

By faith

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[0 : 00] I think it's fair to say we're turning to a portion of Scripture that's arguably some of the most exalted and glorious gospel saturated verses you're likely to come across in the entirety of the Bible.

! And certainly this section of Romans is most important to the overall flow of the book of Romans itself. It acts as a kind of a hinge point. And it's just dripping and oozing with gospel truth and good news.

And I thought it would be very helpful for us to be reminded of some of these themes as we come to communion this evening. But before we dive straight into Romans 3, it's helpful for us to just take a few moments to review the background and context.

Paul has taken time in chapters 1 and 2 to argue the comprehensiveness, the totality, and the absolute immensity, really, of man's depravity, of man's sinfulness.

Those of you who are familiar with the book of Romans, you'll know exactly what Paul is saying here. He's indicting, if you like, both pagan Gentile and very systematically, almost like a lawyer, saying the immensity and the comprehensiveness of their sinfulness as pagan Gentiles.

[1 : 33] But he doesn't just leave it there. He turns his sights on the moral, religious, so-called law-abiding Jew.

And in doing so, everybody, religious, moral, pagan, is under God's judgment for sin.

In Romans 1.18, Paul states that the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness. God's divine judgment and wrath against sin is being shown through him giving sinners up, over to themselves, giving them up.

And Phil, very helpfully, reminded us of aspects of this this morning in his sermon. We see in Romans 1 and 2 this downward spiral, which starts with a thanklessness and ingratitude and not recognizing their accountability, their maker.

And what comes of that? It's a descent, a downward spiral. It doesn't just end with there. And then you see a futility, a kind of futility in that they exchange the creator with worshipping the creature.

[3 : 00] And there's this exchange that goes on that leads to living a kind of lie and being immersed and entrenched in an idolatry. And then a debased mind follows that.

Their thinking, their wiring is totally debased. And they're enslaved. And then the final outcome of that we see is played out in sexual sin and all kinds of confusion.

This is the context. This is the background that Paul is speaking of. And it's a reminder to us, isn't it, that God's judgment isn't always the cataclysmic event that we expect it to be.

God's judgment can sometimes be through the quiet giving people over, giving people up to themselves.

And it should really disturb us, actually, when we see people so immersed in and lost in their sin.

Their consciences are seared and they're no longer open to even hearing the name of Jesus Christ or hearing the gospel or the good news.

[4 : 07] That's a terribly sad thing. And we sometimes look at that and feel, oh, is it something to do with me or is it something to do, I'm not quite getting the message across here. But actually, there's an element here of God's judgment.

And I think that's helpful to be reminded of. And it's helpful to be reminded that this is both Gentile, it's both Jew. And they're accountable to a holy, just and righteous God.

This isn't just them out there. This is the so-called moral person that could come in here who rests in their morality.

Rather than Jesus Christ. Paul argues that by works of the law, no human being, no human being can be justified before God's bar of righteousness.

God's judgment of sinners of every persuasion has led to every mouth being stopped. You can picture the scene, can't you? It's like a cosmic divine courtroom.

[5 : 10] Every mouth is stopped before a holy, righteous God. And we read about the wrath of God in Romans 1 and 2.

And I think it's just helpful in terms of background. We do need to understand the wrath of God. If we don't understand the wrath of God, we don't understand the grace of God in its fullness and beauty.

In a sense, we need the bad news before we can really glory and enjoy the good news. And if you recoil at the wrath of God, and if that's a doctrine that makes you feel most uncomfortable, it's helpful to know actually what it is.

Because there are some misunderstandings. It isn't a capricious outpouring of God's uncontrolled anger like a father who's lost it in the home or someone who has no self-control.

This is, one writer says, this is the holy revulsion. That's a strong word, isn't it? Revulsion of God's being, his essence, his entire being against that which is contradictory to his holiness.

[6 : 14] It's his strong and settled opposition to all that is evil and sin. God is diametrically opposed to sin in all its forms, all evil.

He has to be. He is God. He's righteous. God is holy and he must be consistent with his character, which is righteous and just.

God is holy and sin. And I think we need to, before we delve into Romans 3, it's helpful for us to see this dark backdrop of who we once were and who many of our loved ones are, for the gospel to really make sense and shine.

You may have heard of the analogy of when you go to the jewelers and they bring out the ring. They bring it out on the very dark black backdrop, don't they? So the ring sparkles and it shines. And that's something of what we have here. For this evening, I'm thinking of kind of three little areas, points. Firstly, a righteousness revealed.

[7 : 26] Secondly, a saviour received. And thirdly, a boasting excluded. As I said, I won't be comprehensively looking at this text, but just some themes. Verse 21 says, but now.

You notice that? But now the righteousness of God has been revealed. There's light coming out of this darkness. There's this but now. Is this Paul speaking in the kind of flow of the logic of his argument?

Well, it could be. But most seem to think that this is about a now in time. A now in redemptive history. A now in the messianic age that we are in.

The but now. Christ has come. And he's speaking of the present messianic age. And then he speaks of this righteousness of God.

But now the righteousness of God has been manifested. This is a very important and incredibly profound thing for us to try and get our heads around.

[8 : 26] But the righteousness of God. What does it mean? The righteousness of God. The scriptures can speak of the righteousness of God in slightly different ways. And we've seen in Romans that this righteousness of God is spoken of before in verses 1, 16 and 17.

It's as being revealed in the gospel. So it's something that's revealed in the gospel. We see in 2 Corinthians 5, 21. Many of you will know this. Where Paul states that in him.

In him we might become the righteousness of God. The righteousness of God. So it does us good to know what this righteousness of God is. And in the scriptures there's different ways and nuances of thinking about this.

Firstly, it can be a righteousness that God possesses. You think of an attribute of God. We often talk about the attribute of righteousness in God, don't we?

His moral character. His rectitude. His uprightness. His integrity. His justice. But the righteousness of God can also refer to the righteous actions of God.

[9 : 39] The things that God does. But it can also allude to the righteous requirements of God from sinners. So here I think we're getting kind of closer to what Paul's alluding to.

The righteous requirement of God from sinners. But also it can mean the righteousness that God provides. A righteousness that God provides. And I think here in some sense this encapsulates all of these.

But there's a real sense that this is the righteousness that God expects from sinners. But God provides. And how does he provide it? He provides it through his son.

In this righteousness as he's explained elsewhere. It's revealed in the gospel. It's his righteousness provided in Christ and credited. Theologians say imputed.

That basically means credited to our account. Through Jesus Christ. It's his righteous saving action through Christ.

[10 : 45] As the one who has perfectly met all the requirements of the law. In his perfect life. And his atoning work on the cross. Where we may stand. And we can say we are right before God as our divine judge.

It's good news. This is not a righteousness that we can somehow work up by obedience. But if you notice in the text.

It's a righteousness that's apart from the law. And what Paul's really saying here is that this is a righteousness that's apart from the works of the law. Now the law in itself is good.

I think we have to be careful. The law. It points to the saviour. It reveals the character of God. So although the law is spoken of often in quite negative terms.

In itself it's good. But the law has nothing to do with our justification. The law cannot justify you.

[11 : 46] The law cannot give life. The commandments are good. They're true. They're just. They're righteous. But they cannot give life. The law can't justify.

The law has no mercy. The law demands from you and I. Perfect righteousness. But it does have an important function in believers life.

Through it we gain knowledge of our sin. Paul alludes to that in verse 20. And it's a rule of life for our sanctification. But we don't look to the law for justification.

You remember Paul says elsewhere in Romans 7. He says he would not have known he was covetous. Unless it was the law or the commandment that revealed that in him.

Elsewhere. Slightly difficult text. But he says once he was alive apart from the law. Because he thought he was keeping it.

[12 : 45] He had a superficial understanding of the depth of the law. And the spirituality of the law. But then he realized the searching depth of the law. And he died. It killed him.

He recognized the true application of the law. As Jesus speaks about in Matthew 5. So as we come to the table. Just a question for all of us. What are you wearing tonight?

What are you clothed in tonight? Are you coming here clothed in your own robe of righteousness? Are you coming here thinking well I've come to church this last month. I've been regularly attending. My prayer life is looking pretty good. And my Bible is reading good. And they're wonderful things. They're wonderful things. Or are you coming in a righteousness of someone else? My next thought is a saviour received.

[13 : 45] So how is this righteousness of God received? Well this is received through faith. Through faith.

You read that in. Thank you Mark. Verse 22. The righteousness of God through faith. Faith is an interesting word isn't it?

You hear people in the world speak of faith. Quite frequently. I've just got faith that it's going to work out okay. I've got faith in you. I don't quite know what people really mean.

I think it's just a kind of synonym for positive thinking. A kind of hopeful positive view of how things will pan out. It's probably entrenched in some kind of humanistic world view.

Where we're just good really. And given the chance we'll be able to work it out. But faith in the Bible is a very different thing. Faith in the Bible is a faith in Christ.

[14 : 43] It's not a vague positive feeling or hope. And it's helpful for us just for a moment to think about what this faith is. What it looks like. It's a true knowledge.

It's a faith that's rooted in knowledge that we glean from this book. From God's revelation. It's a knowledge. It's a knowledge. It's also. It involves what people call a mental assent.

We have to assent to these truths. And we say yes I agree with this. But we go further than that. We say that there's a trusting.

And there's a leaning. And there's a resting in faith. It's not just a knowledge. It's not just at the level of our heads. And our understanding. And our wills. But it's something so far deeper.

And often when we think of trusting. Leaning. Resting. That can come across as something kind of passive. And just like falling into a nice fluffy bed. And that's it.

[15 : 42] Faith. I'm just trusting. It's an active thing. Faith. Faith. There can be a striving in faith. There can even be an agonizing in faith.

Luther once said. Faith is a busy thing. Faith gets busy. But faith is the instrumental means of our salvation.

And what I mean by that. Children. Children. Some of you in our family. Sometimes. After church on a Sunday. We go home.

And mum and dad would serve up soup. That would be a quick and easy lunch. We haven't had it for a while. But sometimes soup would be a thing we'd have. And you know when you have your soup. That mum and dad give you. You're eating your soup.

Yeah. You're not thinking. Wow. This spoon. This spoon is so cool. I'm really trusting in this spoon. Your main concern is getting the soup into you.

[16:43] Isn't it? And in a way. Faith is kind of similar to that. When we say it's an instrument. It's a bit like a spoon. And what we're interested in is Christ. We don't come to communion thinking.

Oh my faith is strong today. Or it's Christ we're looking to. And Paul goes on to speak about justification by grace.

As believers we're justified by grace. This is a legal act where we're declared righteous. In God's divine court. We've been thinking about the righteousness of God.

And it's credited to our account. It's ours. It's not something so much that happens inside of us. But it's something that happens to us. It's forensic. It's declarative. It's legal.

We are no longer guilty. We're no longer under condemnation. It's an alien righteousness. And elsewhere in the text.

[17:42] Paul speaks about redemption. Through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus. Whom God put forward for us. This word redemption. The picture here is.

You imagine the market. But actually more specifically. The slave market. Being bought back. Being bought with a price.

Do you ever think of yourself that way? I was struck by this. Paul actually speaks of us being slaves in the present tense. We're slaves of Christ. We were once.

Do you ever think of yourself as you were a slave to sin? You were totally under what the old writers kind of call the thralldom. The dominion. The power of sin.

You were a slave to sin. But you've been bought back. Redemption. It's a wonderful picture, isn't it? And we know freedom. But it's a freedom where we are slaves.

[18:41] We're slaves to Christ. Christ. And then this word here. In verse 25.

Whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood. To be received by faith. This word propitiation. It's a word that probably outside of church you won't hear at all.

Or very rarely. It's not a word that comes up in kind of regular language. Talk at work or anything.

And it's one of those big theological words. Actually, you can equate it to some of the things we see in real life.

In day-to-day life. Not real life. Day-to-day life. But it basically means that through Christ, God's anger and his wrath is turned away.

If you think of it as simply as that. God's anger and his wrath is turned away. I remember once reading a really helpful picture of this. This might be helpful for you, children.

[19:50] Picture for you. You imagine a crashing waterfall. Something totally majestic. Something powerful. But incredibly dangerous. You think of Niagara Falls or something like that.

The majesty. The awesomeness for that. You wouldn't go in there and think, I'm going to just have a quick shower, would you? It would kill you. This is dangerous. And the picture is, is that crashing water is the wrath of God.

Coming down with power and constancy. But can you imagine if you were under that water, but above you there was a rock. Like a kind of umbrella.

And that water was crashing on that rock and bouncing off. Wouldn't that be great? You'd be safe. And God is the water crashing down in his anger towards sin.

Remember, he has to be angry towards sin because he's God. But Christ is that rock for us. That propitiation. And that is wonderful, isn't there? That is so good news.

[20:55] So how's God's righteousness shown? In the text it says it was shown in the past in his divine forbearance for a time. You think back in the Old Testament, he didn't inflict immediate punishment on humans for their sins.

But through patience and mercy, he looked forward to the cross where full payment of sin could be made. But it's also shown in this present time by him being both just and the justifier.

And we've spoken about this already to some degree. God must be consistent with his perfectly righteous and just character. He cannot just erase his righteous wrath. He would almost kind of ungod himself. But he's found a way to be both just and the justifier of his people. Through his son, Jesus Christ.

And that's what we come to celebrate this evening. And lastly, boasting excluded. What should our response be to this?

[22 : 05] You look at the verses 27 to 31. What is our response? Pseudo-religions, philosophies, even some kind of therapeutic programs.

You notice there's something similar about them. They're often like a series of steps that you climb up. And then when you get to the top, you've reached a certain amount of specialist knowledge. You've reached that place of arriving or expertise. And then you can pat yourself on the back for your good works.

There's a lot of religions like that. And there are probably some branches. Well, we know there are branches of Christianity like that. Where there's a kind of climbing up these steps. And this sense of, you hear of mystery religions.

Leaders have secret knowledge. And us just ordinary folk can't really tap into that. And you see that often, don't you? And it's so easy in philosophies and religions like that to boast, isn't it?

[23 : 13] My attainment, my achievement. Therapeutic programs can be quite similar in a subtle way. Remember in my old job years ago, substance misuse services.

You know, people who were attending 12-step programs that are really good and really helpful. Please don't misunderstand me. Ever so helpful. But there can be, I've achieved this amount of clean time. Therefore, your boast becomes, I'm so and so clean. I'm 10 years clean, 12 years clean. And I've reached a certain amount of status. Not in the gospel. What do we boast in?

Do we boast in our attainment? Our knowledge? Our holiness? Our adherence to the law? Well, we wouldn't say we adhere to the law.

But we may have some rules. Some little rules we've kind of made up for ourselves. Or whatever it is as you come to communion. Is it a law of works?

[24 : 16] Or is it a law of faith, Paul says? By what kind of law? By a law of works? When he uses the word law here, this was quite tricky.

And most people I consulted suggested that by the word law, he means more a principle. Is it a principle of works? Or is it a principle of faith?

And what about us? Are we trusting in faith alone, in Christ alone, apart from the works of the law?

But you may ask, just as we come to move to the table, But aren't we told to examine ourselves?

It does say, doesn't it? To Corinthians, examine yourselves. Test yourselves. What about that? Well, self-examination is to see if Christ is in you.

[25 : 15] It's not so much about looking at the strength of your faith and measuring up and giving yourself reason to pat yourself on the back.

Is Christ in you? Are you walking in his ways in any way? And we all do so faintly and weakly and we all sin. Are you holding sin against a brother or a sister?

Have you got a kind of resentment or bitterness towards someone in the church that needs to be dealt with? That's examining yourself. It's not to boast in ourselves, but to glory in the riches of his free grace.

Because Paul says, examine yourself to see if you be in the faith. It's more about the quality, it's more about the reality rather than the quantity of faith.

Well, as we celebrate communion, we don't celebrate a series of theological propositions or categories. We celebrate a person, don't we? And we must not think of these blessings, these wonderful blessings we've thought of.

[26 : 21] The righteousness of God, faith, justification, propitiation, and all these things. As if they're a kind of substance that are kind of doled out to us by God apart from Christ.

We know these blessings in Christ. So, let's remember that our good works have no currency in qualifying us before God, before a holy God.

As we come to the table and let's glory in the free grace that we enjoy. Amen. Amen.

Thank you.