

The Greatest Paragraph ever written

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[0 : 00] If you have a Bible with you, then please turn with me to Romans chapter 3. This paragraph which one eminent commentator says is the greatest paragraph ever written.

That's high praise indeed, the greatest paragraph ever written. Let me set the context in which we find these words of the Apostle Paul.

In the first 17 verses of the opening chapter, Paul introduces himself and he introduces the great theme which dominates the length and breadth of his letter to the Romans.

He says in verse 16 of chapter 1, I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.

For in it, that is in the gospel, the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith.

[1 : 14] The righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith. And by the righteousness of God there, Paul does not mean that attribute of God's rectitude and rightness and holiness.

He means by the righteousness of God, the way that God goes about to make sinners right with himself.

And what Paul does now from verse 18 of chapter 1 through to verse 20 of chapter 3 is to show us our need of the righteousness of God.

We could in two words sum up Romans 1.18 to 3.20. Righteousness lacking.

Righteousness of God. There is none righteous. Chapter 3 verse 9. No, not one. Whoever we are, whatever our background, whatever our history, whatever our heritage, whatever our church affiliation, before God by nature, we stand in need of the righteousness of God.

[2 : 59] We are under his wrath and judgment because of our sin and rebellion. We need God to come and do for us what we could never do for ourselves.

We need God to come and make us right with himself. That's our great need. That's your great need tonight and mine. That God will make us right with himself.

In a sense, nothing else matters in this life. If you know that you are right with God, then all is well with you. But if you do not know that you are right with God, then no matter how privileged you may be in every other area of your life, if you are not right with God, you ultimately have nothing.

You are the most needy, desperate individual on the face of this planet. And Paul comes to the conclusion of his argument from 118 to 320 in those words in verse 20 of chapter 3, by the works of the law, no human being, no flesh will be justified in God's sight.

We have no capacity within ourselves to make ourselves right with God. We don't have the material within us. Sin has utterly disabled us.

[4 : 31] We have not a shred of righteousness within us. We could as well climb to the sun on a rope of ice than make ourselves in any way right with God.

And if Paul had to end his letter at verse 20 of chapter 3, the great cry would go up, what hope then is there for me?

If God shuts the door to being right with him by my efforts and endeavors and attainments, if I have nothing within me that could make me right with God and acceptable to God, what hope is there for me in this life?

And that's why these opening words of verse 21 are so significant. But now. But now.

I think it was Martin Lloyd-Jones, the great 20th century preacher in London, who said these two words, but now, are the greatest two words in the Bible. And what Paul is now going to show us is that God himself in his Son has provided for us the very righteousness that we utterly lack.

[6 : 03] But now the righteousness of God has been manifested. And in these concentrated verses, and they are surely the most concentrated paragraph in the whole Bible, you may be thinking, well, Ian, I'm not persuaded it's the greatest paragraph in the Bible.

There are other great paragraphs you could think of immediately. Ephesians 1, 1 through 14, and other passages similarly. But without doubt, it is the most condensed, concentrated, theological, biblical passage in the whole Bible.

And in these few words, Paul, as it were, reveals to us or unfolds before us the riches of what God has done in Jesus Christ.

To make judgment-deserving sinners right with himself. John Owen, the great English Puritan, divine, perhaps the greatest pastor-theologian the Silens ever produced, said our greatest hindrance in the Christian life is our lack of acquaintedness with our privileges.

Our lack of acquaintedness with our privileges. Maybe you're here tonight and you're struggling in your Christian life. The antidote, Owen is saying, is to become better acquainted with your privileges in Jesus Christ.

[7 : 48] And that's what Paul is doing here. I'm sure tonight I'm not going to say anything that you've never heard before. But Christian believers need to be reminded again and again of the greatness of the gospel.

We need to be reminded lest we take the gospel for commonplace and simply nod our assent to it. We need to be thrilled day by day by the wonders of the grace and love of God in Jesus Christ. So let me highlight four things briefly tonight as we look at this most concentrated and condensed of Paul's biblical paragraphs.

Let me tell you what the four are. The source of God's salvation. The ground or foundation of God's salvation.

The way of entrance into God's salvation. And the life transformation effected by God's salvation.

[8 : 57] First of all then the source of God's salvation. And Paul crystallizes that did you notice in verse 24.

He writes we are justified by his grace as a gift. You see the great question that arises surely is this. Why? Why did God do anything to effect salvation for a world that had rebelled against him rejected him refused him resisted him?

Why was God ever prompted to do anything for this world in its fallenness and lostness? Why? Why?

And the answer is simply this by his grace as a gift. This word justified is a very rich biblical word.

[10 : 02] It means to be declared righteous in the sight of God. to be right in his sight to be acceptable. Well how is it that anyone anywhere becomes right with God?

How is it that anyone anywhere has a righteous standing before a holy just and righteous God?

Well says the apostle we are justified by his grace and to underline it he continues as a gift.

Now I think this word grace is one of the most commonly used words in the evangelical vocabulary.

We speak about it all the time. I preach about it all the time. Some of us write about it all the time.

But what is grace?

What does Paul mean when he says we are justified by his grace as a gift? What is grace? Well very simply when the Bible speaks of grace it speaks of God's undeserved saving kindness to judgment deserving sinners.

[11 : 21] That's what grace is. In mercy God does not give us what we deserve and in his grace he gives us what we don't deserve and what we don't deserve is his salvation.

We deserve nothing from God but his righteous judgment but in his grace as a free gift he gives to us his son Jesus Christ who is the Lord our righteousness.

righteousness. That is the source of the salvation of God. It doesn't originate in anything in us. It originates wholly in the free good pleasure loving kindness and tender heartedness of God.

Let me quote again some words of John Owen the great English Puritan Divine. He wrote in I think it's volume two of his collected works on communion with God.

He says many Christians find it hard to believe that there is any sweetness in God except what has been won by the blood of Jesus Christ.

[12 : 42] Maybe that's your thinking tonight. What did the cross of Jesus Christ do in relation to the love of God? Well if you think the love of God was purchased by the blood of Jesus Christ you're turning the gospel on its head said Owen.

God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son. The cross is not where Jesus Christ secured or won the love of God for sinners.

The cross of Jesus Christ is the manifestation of the love of God for sinners. and the wonder of it is that this love that God had that drove him dare we say to set forth his son to be the savior of the world this love finds its origin holy within God himself.

It's not that he looked upon us and saw anything desirable or deserving. nothing. What was the desirable or deserving in you or in me? Nothing. And the question then is why oh Lord why such love to me?

And the Bible's answer is because it pleased God so to do. I travel a fair bit in the USA and Americans being Americans will often ask you all kinds of questions some of them very crass but regularly I'm asked this what do you think we'll say when we get to the glory?

[14 : 25] Well who knows? But unfailingly I reply I'm pretty sure though I don't know for certain I'm pretty sure when I come to the glory I will ask and never stop asking throughout the ages of eternity why oh God such love to me?

Why oh God such love to me? This is the source of our salvation. It originates in the free unmerited undeserving kindness and love of God.

That's what the Bible means by grace. And we must resist the temptation to become Roman Catholics in our thinking about grace. I think often even reformed Christians think of grace as some kind of substance some kind of blessing that God scoops out of a treasury of merit and dollops down on his people.

That's Roman Catholicism. Grace isn't a spiritual substance. Grace isn't even a spiritual blessing. There is actually no such thing as grace.

Did you know that? there is only the grace of God. Or better the God of grace. Grace is God giving us himself in undeserved kindness and mercy.

[15 : 55] That's why Jesus Christ 2 Corinthians 8-9 is himself called the grace of God. For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ that though he was rich yet for your sakes he became poor so that you by his poverty might become rich.

Grace is incarnated in Jesus Christ. He is the grace of God just as he is the salvation of God.

Salvation isn't something that God gives us when we believe in Jesus.

Salvation is God giving us his son as saviour. The source of our salvation is the grace of God which he gives to us as a gift.

And that again underlines the undeserved nature of it. By its very definition a gift isn't something you deserve or merit. It wouldn't then be a gift.

It would be a reward for services rendered. But God comes to us and says I have something to give you.

[17 : 07] You could hardly believe what I'm going to give you. But I'm going to give it to you as a free gift. It is my salvation wrapped up in my son Jesus Christ.

And that's why we should never go over the wonder of saying why oh Lord such love to me? What did I ever do?

Nothing. Nothing. What did I ever say? Nothing. nothing. Why do I have all of this? Because it pleased me so to love you.

Secondly notice the ground or foundation of God's salvation. Paul goes on to develop this in verses 24 and 25.

He says we are justified by his grace as a gift through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood to be received by faith.

[18 : 15] Now I sometimes get accused of using big words. I almost always deny the accusation. I'm a bit like Anne of Green Gables. If you only knew the words I want to use but don't you would think my words were really quite monosyllabic.

But the Bible's got no hesitation in using big words. Do you know why? Because the gospel is big and it takes big words to begin to begin to unpack the riches of the gospel.

And Paul uses two of those big words here. Redemption and propitiation. Redemption conveys the idea of paying a price to rescue someone or release someone from bondage.

And that is our condition by nature. Jesus said everyone who sins is a slave to sin. Now I don't know hardly any of you here tonight.

Maybe you're thinking that's a bit much. I'm happy to admit I'm a sinner. I do things that aren't right. I say things that aren't right. I think things that aren't right. But a slave to sin, that's a bit over the top.

[19 : 33] Well those are the words of the Lord Jesus Christ. John chapter 8. Everyone who sins is a slave to sin. That's the deceitfulness of sin. It brings us into a captivity and we don't know we're actually captives in that captivity.

But we can't free ourselves from our sinful nature. we need someone to come and rescue us. Rescue us from sin's prevailing power and behind sin's prevailing power sin's powerful master Satan himself.

We need someone to come and rescue us. And that's what Jesus Christ came into the world to do. He came to rescue us. He's the divine rescuer who has come to pay the ransom price. He doesn't pay it to Satan, doesn't pay it to sin. He pays it to God, including himself. He pays the ransom price of his own blood.

The wages of sin is death. We rightly are captives to sin and Satan. But Jesus Christ has come.

[20 : 48] And by his redemption he has paid the price to set us free. To rescue us and release us from that unholy dominion that would take us into a lost and ruined eternity.

And then there is the word propitiation whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood. This is one of the great words of the Christian gospel. you know what it means to propitiate.

It means to placate someone you've offended. Maybe you've upset someone and you think what can I do to make things right? I know what I'll do.

I'll go and buy this lovely bunch of flowers or this nice box of chocolates or this nice gift and I'll go and I'll say I'm so very, very sorry.

will you please accept this gift? Will you turn aside your anger and annoyance with me and receive this gift as a propitiation that we might once again be friends?

[22 : 01] And embedded here in this word propitiation is the very reality of the wrath. The holy wrath. Not the capricious wrath but the holy wrath of God.

Why does God need to be propitiated? Well there are some modern theologians and not so modern who say well God doesn't need to be propitiated. God loves the world.

Paul's language is over the top. It betrays the atmosphere of the first century. We moderns know so much more. I love the quip of C.S.

Lewis when he speaks about the arrogance of modernity. We moderns think we know so much more and so much better than people in the past.

We know a lot more stuff certainly. I don't think we know much that's better than our forefathers.

And Paul is simply telling us that God is holy.

[23 : 05] he will by no means clear the guilty. Yes he is rich in mercy. He holds out his arms all the day long. He takes no pleasure in the death of the wicked.

Ezekiel 33 but rather that they turn to him and live. He takes no pleasure in the death of the wicked but he is holy and his wrath goes out to everything that is unholy.

How is God to be placated? How is his friendship to be attained? Do you see what Paul says?

Whom God put forward. God himself.

God the offended one has provided the propitiation. The gospel is so wonderful that if it wasn't in the Bible you wouldn't believe it.

It's just out of this world. God himself the offended one. The spurned one. The rejected one. The reviled one. The rebelled against one.

[24 : 12] He put forward Jesus Christ his own son as a propitiation to turn aside his wrath. All the righteous anger of God was laid upon Jesus Christ on Calvary's cross.

The holocaust of Calvary where he bore our sin, died our death. Entered into the hell that was ours. In our place and for our sake as our covenant head and king. This is the foundation of our salvation.

That's why when you come to believe into Jesus Christ you believe into a sure and certain salvation. salvation because he has once for all redeemed and once for all turned aside the wrath of God.

He doesn't need to keep doing it perpetually he's done it once for all says the writer to the Hebrews. Our salvation is secure because it is grounded in the redemption effected by Jesus Christ.

[25 : 22] He is the redeemer and by the propitiation whereby he turns aside God's wrath and God no longer looks upon all who believe except with the loving kindness of a reconciled father.

One of the great delights in my life as a Christian is regularly early in the morning to pray the Lord's Prayer and to linger over the first two words our father.

Our father, the holy one. The just the pure the righteous one. Whom I offended. Whose wrath is real and would consume me in an instant.

It's now because of Jesus Christ my father. I think the Westminster Directory of Public Worship is very wise when it says that congregation should regularly pray the Lord's Prayer.

and recite the Apostles Creed. That's the Westminster Standards. Pray the Lord's Prayer. Just savor the words Father.

[26 : 37] Our Father. Because in Jesus Christ his wrath has been turned aside and his friendship has been secured.

But then thirdly the way of entrance into God's salvation. the way of entrance. Well Paul tells us two things. He tells us in verse 20 it's not by works.

By works of law no flesh will be justified in God's sight. Do you know why you cannot be made right with God by your own works?

Because you cannot. There isn't a scintilla of goodness native to any one of you, myself included.

All our works are tainted. In fact the Bible puts it so graphically we don't like to translate what's there actually in Isaiah 64.

[27 : 36] All our righteousness is as filthy rags. That's a very polite translation of the Hebrew. Well how then are we justified?

How are we made right with God? Three times Paul tells us here verse 22 verse 25 and verse 26 the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe.

Verse 25 whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood to be received by faith. Verse 26 it was to show his righteousness at the present time so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.

Faith the alone instrument by which we receive the salvation of God. But what is faith? what does it mean to believe on the Lord Jesus Christ?

What is this faith without which we are not justified made right with God? What is it? Well it's many things but at its heart it is this upon a life I did not live a death I did not die another's life another's death I stake my whole eternity.

[29 : 21] Horatius Bonner faith is resting the weight of all that you are on the grace and love of God in Jesus Christ. Faith is self abandoning and Christ receiving.

Faith turns its back on self congratulation and casts its all upon Jesus Christ crucified and risen.

You see just as there is no such thing as grace there is actually no such thing as faith. There is only faith in Jesus Christ and actually and more accurately we are not justified made right with God through faith but through Jesus Christ he is the Lord our righteousness but we receive Christ as a gift through faith.

Faith is the empty hand that receives the gift of God's love in Jesus Christ. That is what faith is. But why faith?

Why not love? Paul says in 1 Corinthians 13 now abides faith hope and love. The greatest of these is love. Love is greater than faith.

[30 : 40] Why are we not justified by love? For one very basic simple reason. Love is that which goes out to another.

Faith is that which receives from another. Faith is a resting grace. Faith gives all the glory to God because we can't even say well it was my faith that brought me the righteousness of God in Jesus Christ where in one sense that would be true but the faith with which you believe in the Lord Jesus Christ is itself a gift from God.

You would have no faith. You're not born with it. You don't cultivate it. It is a gift of the grace of God in Jesus Christ.

That's why we say to God all praise and glory. That's why Paul says in verse 27 what then becomes of our boasting it is excluded by what kind of law? By a law of works?

No, but by the law of faith because faith says I've got nothing to boast about and even the very faith that has brought me to rest the weight of all that I am on the sufficiency of all that Jesus Christ is, is itself the gift of God.

[32 : 09] But that leads to another question, doesn't it? if I'm dead in trespasses and sins how do I get this faith with which to believe on the Lord Jesus Christ?

Do I simply have to say, well, it's a sovereign gift from a gracious God, I'll have to just sit back and wait. A very eminent Jewish theological professor came to Jesus one night, John 3, a man called

Nicodemus.

He's called in verse 10 of John 3 the teacher of Israel. He is the Reverend Doctor Professor Nicodemus. He probably knew the Old Testament off by heart.

I barely know the first verse of the Hebrew of Genesis one off by heart. He probably knew the whole of the Old Testament, what we call the Old Testament off by heart. And he came to Jesus one night and he said, Jesus, we know that you're a man sent from God because no one could do the sort of things you're doing if he was not from God.

And Jesus looked him in the eye and said, Nicodemus, unless a man is born again, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. Ah, you say, well, there you have it.

[33 : 38] You have to wait for God to grant you a new birth, a new beginning. You have to just wait until it pleases God to effect within you that inward change that enables you to believe in Jesus Christ.

But Jesus didn't stop there, did he? He didn't stop at John chapter three. He keeps talking to Nicodemus. And what Jesus does from this point on is that he seeks to distress Nicodemus. He seeks to show this educated, erudite, theologically able, Jewish religious leader. He seeks to distress his soul.

He says to Nicodemus, you don't know these things? this is the ABC of the things of God, to paraphrase Jesus' words. You don't know these things, Nicodemus.

See what Jesus is doing? He's probing his life. He's not just saying, right, Nicodemus, sit back and wait for God to act. He's distressing him, he's pressing on his conscience.

[34 : 52] The teacher of Israel, and you don't know the first thing about biblical religion. The first thing, Deuteronomy 10, Deuteronomy 30, circumcise your hearts.

Do you think I'm satisfied with fleshly circumcision? God is saying, don't be so silly. That's to be symbolic of heart circumcision, of a new heart.

Nicodemus, Jesus was distressing his soul. And so we're not simply to sit back and say, well, God's sovereign, he grants the new birth to this one and not to that one.

We are to seek God and say, Lord, give me what I could never give myself. And he never turns away anyone who comes to him by Jesus Christ.

You see, faith gives God all the glory. And none of us can say, look at me. All we can say is, to God all praise and glory.

[36 : 04] What do I have that I did not receive? Of all people, Reformed Christians should be noted for humility, with nothing to boast about. If we have gifts, it's because God's granted them to us.

And we're far too taken up with gifts anyway. then the final thing, the life transformation effected by God's salvation.

Maybe you're reading this passage and thinking, well, Ian, where do you find this life transformation? Well, it's touched on in verse 27, what then becomes of boasting?

It is excluded. When the gospel comes to us, it humbles us, people should see an evident change in us.

But actually what is more significant, I think, is what's implied here that Paul will later go on to develop. Because when you believe into Jesus Christ, and that's the basic New Testament way to describe faith, faith believes into Jesus Christ, faith takes you into union, with Jesus Christ.

[37 : 19] And not just for justification, for being right with God, faith takes you into Jesus Christ for sanctification. John Calvin used a beautiful phrase which I'll tell you and then I'll explain it.

He called it the duplex gratia, the double grace. That when a sinner comes to Christ and receives with empty hands a whole Christ, Christ.

He receives that Christ in all his fullness, not just for justification but for sanctification and glorification. Immediately we receive all things in Jesus Christ.

You cannot be united to the vine and not showing your life the life of the vine. You cannot be savingly joined to Jesus Christ and not showing your life that you have been joined to Jesus Christ. By their fruit you will know them, said Jesus. By their fruit you will know them. Not simply by their profession of faith, though we thank God for accurate biblical reformed confessions of faith.

[38 : 32] By their fruit, by their lives, by their lifestyle, by the way they treat their husbands, by the way they treat their wives, by the way they treat their children, by the way they treat their employers, by the way they work for their employees.

The gospel comes to change us. Not just to give us a new standing before God, but to transform us, as Paul will later say in Romans 8, into the likeness of Jesus Christ.

And if there has been no transformation, there has been no salvation. I often, well, whether it would ever be possible to do this, I don't know, but I've often thought, if a man came when I was a pastor, 20 years in New Mills, 17 years in Cambridge, and said, I want to confess the gospel of Jesus Christ, I want to be united visibly to this church and come to the Lord's table, God, I would say, that's just wonderful.

Excuse me while I go and talk to your wife and ask her, what's your husband like to live with? Or a wife comes, or you say, well, thankfully I'm not married.

Well, some young person comes, you say, that's just wonderful. It's just, nothing is more delightful to ministers and elders and having someone come and say, I want publicly to confess Christ as my saviour.

[40 : 07] I say, that's just wonderful. Do you believe the gospel? Absolutely. Do you believe all of the word of God? Truly I do. Let me go and talk to your parents. See what you like to live with.

I've always been a little bemused, if I'm honest. I don't mean to talk out of turn when churches are looking for a pastor, and I know you are.

I've always found it strange they don't spend a lot of time with a potential pastor's wife, and get to know their children. What's this person like? Has he been transformed?

Does he behave with Christ-like gentleness to his wife, with godly sacrificial generosity? Is his wife submissive and obedient to her husband with joy and not with a stern, miserable look?

Do they work together in harmony? You see, the gospel comes to change us because it unites us to Jesus Christ, the great life changer. If any man is in Christ, you know the verse, 2 Corinthians 5, 17?

[41 : 14] Literally, if anyone is in Christ, new creation. It's very stark in the Greek. If anyone is in Christ, new creation. People should be able to see, before we even open our mouths, I actually know you remember.

I can tell by the way you now live. Not just by the fact you come out twice on the Lord's Day and come to prayer, which I hope you do, a non-negotiable. That's great.

I just see it in your demeanor. There's a great story, maybe I've told you before, I can't remember, I'm at the age where I repeat myself. At the close of the American Civil War, and I'll finish with this, close of the American Civil War, two men were walking through a city in the western part of the USA, full of tumult, you can imagine the end of a war, freedom of slaves, and there was great tumult in the city, and these two men were walking towards each other in the midst of this throng of people, and as they got closer and closer, they began to eyeball each other, until they were face to face, and one of them took his index finger and pressed it against the man's chest and said, what is the chief end of man?

And the counter signature came back to glorify God and enjoy him forever, and the first man replied, I knew you were a shorter catechism boy by the way you walked.

He said, by the way he walked? he walked with a sureness before the face of a gracious God. Our lives are to show that we're united to Jesus Christ, that the gospel has come as a power into our lives.

[43 : 08] We'll fail and we fall and we grieve the Lord and we'll grieve one another. But by God's grace we get up. And by God's grace we go.

So, the greatest paragraph ever written, well, who knows, but certainly a paragraph rich in gospel teaching.

May it be true of every one of us that the gospel has become for us the power of God unto salvation.

Amen.