

Record of Sermons delivered during the month of
February 2020

(added progressively after each Sunday)

(see following pages)

Romans 3:9-23

Darkest Before the Dawn

Rom 3:20

²⁰ For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight,

Many years ago there was a famous correspondence in *The Times* under the subject “What is wrong with the world today?” The best letter of all was also the shortest, and read—“Dear Sir, I am. Yours faithfully, G. K. Chesterton.” That devastating declaration showed a profound insight into man’s universal malaise, and I believe that it can teach us a deeply challenging lesson. I am convinced that throughout the Christian church there are problems, difficulties and frustrations that would begin to dissolve immediately if only some Christians would be honest enough to answer the question—“What’s wrong?” with the words “I am!”¹ (From John Blanchard, author of *Ultimate Questions*.)

This is the key point to Paul's summing up of his charge against all humanity in Romans 1:18 – 3:8 and is found in today's reading Rom 3:9-20.

In this passage we are faced with the reality of our sin against God and other people. In short, *we* are the problem; *I* am the problem. I cannot escape; the apostle makes it clear—with a litany of OT citations carrying the full authority of “thus says the Lord” (or “As it is written” – ESV). The passage as a whole stands as a fitting climax to this entire section which began in 1:18. Paul says that men are sinners—all of us—and held accountable to God. Here we stand, guilty and convicted. The sombre weight of this passage should not be missed. **Do not run to the peace of the gospel too quickly, lest you cheapen its message.** First, take a good and prayerful look in the mirror of scripture and see if you are not there. Then, look to God for mercy. Then may he give us the same attitude we see in Copernicus: “I do not ask for the grace thou didst give to the Apostle Paul; nor can I dare ask for the grace which thou didst grant to the Apostle Peter; but, the mercy which thou didst show to the Dying Robber, that mercy, show to me.” Having come to see ourselves against the infinite holiness of God and his immutable law in 1:18-3:20, we may then be eager to welcome the message of grace preached in 3:21-31.

The point of this section, made explicit in 3:19-20, is twofold. First, Paul wants to drive home and yet bring to a conclusion his accusations of Gentile (1:18-32) and Jewish (2:1-3:8) sinfulness. His argument is that all men alike are under sin, equally meriting God’s wrath, and that neither has an out of any sort, not even ignorance in the case of the Gentile, or supposed obedience to the Law in the case of the Jew. The use of the many OT quotations is meant to heighten the thesis of the universality of human sinfulness and the repetition of these passages, one on top of the other, in a coherent fashion, is meant to drive the point home with vigour and power. This is a sermon, if you will, not an impassioned comment!

¹ John Blanchard, *The Truth for Life* (West Sussex, England: H. E. Walter, 1982), 263.

The second purpose Paul wishes to establish with this section, having summarised human sinfulness and guilt, is to introduce his readers to the next specific topic on the agenda, namely, the gospel (3:21-32), as well as to hint generally at other topics to come—topics such as “righteousness,” “works of the law,” and “the knowledge of sin and the law.”²

Some time ago, in High Park in Toronto, Canada, there lived a duck called “Ringo”.

- And this duck made the headlines of one of the paper’s because one day it accidentally poked her beak through the ring of the ring pull of a can and was not able to remove it.
- This resulted in her being unable to eat and certain death from starvation.
- The duck’s plight was noticed by some of the park visitors and as a result she became something of a celebrity.
- All kinds of people got involved and various solutions were tried in order to capture and help poor Ringo.
- A cannon, that fired a large net was tried but no success.
- A diver tried to scare Ringo out of the bulrushes but no success.
- Ringo was tempted with corn and bread but that only attracted sea gulls.
- Even a champion duck-caller came and attracted every duck for miles, but not Ringo.
- All the efforts to help her failed, as each time the duck mistook the efforts to help as threats and eventually disappeared before anyone could provide the rescue she so desperately needed.³

The apostle Paul tells us in Romans that we and the rest of humanity like Ringo are in serious danger and are helpless to do anything about it.

- But wonderfully God has provided a rescue through the gospel, the good news of Jesus and what He’s done to save us.
- Paul writes to Christians who unlike Ringo have accepted the rescue which is available, and he writes to awaken in them a passion for the gospel that will explode in enthusiasm **to share it with each other and with those who don’t yet know about it.**

But the thing is, we won’t be excited about the gospel until we truly understand why we need to be rescued.

- What the ring around our beak is.
- Because when we see how much trouble and danger we are in and how helpless we are, Jesus’ offer of rescue becomes more amazing.
- Paul aims to show us that *“we’re more wicked than we ever realised, but more loved than we ever dreamed”*, to borrow a phrase from Rico Tice.
- And in the first part of his letter, from Romans 1:18 through to Romans 3:20, Paul shows the depth of human wickedness and sin.

² Greg Herrick from <http://bible.org/seriespage/study-and-exposition-romans-39-20>

³ Terry Zerby, What is a duck worth?

- But then in Romans 3:21 we have the turning point of the letter. After chapters of how wicked we are, Paul turns his attention to how good and loving God has been to us.
- So as we look at Romans 3:9-20 it's not happy reading or hearing, but remember it's not hopeless.

So the thrust of the passage from verse 9 to 20 is that:

- "Everyone is a sinner and guilty before God and deserving of His judgement and there is nothing **we** can do about it!"
- And just to make sure that we are convinced of this, Paul says in verse 10, listen to what God has been saying for centuries, before quoting a number of verses from the Psalms and Isaiah, which together have been described as 'fourteen horrible things about all men'.⁴

Imagine that each of these fourteen statements was like a bead being placed onto a necklace, but the necklace actually turns out to be a hangman's noose.

- First bead. There is no-one righteous.
- Second. There is no-one who understands.
- Third. There is no-one who seeks God.
- Fourth. All have turned away.
- Fifth. They all have together become worthless.
- Sixth. There is no-one who does good.
- Seventh. Their throats are open graves.
- Eighth. Their tongues practise deceit.
- Ninth. The poison of vipers is on their lips.
- Tenth. Their mouths are full of cursing and bitterness.
- Eleventh. Their feet are swift to shed blood. [The feet carry the whole body towards sin. Not ultimately murder perhaps but the thought of murder? Have we ever given to others a 'look that could kill'?]
- Twelfth. Ruin and misery mark their ways.
- Thirteenth. The way of peace they do not know.
- And fourteenth. There is no fear of God before their eyes. [Which links back to the reference in Ecclesiastes which echoes Proverbs 1:7 "The fear of the Lord is

the beginning of knowledge; fools despise wisdom and instruction”, as well as Psalm 14:1 *The fool says in his heart,*

“There is no God.” A lack of the fear of God is at once the root problem for sin and a great sin itself leading to much folly and corruption. Men commit sins because they hold God in contempt and simply have no fear of his awesomeness. But as Nahum declared to Nineveh and the Assyrians, God is not to be trifled with. He is a divine warrior who exacts punishment on his enemies, and does so without mercy.

Nahum portrays the downfall of Nineveh and Assyria as an image of how God will confront and bring down all violent human empires.

The book of Nahum is a collection of poems announcing the downfall of Assyria, one of Israel's worst oppressors. Referencing Daniel, Exodus, Isaiah and Babylon, Nahum shows us that the destruction of Nineveh and Assyria are examples of how God works in history in every age.

For Christians, one of the most significant revelations of the New Testament is the fact that God is our personal heavenly father (Matt 6:9; Gal 4:6). This wonderful and comforting truth must not be minimised, but it must not be permitted to denigrate into mere sentimentality for we are also commanded to fear and reverence our Father (1 Peter 1:17-19).⁵]

It's a dark picture of humanity and shows how serious sin is, how guilty, and how deserving of God's judgement we are.⁶

“Back in the eighteenth century, a young boy was born into a Christian home. For the first six years of his life, he heard the truths of the gospel and he was loved. Sadly, though, his parents died. The orphaned boy went to live with his relatives. There he was mistreated and abused and ridiculed for his faith in Christ. The boy couldn't tolerate that situation, and he fled and joined the Royal Navy. In the navy, the boy's life went downhill. He became known as a brawler, was whipped many times, and participated in some of his comrades being keel-hauled. Finally, while he was still young, he deserted the Royal Navy and fled to Africa, where he attached himself to a Portuguese slave trader. There, his life reached its lowest point. There were times when he actually ate off the floor on his hands and knees. He escaped and then became attached to another slave trader as the first mate on his ship. But the young man's pattern of life had become so depraved, he couldn't stay out of trouble. As the story goes, he stole the ship's whisky and got so drunk that he fell overboard. He was close to drowning when one of his shipmates harpooned him and brought him back on board. As a result, the young man had a huge scar in his side for the rest of his life. After that escapade, he couldn't get much lower. In the midst of a great storm off the coast of Scotland, when days and days were filled with pumping water out of the boat, the young man began to reflect on the Scripture verses he had heard

5 Greg Herrick from <http://bible.org/seriespage/study-and-exposition-romans-39-20>

6 <http://blogofdan.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2010/03/Romans-3v9-20-Talk.pdf>

as a child. He was marvellously converted. The new life John Newton found is reflected in his own heartfelt words, familiar to millions now:⁷

Let us sing those words, from REJOICE! 386, Amazing Grace.

[1861]

And pray God's grace for all the saints present today. Amen

⁷ See R. Kent Hughes, *1001 Great Stories & Quotes* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale, 1998), 191-92.

Romans 3:21-26

Now is our winter of discontent, made ...

Rom 3:21a

²¹But now apart from the law the righteousness of God has been made known,

“Now is the winter of our discontent made glorious summer by this Sun ...” Shakespeare in his play, Richard III, puts these words in the mouth of the younger brother who is to become that Richard III. In the play it goes on to identify what is called a Sun as the new king, Edward IV, his brother. Shakespeare uses a play on words. S-u-n and S-o-n. Edward is the S-o-n of York – that is, the heir of the family of York that has been in civil war, the 'war of the roses', with the Lancaster family, for many years. But he is called here, the S-u-n of York, by referring to the new family crest which incorporates a picture of the Sun.⁸ This crest was established after Edward, prior to a decisive battle, saw an atmospheric illusion, where three Suns appeared in the sky at once. He likened this to the Trinity of God, and put his subsequent victory to the Glory of God.

Jesus has also been referred to in Scripture as the S-u-n of Righteousness – This is also an analogy.

But Paul needs no poetic device to establish the credentials of the sole hero of his letter: Jesus Christ, that very S-o-n of the Divine Trinity.

Human existence on this earth, since the fall of Adam and Eve, has truly been a very long 'winter of discontent'. And now having made that clear, Paul is ready to reveal, announce, clarify, extol and glorify the 'glorious summer'. The revealing of the righteousness of God through Jesus Christ the Son.

Attributed to Leon Morris, and repeated by many others, Romans 3:21-26 is said to be, “possibly the single most important paragraph ever written”. It is found in what we have previously described, “as the most important letter ever written” and it is part of the most important book, the one written through the 'breath' – inspiration, of the Spirit.

From Romans 3:21, Paul begins to tell us about the righteousness we have just mentioned. He spells it out using 15 clear terms. These 15 important things build on one another to increase our understanding of what Paul is talking about:

1. It is a righteousness provided by God (3:21)

Elsewhere, the righteousness of God Himself is referred to, but here it is a righteous being provided, to salvation. *The very God who condemns you, is angry with you and whom you have despised is the one who provides this righteousness. What mercy! He sets it forth. He does what man could never*

⁸ The **Sun in Splendour** is a [heraldic](#) device or [charge](#). It consists of a round disc representing the [sun](#) surrounded by numerous rays, usually wavy or alternating wavy and straight, and sometimes showing the features of a human face. It was used as a badge by [Edward II of England](#), and was later adopted by [Edward IV](#) following the appearance of a [parhelion](#) or "sun dog" before his victory at the [Battle of Mortimer's Cross](#) in 1461.[]

do. *What power!*⁹

2. *It is displayed now (3:21)*

Prior to this verse Paul has detailed the 'winter of discontent' of all, Gentile and Jew. He connects this to v21 by saying 'but now'. There are two implications. Firstly he refers back to that 'water shed' of God's redemption history, the incarnation; pure life; sacrificial death; and vindicating resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ the Lord. And declares that righteous standing with God, is now fully revealed and can be credited to you right now. Paul has painted a dismal and hopeless situation for all of fallen humankind in the previous 64 verses. BUT NOW! He says. This is how God intervenes. How God does the humanly impossible. The greatest miracle of all! The pivot point of God's plan: to bring sinners back to Himself.

3. *It is outside of the law (3:21)*

Paul has shown that neither Gentile nor Jew has kept their law. That is no one has. No one can. No one will. All of us then are under the penalty, the curse, of the law. But God's righteousness is now revealed through the Gospel. A way of getting right with God, and being accepted by Him. Intended for those condemned by their inherited, wilful and continual disobedience of God, shown by their failure to 'measure up' to the law. But the curse, penalty is still to be received. God's personal, perfect righteousness, His absolute justice, cannot be just set aside. *Someone has become a curse for us. He was the only one who kept the law fully. He incurred no penalty personally. But through Him a righteousness, which we could never earn is now offered to us.*

4. *It is revealed (3:21)*

Not a closely guarded secret, intended only for the 'in' crowd. This righteousness is unveiled, uncovered and preached to all – including us.

5. *The Law and the Prophets witness to it (3:21)*

It is not a notion which has just been dreamed up, nor is it a modern invention [to suit the particular circumstance of the people of Paul's day]. The Old Testament bears witness to it. It has been declared from the earliest times. It [even] was in this way that men of that [earlier] period were placed in a right relationship with God.

6. *It is effective by faith in Jesus Christ (3:22)*

Paul assures us that he is talking about the righteousness that is received, not by works, but by faith. This faith does not operate in a vacuum. It is faith in Jesus Christ. His are the merits, and His is the work, by which this righteousness has become available. Faith [itself] does not earn this righteousness; it is [but] the instrument by which [righteousness] is received. Jesus Christ has purchased this righteousness, but the believer has it reckoned [imputed] to his own account. He does not have to do something to deserve it. It is a gift, received through faith.

7. All who believe receive it (3:22-23)

Since everybody is in the same helpless and hopeless condition, this righteousness is not for a select group only, but for all who have faith in the Son of God. The old divisions in the human race do not apply. All, Jew and Gentile alike, fall short of the purpose for which they were created. Neither can 'get right' with God by their own efforts, or anything they do. It is not a case of do, do, do – but done! Whoever believes, receives.

8. It is the free gift of God's grace (3:24)

In this verse a change has occurred. At least as far as English translations make it appear. So far the key word has been *righteousness*, but now *being justified* is used. What is the difference? In the original Greek no such problem occurs.

Consider the following example in English:

There is a verb 'to follow' and from it are derived other parts of speech that are related to it in meaning. 'Follower' a noun; 'following' can be an adjective – as I used, in saying, "the following example"; and even a sort of present form of the past participle, 'being followed'. Now this last example required two words to get the required 'shade of meaning'.

In Greek there are many extra parts of speech, including the present passive participle, which we can only duplicate with 2 words as above.

Now to get to our apparent problem: The chart¹⁰ shows various derivatives from the verb, δικαίωω *dikaioó*, (*dik-ah-yo'-o*) – I make righteous, defend the cause of, justify. It is clear that all these words are related. 'Justify' and 'I make righteous' are of the same root meaning.

It is interesting to note that while the Greek word that translates as 'righteousness' occurs many times in the New Testament, the word translated as 'being justified' in verse 24 only occurs this once. The Greek verb for 'justify' however is used often.

There is further concern regarding the word translated as 'righteousness', which verse 24, with its use of 'being justified' helps to resolve.

Martin Luther was a conscientious believer, who followed carefully the teaching of the Medieval Church. He said , '*I hated that word "righteousness of God,"*

¹⁰δικαιοσύνη – Noun,
dikaiosuné
(*dik-ah-yos-oo'-nay*)

justice, justness, righteousness

δικαιος – Adjective
dikaios
(*dik'-ah-yos*)

just, righteous, impartial

δικαιούμενοι – present passive participle
dikaioumenoi

being justified

*which, according to the use and custom of all the teachers, I had been taught to understand philosophically regarding the formal or **active righteousness**, as they call it, with which God is righteous and punishes the unrighteous sinner.”* The Church taught that the 'Righteousness of God' stood for His immutable Justice by which he visited His wrath on every sin. All sorts of 'works' – penance, were required to appease this fearful God. Luther went on to say, *“Though I lived as a monk without reproach, I felt that I was a sinner before God with an extremely disturbed conscience. I could not believe that he was placated by my satisfaction. I did not love, yes, I hated the righteous God who punishes sinners, and secretly, if not blasphemously, certainly murmuring greatly, I was angry with God, and said, 'As if, indeed, it is not enough, that miserable sinners, eternally lost through original sin, are crushed by every kind of calamity by the law of the Decalogue, without having God add pain to pain by the gospel and also by the gospel threatening us with his righteousness and wrath!' “* Then as he studied – he was lecturing on the letters of Paul at the time: *“At last, by the mercy of God, meditating day and night, I gave heed to the context of the words, namely, "In it the righteousness of God is revealed, as it is written, 'He who through faith is righteous, shall live.'" Luther counted this as his true conversion. He began to understand that the righteousness of God is that by which the righteous live by a gift of God, namely by faith. And this is the meaning: the righteousness of God is revealed by the gospel, namely, the **passive righteousness** with which the merciful God justifies us by faith.¹¹*

*God does not put people right with Himself because of works; [even] because of faith (although faith is the means by which Christ's righteousness is received); or because of anything about them. The righteousness **from** God of which Paul speaks is a gift. Not a reward for 'success'. It is an absolute grant to the undeserving. Those who receive it have made no contribution towards it.*

9. *It is given through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus (3:24)*
Salvation is given freely, but we must not think that it was bought cheaply. Redemption – [like when retrieving an item from a Pawn Broker] – refers to something which has to be bought back at a price. Who has paid the price? Christ! How much of the price has He paid? All! There is nothing left for us to pay. But what was that price He had to pay?

10. *The price was that He should be a sacrifice of atonement by blood (3:25)*
*In other words He had to be the bearer and appeaser [providing propitiation] and diverter of God's just wrath. He had to be the one who wiped out the record of our sins. It was done by blood – His blood!
 Now, by faith in Christ, the benefits of His atonement become mine. In this way my sin is pardoned, and the punishment that I deserve is averted.*

11. *Such atonement has a reference backwards, as well as forwards (3:25)*
As fallen humans we retain an echo of God's righteousness. That righteousness that incorporates His perfect justice. We naturally approve, the attaining of

11 For a more complete version of Luther's account of his 'conversion' and the similar insight that he found Augustine had previously discovered (but forgotten by the Church in the following centuries), see:
<http://homepage.mac.com/shanerosenthal/reformationink/mlconversion.htm> or
<http://www.orthodoxlutheran.com/html/tower.html>

justice – especially where we are wronged.

God is not indifferent to the claims of justice. Yet He was very forbearing towards the sins of many in the Old Testament, and suspended judgement on them. [Yet] it would be unjust to leave the [sins of these] guilty, unpunished. ... the punishment they deserved fell on Christ. [Further] those whom God justified in the Old Testament, He justified on the basis of what Christ was to do at Calvary.

12. *It has now been clearly demonstrated that God is righteous (3:26)*

God's passing over the sins of the Old Testament saints may have appeared unjust, but we can now clearly see that this was not the case. Throughout that period He had in mind the events of the cross, where the just punishment of their sins was going to be borne by their substitute. These events, now [having] taken place, we can see, in a way, which past ages could not. How righteous God is. Justification by faith is now declared in a way unknown, previously.

13. *God's justice is not compromised (3:26)*

Christ's death on the cross was penal – it was a satisfaction of divine justice. It was substitutionary – He took the punishment that was due to others. The required penalty has been paid. God can not say, that sins don't matter. God can not say that our deep-seated, long-term rejection of Him doesn't matter. However, by His grace through the sacrifice of Jesus, God's justice has not been set aside. He remains just.

14. *Yet His grace is satisfied (3:26)*

The penalty due to the believing sinner is reckoned to Christ's account and the righteousness of Christ is reckoned to the believing sinner's account. The sinner is thus certainly saved and God's gracious purposes are fulfilled. Neither is set aside. He remains just, and yet there is justification, [we being pronounced guiltless], for every believer in Jesus.

15. *All this for the believer in Jesus! (3:26)*

*There is hope for all perishing sinners – but only **one** hope! How narrow the gospel is! Yet how wide, for its benefits are for **all** who believe! How profound, yet strikingly simple – this righteousness from God is received through faith [in Jesus Christ, and Him alone].*

Today's passage from Romans is the very heart of the gospel. *Let us all see to it that we have fled from our sins to the appointed Saviour and, by resting on Him alone, have entered personally into all the benefits about which we have been reading.*

[2273]

And pray God's grace for all the saints present today. Amen

Romans 3:27-31

Boast only in the work of the Spirit

Rom 3:31

³¹ Do we then overthrow the law by this faith? By no means! On the contrary, we uphold the law.

Romans 3:21-26 is the gospel in a nutshell. We looked quite closely at these verses last week. Paul will go on to fill in the details in chapters 4-6. But here, as he concludes chapter 3 and this gospel in a nutshell he adds a couple of comments and a summary:

(v 27) How can you boast? About your justification, being put right with, God. Such boasting is excluded. Certainly you can boast about the works and righteousness of Christ in THE faith. But none of this is your doing.

Reluctantly, people you may talk to, will acknowledge that they are sometimes bad, even sinful. Some even will bask in their bad deeds. A badge of honour! Bravado? Probably. However, if you were to tell them that nothing they do in their own strength is good. In fact, God, who sees into the 'heart' and knows their motives, classes all their efforts as but 'dirty rags'. That motives of pride, self-glorifying, self-promotion and even hoping to buy off God by doing 'good things' are all sin in His eyes. No one's ego wants to hear any of this. Its OK to acknowledge that one is naughty. But nothing one does is 'good'! To say that to someone is taken as an attack on their self-worth. An insult. Not done!

Paul has covered it pretty well. All have sinned and fall short. No one is righteous, no not one. The 'good' work you do, that is not His work, through His Spirit, for His glory alone, is futile. It cannot earn Salvation from the penalty rightly earned for inherited, personal and continual disregard and disobedience of Him and His purpose in our creation. It is not only futile but further sinfulness. How can any 'fallen' human with a nature distorted by sin and alienated from God, hating Him in fact, be ever able to seek to do God's 'works' solely to His glory. This is why it is impossible for the non-regenerated, to be inclined towards God and glorify Him. To glorify Him, the heart has to be changed by the Spirit to receive God's call, believe, repent and obey. So those who receive God's grace – His gracious gift – the righteousness that comes from Him, through the sacrificial atonement of Jesus Christ the Lord, they have made no contribution whatsoever. Who then can boast?

A few years ago, when I taught at the Jewish School, I accompanied a class of students when they were required to 'visit' the Holocaust Centre. This is a museum representing the history of many European Jews persecuted by Hitler. School groups from all schools are invited, and many go there, from time to time. As well as the posters and exhibits describing this blight on the 'inhumanity of man to man', at that time there were still some 'survivors' of the ordeal, living in Perth. One such elderly Jewish man was 'on duty' the day I was there. He actually showed great insight to what Paul has said in Romans. But possibly without any direct knowledge of Paul's letter. I'm not sure what prompted him, but he said, "Jews are very lucky. We have the

Law of Moses, and by this Law we can work very hard to obey it, and thus earn our reward with God. We can have great satisfaction in doing this. We can glory in our achievements.” He went on to say, “I pity Christians! They can have no sense of personal achievement, no pride in their accomplishments, because they believe that God gives their salvation freely, as a gift.”

Paul describes non-Christian Jews then and now accurately. And he describes so many of our neighbours, who without even the benefit of God's revealed Word, as the Jews had, share much of the Jewish self worth and boastfulness. “We're basically 'good' people, God will reward us in the end!” “We're all-right, Jack!” Or worse still, “God is love, we'll all get to heaven in the end, no matter what, won't we!”

No one earns God's righteousness. Because no one's 'fallen' nature allows absolute obedience and love of God. God justifies sinners on the ground of another's merit. That of Jesus Christ, whose human nature was untainted by natural conception. He demonstrated that righteous human existence which the first Adam had the potential to live, before he gave in to temptation.

Salvation by works for fallen mankind is no longer possible. So the Law is not a recipe for self-righteous salvation as the Jew may believe and our 'good' neighbours hope. It serves three purposes for the believing Christian, (we may discuss these some other time), but obedience to the Law to earn salvation (and then to be able to boast of our merits) is not one of them.

For human kind there is no other way to get right with God. Not by recipe. Not by hope. Not by effort. Only by His free grace. The gift of salvation in and by and through Jesus Christ. Justification through faith in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus.

Some have suggested that there are different ways to receive God's grace in Salvation.¹² But Paul here (and elsewhere) is quite clear. There is only one way. The same for Jews (the circumcised) and the same for the Gentile (the uncircumcised). Not the principle of obedience to the Law, but the principle of The Faith. In making this clear Paul makes use of the most commonly used assertion in the daily Jewish observance. Every practising Jew recites the *Shema Yisrael*, a phrase from Deuteronomy (6:4), ⁴ *Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one*, at the beginning of morning prayers and often the last thing at night – every day. Paul then uses this so well known assertion to press the point that there is one God. Of Jew and everyone else.

There is no distinction between Jew or Gentile (everyone else) in God's eyes, you are either a saved sinner or a lost one!

(v 31) Paul knows that people will happily discard the Law, assuming that the grace of God to Salvation replaces it. Like a newly converted 'pentecostal' African once demonstrated to a pastor.¹³ He was keen to witness, to any he met, with the words, “Are you saved?” Which revealed a shallow concept of the Faith, that was further confirmed when he implied that he could now continue to sin with impunity. The pastor's reply was to take him through the 'tenses' of the growth of faith in Christ:

¹² Even in recent times the idea of one set of principles for the Jews and a different one for the rest of us, is supported. A number of present day commentators, refer to a 'new perspective on Paul', where they revive this idea of different dispensations.

¹³ Pastor Jack Sequeira, quotes this incident in his video sermon for Rom3:21-31, *the Gospel in a nutshell*, http://www.jacksequeira.org/videos/gospel_in_nutshell.html

- from the moment you accept Christ through faith, you are saved from the **guilt and punishment of sin**. You are justified in God's sight.
- Then you learn to walk in the Spirit – having Christ living in you. Thus you can say, “I am being saved from the **power of slavery to sin**. You are being sanctified.
- Only at the second coming of Christ can you say, “I have been saved”. Until then you can only say, “I will be saved and fully released from the **naked presence of sin**. Only at the second coming of Christ, will you be sinless – be glorified.

The 'convert' had boasted that his faith had saved him 3 months earlier. The pastor's reply was that he had been potentially saved 2000 years ago. What had happened 3 months ago was that he had heard the offer of Salvation. Perhaps the fruit of the indwelling of the Spirit was yet to be apparent.

In verse 31, Paul implies the summary that Justification is solely through faith in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. That we contribute nothing to this by what we do – our 'works'. Striving, but inevitably failing to obey, the Law at the level necessary to satisfy God's standards, cannot save us. However that very bench mark – the law – having shown us how inadequate we are is still maintained in the perfect justice of the fully righteous God. The penalty of failure to obey the Law absolutely is still paid – by Christ, for us. The law is followed absolutely as part of The Faith. After all if it were not for our fallen human nature preventing us from absolute obedience to God, there would be no need for our Justification through grace – no need for the Gospel. Justification by The Faith and the Law are not in conflict, they serve different purposes. Through faith God's grace is freely given to believing sinners; through the sacrifice of Jesus on behalf of believing sinners; the penalty of the Law is satisfied – the Law is upheld. ³¹ *Do we then overthrow the law by this faith? By no means! On the contrary, we uphold the law.*

However, the 'cheap grace' demonstrated by the recent convert, mentioned above, is also in Paul's mind. Verse 31 should also be read in conjunction with 5:20 -6:4. Grace can expand to cover even the worst sinner. But this is not to say that we have licence to sin the more so that more grace can be demonstrated. It is absolutely the case that our justification at the point of our conversion is all of grace and none of us. But the faith in Christ that is bestowed at the same time means that Christ in us – the indwelling of the Spirit – raises us from our death in sin. ² *... How can we who died to sin still live in it?* ³ *Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?* ⁴ *We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.*

Let us consider this further, by looking at the Galatians reading:

In both instances, Paul is dealing with the responsibility of the saved sinner to live a new life. True faith has three cumulative evidences:

- knowledge – we hear the Gospel and know the truth.
- belief – we believe that this is God's truth. (So far we are no different from the demons, who tremble!)

- obedience – our trust in the work of Christ and the promises of God allows us to respond in obedience because our old nature is being crucified with Christ and born again with Christ in us, to newness of life. This is the mark of the truly believing sinner.

Verses 19 and 20 of Galatians 5 clearly describe the natural acts of the non-believer. The normal nature of all humans since the fall of Adam. The contrast, (verses 22 and 23) of those who belong to Christ – the true believers – is obvious and stark. *Against such things there is no Law.* Taken in the positive sense, those who belong to Christ are thus inclined and enabled to do, through the Spirit, what is in accord with the Law. To the Christian the Law is an infallible guide to the required standard of Christian living.

It is by the Spirit that we now live; our responsibility is to keep in step – to walk – with the Spirit. *This is the outward manifestation, in action and speech, of Living by the Spirit. Living by the Spirit is the root; walking by the Spirit is the fruit and that fruit is nothing less than the practical reproduction of the character (and therefore the conduct) of Christ in the lives of His people* (F F Bruce)

We have **been given** life by the spirit, God's gift to us: freedom in Christ by His cross; and the gift of the Holy Spirit. Such grace is given as the basis of life and is also the basis by which life is lived out.

We **need to live** in the life of the Spirit. The resultant spiritual responsibility of the Christian believer. Let the Spirit set the pace and then keep up with Him.

There is a continuous war, in the life of a Christian believer against the sinful nature of us all and the absolute execution (or extinction) of that sinful nature. The perfectionist who talks as if the sinful nature has been or can be totally conquered in this life have lost sight of the need to fight every day. While the pessimist is half-hearted in battling the flesh, because they never expect victory, have lost sight of victory that is ours through active identification with Christ on the Cross. (Hansen)¹⁴

³¹ *Do we then overthrow the law by this faith? By no means! On the contrary, we uphold the law.*

[2101]

Pray for God's grace, through the Spirit of Christ to live in us all, that we may live the new life made possible for the saints present today. Amen

Romans 4:1-25

The Left Ditch

Rom 4:4

⁴ Now to the one who works, his wages are not counted as a gift but as his due.

Let us form a picture in our minds of a long roadway: It winds onward like our path through the Christian life; there is a narrow formed section, the crown of the road; and the verges are steep-sided rock strewn ditches. In total the road reserve is quite wide. Further let us project this road example back into past ages. Before high speed vehicles. When, like the Roman roads, most traffic was 'by foot'. There is a great multitude on this road of life! Some are on the narrow part – the carriage-way – most spread out and stumble through the ditches.

Those who trust in God and His promises. Those who have that faith that passes mere knowledge and ascent of Christ's redeeming grace. These are on the narrow road. But all the throng are seeking salvation from something. Perhaps they even sense that 'Christ is the Answer', but as yet, while they have heard the gospel, they have yet to be called by the Spirit. How would we recognise then the true believers that are on the crown of the road? They have the Spirit of Christ and show Christ's works as its 'fruit'.

Satan hates the gospel as do unregenerated mortals. Humans of normal birth inherit the fallen nature of humanity. We all begin in this condemnation. We are, as it were, children of unrighteousness. Subjects of Satan's Kingdom. This corrupted earth. Each soul that is saved through faith in Christ's redemption of us from this bondage, is a loss to Satan. How he loves those well filled ditches on either side of the narrow Way.

Satan's purposes are fulfilled by travellers in either ditch. On the one hand, the left ditch, say, is 'Salvation by works' or legalism. On the other is antinomianism or 'cheap grace'.

Having spent the first 3 Chapters introducing the gospel: the fatal need of us all; the free grace of God then for both Jew and Gentile, Paul, in Chapter 4 looks closely at the 'left ditch'. The DIY method of Salvation. While in Chapter 6 he looks at 'cheap grace' – grace is sufficient to cover the worst sinner. Can we then multiply grace by sinning with impunity. Saved by grace alone, so sin all you like! “By no means”, says Paul.

But, today we start to look in the left ditch.

Paul was addressing circumstances of his day. Yet we can, with a little thought, imagine what he would have to say to our present-day circumstances. Paul was concerned about people who claimed to be Christians and were active in the Church. He first encountered them in the newly formed Galatian Churches. He wrote a letter to counsel the wavering Christians against the ideas of these Judaisers. Then at Antioch

– where the name Christian was first used – Paul with Barnabas reported that the same cancer was being spread by 'some men who came down from Judea'. (Acts 15) This led to the Council at Jerusalem. This Council resolved the Church's official doctrine. Grace alone. Yet years later Paul in writing to the Christian house groups in Rome feels the need to reiterate this doctrine. And today this is also necessary.

Some Jewish Christians (in name) were insisting that all Christians – Jew and Gentile alike – needed to add to God's free grace the traditional requirements, in order to complete the process of Salvation:

- earning Salvation by what ones does or is – one's 'works'.
- Being circumcised – following the ritual of the Church.
- Obeying the Law of Moses.

To begin with Paul is addressing people of Jewish background. He takes their prime ancestor. The founder of their race. There was none greater than Abraham for the Jew. If it were to be shown that anyone could be put right with God, by works – that is, what they do and what qualities and merit they have – Abraham was the one. But Paul quotes at verse 3, Genesis 15:6. (and later in verse 22) ³ *For what does the Scripture say? "Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness."* Abraham (or Abram as he was then) was put right with God by God not because of any special merit or personal characteristics, but simply because he believed God and lived in God's promises. He had that faith that was demonstrated by trust. Trust that ordered his future actions. He committed himself to life changing actions, purely on his belief of what God said. Impossible that it may have seemed.

Let us look at the sketch on the cover of today's Order of Service:

I mentioned last week, part of my experience at the Jewish School in Perth. Every morning all the students conduct morning prayers for about half an hour. As well as having the ritual garments and symbols that they (the males) wear, they also have their 'Bible'. Each student has this 'kit' with them each day. Their bible is an English translation, from Hebrew, of the first 5 books.

I have examined one of these bibles. And let us consider the passage I read this morning from the book of Genesis (12:1-5). This is a brief passage and takes up only a small fraction of a page. In the Bibles the students had, the rest of the page had a type of commentary. A homily that is designed to fill in the details of the 'official' scripture. These are called Midrashim.

Here is a quote from Wikipedia about a Midrash (singular of Midrashim): *Midrash* is a way of interpreting biblical stories that goes beyond simple distillation of religious, legal or moral teachings. It fills in many gaps left in the biblical narrative regarding events and personalities that are only hinted at.¹⁵

Now a quote from Rabbi Rachel M. Solomin, entitled: **The midrash rounds out the biblical figures Abraham and Sarah**. This quote gives an insight into how Jews throughout the ages have looked for 'works' and special merit and characteristics to justify God's acknowledging humanly earned righteousness.

The Bible offers few details about its characters' backgrounds and motivations. That's where midrash comes in; one of the functions of this genre of rabbinic literature is to flesh out the characters of the Bible.

Often, the sages of the midrash seek to provide a “back story” for a biblical personality. The sages also were compelled to explain the motivations of God and human characters, imagining their inner lives. Midrashim take roughly sketched biblical characters and make of them archetypal figures with whom we can more easily identify.

Some of the most famous midrashim are stories about Abraham and Sarah. Among these midrashim are tales so imbedded in Jewish tradition that many people do not even realize they can't be found in the Torah.

Why God Chose Abraham

When the Torah introduces Avram (as Abraham was initially named), he is already a grown man. The Torah mentions that he was born to a man named Terah in Ur of the Chaldees, and that Avram left Ur with his father, his brother, and their collective households and traveled to Haran (Genesis 11:27-32). God's first reported words to Avram come when God commands Avram, at the age of 75, to leave Haran for Canaan (Genesis 12).

What was special about Avram/Abraham? What are the character traits that motivated God to choose this man over all others? Midrashic stories of Avram's youth provide the answers. They portray Avram as possessing logical gifts and spiritual insight that allow him to see the inconsistencies between the idolatrous practices around him and the theological claims to which they are linked.¹⁶

An example of such a Midrash can be briefly mentioned as follows:

Abram, by his own intellectual discernment had come to the realisation that the Sun, Moon and the stars etc did not control things, nor did inanimate objects have any divine abilities. He recognised that there was 'one true God', only. His father, however made his living from making and selling idols. Abram, as a teenager, was left in charge of the shop one day. How could he convince his father that the idols were useless? On that day a woman came to the shop with a basket of food as a 'meal offering' to the idols. After she left, Abram destroyed all the idols except the biggest. He put the club, that he had used, in the hands of the only undamaged idol. When the father returned he was furious. Abram explained that the idols had fought over the food offering and what remained was the result. The father's reply was that everyone knew that idols didn't have any powers or abilities to do what Abram suggested. Abram said, “Father, listen to the words that your mouth just said!”

Paul has no need for a Midrash to account for Abraham's imputed righteousness. Paul (having been fully instructed by Christ Himself) takes the direct text of God's revealed word: *“Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.”*

(V 4) So Abraham was made right with God. This acceptance did not come by works, but by faith. His righteousness is described as something given to him by means of faith [but not because of faith] . When a man works for something, that then is his due; it is owed to him. If Abraham [by his works, character, intellect

¹⁶ http://www.myjewishlearning.com/texts/Rabbinics/Midrash/Midrash_Aggadah/How_Midrash_Functions/Abraham_and_Sarah_in_Midrash.shtml

etc] had earned his righteousness, it would have been described as a reward, or as his due, but not as a gift.

(v 5) It is only when a person does not get his righteousness by his own work, but believes on Him who justifies the ungodly, that righteousness can be said to be accounted, reckoned, imputed, or attributed to him.¹⁷

The alternative terms used here relate to a financial analogy. While less favoured these days, imputed has a particularly instructive meaning. Imputation implies that you have received something that was not achieved by your own actions. For example: you may be a passive shareholder in a company. You carry out none of the activities that earn the profit. This profit while still residing in the company attracts tax, which may be paid by the company. Once your share of this profit is passed on to you, will you be required to pay tax on it again? Rather you have a title in receiving the 'dividend' which imputes to you, release from a tax liability because, tax has already been paid. Fits well don't you agree?

Next week we will continue in the 'left ditch'. The burden of legalism.

How easy it is for our fallen human nature to lead us into distorting the gospel, the free grace of God. Our human pride. Or fatal compulsion to make of ourselves a god. We just have to add to God's free gift our feeble, faulty, fruitless sinful contribution. To boost our pride. To boast. And by so doing turn gift into obligation. An obligation that can only result in condemnation and death. God's free gift saves. God's justice condemns.

Praise God we do not have to rely on our own merits. That the merits of Christ alone satisfy the justice that our sin requires. That Christ's righteousness can be imputed to us through his Spirit. That we can be placed on the 'crown' of that road of life. Thank God for His gospel of grace, alone.

[1888]

Pray for God's grace, through the Spirit of Christ to live in us all, that we may live the new life made possible for all the saints present today. Amen