundwork. God is believed. Next, in its object, not only did he believe in the resurrection, but in the God that raised. So with us; we do not merely believe in Jesus, who rose from the dead, but in the God who

raised Him: the power that came in to give Christ, as man, a place before God, which was the plain witness to the value of His work, in putting away our sins.

35 In referring to Abraham, who had nothing to do with law, we find the double character of faith, its nature, and its particular object in the Christian; in the second character of justification, he says, "Abraham believed God, and it was counted unto him for righteousness." It is not here said that he believed in God, but he believed God. Such is faith in its subjective elementary character; we set to our seal that God is true; and that is how Abraham got his righteousness. It was not man's working, but one that worked not. But the word of God reveals God Himself, and God in grace; hence, though there may be much struggling first, when we simply believe God, we believe in Him that justifies the ungodly, and of such David describes the blessedness.

But the character of our faith is carried farther here; the object is God who raised the dead. Our confidence is a righteous one: we believe on One who raised up Him who had been delivered for our offences - raised for our justification. But there is this difference between Abraham's faith and ours. He believed in God's power to fulfil His word. We believe that God has raised up Jesus after He had stood in our place 'as sinners. We have thus the resurrection of Christ applied to our justification. Yet in all this part of the epistle justification does not go beyond forgiveness, as chapter 4 plainly shews. Righteousness goes farther, but not what we have here. Here we have the active clearing away of all the guilt that attached to the deeds of the old man. This completes the work of grace for us, as responsible beings. The effect is, we have peace, stand in divine favour, and rejoice in hope of the glory of God; we glory in tribulation by the way, for it is for our good, and we have the key to all in the love of God, shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Ghost given to us. Besides, we joy in God Himself, thus revealed in the perfectness of His grace towards us when we were sinners.

Having shewn thus the result of grace, in the beginning of Romans 5, in the way in which God justified each individual sinner, passing by sins, the apostle turns to the headship of the two Adams, and shews where the law came in. Our place is not in the first, not under the law, but in the second, according to the efficacy of the work He had wrought. What went before applied to our sins. Now he speaks of our nature and place.

36 I will summarily review his reasonings founded on this, before entering into detail. The disobedience of one made the many sinners - the obedience of One constitutes the many connected with Him righteous, and thus we are righteous by the work of another. In chapter 6 he goes on to notice that some will say, "Oh, if Christ has done all, it is no matter what I do: if it is righteousness without works, then we may walk as we like." The answer is, not "That ought not to be," but "That cannot be," for we speak of death - I have part in righteousness by death. If the thing be real, I cannot live in what I am dead to, and that makes this become impossible; if I live, being thus dead, it is by being alive to God, in Jesus Christ our Lord. A new and holy life (for it is Christ in the power of resurrection) brings with it, not only hatred of sin, but deliverance; the same principle is applied to law in Romans 7. If I am dead to the law by the body of Christ, I am delivered from that which had power over me while I was alive, that I may walk in newness of life.

We have the application of Christ's death and resurrection to man, for his justification before God, in the beginning of Romans 5; as dead to sin and consequently leading a holy life, in Romans 6; as dead to the law in Romans 7. The law, as Galatians also teaches us, has killed you, therefore it can do no more; its greatest work was, so to speak, to kill Christ, as in grace taking its curse; but He rose again, and we are in

Him beyond the law - in Him who had borne its curse. Thereupon Romans 8 brings out the Christian in perfect liberty, in the last Adam of chapter 5 in virtue of His being risen. There is no condemnation for him who is in Christ. The Christian is necessarily viewed in Christ in chapter 8, but resurrection with Christ is not developed in Romans as a doctrine. The power of a new life in the Spirit is stated in verse 2; the condemnation of flesh on the cross, so as to put an end to that for faith and before God; our affections consequently shewing our life in Him. Being thus fully and freely justified and accepted in Christ, we are only waiting for the redemption of our bodies.

It is now not man's righteousness; if it were, it must be by the law and for those who have it. It is God's righteousness for all, and is upon all who believe, and no man can come in any other way; if it is God's righteousness, He cannot accept a Jew in preference to a Gentile, and as it is His "to all," it is as free for sinners of the Gentiles as the Jews. As regards the standing and peace of the soul, it is deeply important to see that while what we are ever struggling for is to get something in which we can come before God, it is God who comes before us in the gospel with His, as our only righteousness; it is unto all, but upon those who believe. Mark here another thing that is connected with peace of soul: some may say, "I do not deny His divine righteousness, I believe it; but how am I to know that I have a share in it? Is it applied to me? I want it applied to my soul." Well, God has applied it to you, if you believe, if, in the consciousness of your sinfulness, you have believed the record that God has given of His Son, then you have had it applied to your soul, for it is upon all them that believe; you are righteous. If you go on tampering with sin, or the world, God must work this out of you, that is true; and the same is the case, if there be much of the pride of self-righteousness. But the thing that is believed is what His Son is, and has done; if there is tampering with sin or the world in our souls, it prevents our laying hold of the truth; nor even if we have found divine righteousness, can we have the joy of the Holy Ghost in our hearts, for God must be real to us. But what we have to rest on is Christ's dying for our sins, and the acceptableness of Christ's person.

37 Many a Christian would be glad to rest, and, as they think, to rest there. But in the last thought they deceive themselves; they look for something better in themselves than they found; but that is not submitting to God's righteousness, not resting in what Christ is. They have not learnt the value of the cross, nor its meaning. If they had learnt its value, they would not be trembling for fear; for how could they be trembling if they knew that their sins are put away? How could they be looking for good in themselves, if they knew that the cross was the final condemnation of all flesh in itself?

You say you have no other confidence than the cross; that may be as to your conviction of the truth, and you may feel your need of it in a certain sense, so as to know you cannot do without it. I suppose you do, or you would not look to it; but you have not yet learned the value of the cross, which purges the conscience by the absolute putting away of sin. And the secret of it is, that you still look for something besides sin in yourself; that is, there is still the looking for, still some hankering after, your own goodness lurking within; you do not think yourself as thoroughly bad as the cross proves you to be, for you are what needed it, you are sin in your nature as in your acts.

God has condemned sin in the flesh, as needing that abhorrence on His part, and that is all you are in yourself, Rom. 8:3. You have yet to learn that it is the ungodly whom God justifies; you will have more than that, but you must come to that first. It is "being justified freely by his grace, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus"; it is not mere justification from sins, but actual deliverance - entire redemption. Thus, in the figure of Israel, it was a question between God and Pharaoh: "Let my people go."

It is real positive redemption, not merely a forgiveness, but Christ has brought us out free from all the title Satan can have against us, or power he can have over us, according to the righteousness of God, and for Him. If I buy a slave, he is mine, and no one can have any right over him, and that is true with regard even to our poor bodies - they are to be free from Satan's power: God will have us entirely for Himself, by the work of Christ, and that according to His own holy nature and life, and His divine righteousness in judgment.

Not even the smallest particle of our dust shall remain in Satan's kingdom, and this is why redemption is mentioned last in Corinthians 1:30: as it is brought out, too, in the similitude, as to this, of Israel in Egypt. It was one thing for them to be screened from the destroying angel by the blood on the door-posts in Egypt, and another and very different thing for them to be brought clean out of Egypt by the passage of the Red Sea; thus being entirely delivered from the power of Pharaoh.

And more than this: Christ has broken and destroyed all the power of death by which Satan held us, and taken him captive whose captives we were, and made us, who were Satan's captives, the vessels of God's power and testimony against Satan.

38 "Whom God hath set forth to be a propitiation through faith in his blood, to declare his righteousness." Here we have the connection of the blood of Christ with God's righteousness. It has been declared. It rested only in promise until Christ came in the flesh; it was not manifested till then; so that like Adam, Abel, or Job, they rested on the promises of righteousness, because the blood was yet to be shed. But now it is declared in having been fulfilled, in that Christ sits at the right hand of God, or rather, to confine myself to this epistle, that He is risen. And there is an amazing difference between resting on the promise (though this is most blessed) and on a fulfilment. A man in prison with a promise that his debt shall be paid is no doubt happy; but it is not the same thing as walking at liberty with the knowledge that it has been paid.

39 It is not forbearance now, but accomplished salvation, God's own righteousness declared. Can He forbear with that? The time of forbearance was in the time of the Old Testament saints; then God was forbearing, because of what He was going to do, and has proved His righteousness in doing it by the death of Christ. But that is not our condition. We have God's righteousness at this time, this present time. He is not speaking here of what is past before Christ's death, but of the fact of righteousness, and our present state of conscience, of the better thing God has provided for us, as regards our standing before Him. For if I sin, I do not want a prophet to come and tell me my sin is just put away, I can say I know the blood has been shed; therefore I know as a present thing that every sin is put away. It is a settled question. We can add much more even; because, though the fact is assumed of our being in Christ, and His resurrection mentioned in chapter 8, the subject of this epistle is Christ's death and resurrection, as justifying and delivering us, we can speak of being with Him. The Ephesians looks at us as dead in sin, and quickened with Him, and sitting in heavenly places in Him. Colossians takes up both, only it does not go on to our sitting in heavenly places in Him; but sets us as risen and looking up to heaven where He is. It is such a righteousness, that He, who accomplished that through which it was to be revealed and made good, has, in virtue of what He has done, sat down at the right hand of God; and our life is in Him there. Abraham could not say, "I am one with a man at God's right hand," for Christ was not there as man then. But the believer in Christ can say so; for as surely as the first Adam was turned out of paradise, so surely has the last Adam entered heaven, and that as man, in the glory He had with the Father before the world was; and I am as sure of my place in Christ, as of my place in Adam.

40 Well, then, it is such a work as God recognised in righteousness, and such an one as has fully satisfied God - nay, more, has glorified Him, as indeed it must have done, to satisfy Him in divine righteousness. Still, we can say it has glorified Him. See John 13:31, 32; and 17:4, 5. As regards the blood, He is just to forgive. It is His own righteousness which is upon the believer, and He must own it; and here too is the resting-place of faith. This is justice; but the opening of my heart is under the sunshine of grace at the outflowing of love. To see ourselves perfectly cleansed makes us hate sin, as a man who is thoroughly clean will not like to get a spot on his garment; while one who is already defiled will not care about getting a little more so. When the blood was put upon the lintels of the door-posts, it was to keep the judgment out, and God passed over; for had He come in, He must have judged them as they deserved, for they deserved judgment as much as the Egyptians, nay, more, for they knew better. Therefore it was grace keeping God out as a righteous judge, and according to His righteousness; but at the Red Sea they were to stand still, and see the salvation of God. It was God overriding every barrier, coming in and taking them completely out of the place of judgment and bondage, and bringing them to Himself. While the one was keeping God out, the other was bringing God in, or rather bringing them to God.

As an ungodly man I am justified by the blood; but as a Christian I am accepted in Him. But many, many Christians keep outside; looking at the cross only as an object of hope, they have not entered into God's presence by it. Has the cross then left me outside? No; it has saved me from judgment, and I have entered into God's presence by it, and therefore value it. How many do we see as sinners trembling at the foot of the cross, feeling their need of it, but getting no farther!

We are not under law as innocent beings, for man is a sinner, and the law cannot allow of even a lust; then where is the use of giving the law to man that is a sinner? What is the use of my giving a righteous measure to a man who is unrighteous? What the use of my giving a true measure to one who uses fraud in selling his goods, but to teach him where he is wrong? So God never gave the law to man to make him righteous, but to convict him and shew him where his sin is. Man may abuse the grace, to continue in sin; but that does not alter the nature of God's righteousness. If a law is given to man already a sinner, it can only be to make him know himself a sinner.

41 "Is he the God of the Jews only?" He will justify the circumcision by faith, and the uncircumcision through faith; that is, the Jews who sought righteousness, obtained it only on the principle of faith; and the Gentiles, inasmuch as it was on that principle, possessed it through the faith that they had. Do we then make void the law, or more properly, law? No; we establish law, not Moses' law, but the principle of law. If a thief is hanging on a tree, is that making void the law? No; so far from making it void, hanging establishes it. But if after the punishment he rose, the law would have inflicted its penalty, and he would be beyond its reach. So then Christ died, and He established the law, and faith comes in and says, So far from making void the law, when Christ died for my sins, He established the law. But that does not put me under it: if under it I am lost, not merely as a sinner, but by the law itself. Nothing establishes the law like the death of Christ.

The Gentiles having been proved lawless, Romans 3, gives the Jew under law, condemned out of the law. Christ was under the law; He kept it, and died under its curse. And is He under it now? No; He is dead to the law, and risen from the dead. I am the sinner He died for; He has borne the curse, and it is all gone, and it has lost all power to touch me, for I am one with Christ, I stand in Him, in the presence and favour of God, as dead and risen again in Christ. He gave all His sanction to the law - suffered it, if you will.

In Romans 4, in referring to Abraham and David as believing God, he then goes on to shew the ground on which Abraham gets the promises. The blessing belongs to me in uncircumcision, as righteousness was reckoned to him in uncircumcision, and that on the principle of faith, thus stopping the Jew's mouth, and hence to the Gentiles. Then in David we have the same thing, "Blessed is the man unto whom the Lord will not impute sin." The law on the contrary worketh wrath. Therefore it is of faith, that it might be by grace, not to that only which is of the law, but to that also which is of the faith of Abraham, who is the father of the faithful, before Him whom he believed, even God, who quickeneth the dead. The difference between us and Abraham is this: He believed God was able to perform; we believe He has raised up Christ from the dead. The deliverance has been effected, the power shewn, as well as our sins been put away. He was delivered for our offences. Was it effectual? He is raised again for our justification. All is complete and accepted, and Christ as man has left the dead - is out of and past all the consequences of sin; for judgment itself He has borne for us.

42 Beloved, in a day like this, what a thought it is for us that we are set in God's righteousness before Him! His righteousness has set aside all man's reasonings, as the rising sun not only dispels the darkness, but causes even the stars to vanish because of its brightness. When Christ is first revealed to the soul it is always humbling, because it displays what it really is before God, and brings the conscience into play, while the heart mourns its having despised and rejected such an One. I do not say that the affections may not be found towards Christ without this; but there must be sooner or later such a revelation of what Christ is, as to shew us what we are; and it is that which breaks down what is inside, foolish and vain desires, self-will, sinful thoughts and feelings, and everything that is the opposite of Christ, thus shewing us not only that we have committed sins, but that we are sin. Then He reveals to us the unclouded favour of God into which we are brought, according to the love which sought us, and gave His Son for us, and brought us there in righteousness.

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