

The Great Acquittal

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[0 : 00] Let's pray as we come to dig into God's Word together. Lord our God, we do ask that in your mercy you would help us to not be ashamed of the cross.

That tonight, by your Word, you would encourage us, strengthen our faith, and turn our eyes to the Lord Jesus.

We ask that you would give us ears to hear and wills to obey. In Jesus' name. Amen. I wanted a God who took sin seriously.

I was struck by these words in 2001 when I was sitting in a tut room in the Menzies building at Monash Uni, which is the Arts Faculty Building, and I was doing an elective in my science course on Western religious traditions.

And it was really stuffy and hot in this little room, but I was fascinated by the speaker. The speaker was a girl about my age, Anglo-Saxon as far as I could tell, but I could only see her face and her hands, because she had converted to Islam.

[1 : 28] And she'd been asked to come to clearly share with us why she had converted from what she said was a Christian upbringing to pretty radical Islam.

And as she explained her kind of Christian upbringing, she said that she had come to realise that Christianity was too soft.

It was soft on morality. It was soft on sin. It was soft on holiness. Its message of forgiveness, its message of liberty, seemed to her to be the opposite of what humanity needed.

So she wanted, she said, a God who took sin seriously, who punished wickedness, who demanded more of his people, who called everyone to submit to him, Allah.

Now you and I would say, well, clearly she hadn't understood the gospel. She hadn't understood the good news. But her charge against Christianity really should give us a pause to stop and think.

[2 : 49] What is the good news? Is it really good news to say that no matter what you've done, no matter how bad you've been, God accepts you.

God forgives you. Well, it certainly seems like good news to me if I'm the one who's being forgiven. I don't want punishment. I don't want condemnation.

I don't want to be declared guilty before the judge of all the earth. I want to be let off. But what about when that forgiveness is given to someone who has done terrible things?

To you, to other people, to, you know, thousands of people in the world? Is that good news?

Is that just? How can a God who declares himself to be holy, who says in Exodus 23, I will not acquit the guilty, and whom it says in Proverbs 17, detests the practice of acquitting the guilty and condemning the innocent, how can this God keep letting sinners off the hook?

[4 : 06] Well, I don't know, but I wonder whether these were some of the questions that this Muslim girl had going around in her mind to cause her to reject the form of Christianity that she'd received and to search for some kind of God that always and only punished the wicked and rewarded the righteous, a God who in her eyes took sin seriously.

What she didn't realise, however, is that the God of the Bible, the only God, takes sin far more seriously than she could have ever imagined, and that she, having confidence that, in fact, she was one of the righteous, that she was not one that would be punished because of her obedience to the tenets of Islam, was, in fact, just as much worthy of punishment as the worst criminal, the most licentious Westerner.

She wanted a God who took sin seriously, but if she had read these first three chapters of Paul's letter to the Romans, she would have realised that that was a terrifying prospect indeed.

For the message in these chapters is that the wrath of God is being revealed, not just against the murderer, the homosexual, the self-righteous religious Jew, but against all of us.

There is no one righteous, not even one, says Paul in chapter 3, verse 10. And he repeats the same message in our passage today, doesn't he?

[6 : 02] Verse 22, For there is no distinction, since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. God has been revealed, the glorious, holy, pure, majestic creator of the universe, who has called humans to image him by living in obedience and trust, has declared each of us guilty.

Because in turning away from him, we have fallen so far short of his glory, his holiness, his call on our lives, that we are completely and irrevocably separated from him.

We are rebels. We are guilty. And far from being soft, the Bible says that this is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.

And what's worse, we cannot fix the situation ourselves because God's holiness is so far beyond our reach. It doesn't matter if we devote ourselves to good works, serving at church, taking communion every day, making sure we care for people, be a good bloke, give to the poor. All these things are completely unable to get us to the goal of a right standing with the judge of the universe. Now, I'm not saying these are bad things, but it's like we're trying to swim from Melbourne to Antarctica.

[7 : 47] All analogies fall down, but go with me on this one. Now, I've no doubt that many of you would get a lot further toward Antarctica than I would, but none of us would even make it to Tassie, let alone to Antarctica, let alone crossing the whole, you know, southern ocean.

And that's what our good deeds and religious observances are like. They might get us out the heads at Port Phillip Bay, but they don't get us anywhere near the requirement of a holy God because the gap, the separation is just too great.

God is serious about sin and his wrath is being and will be revealed against sin and us on the final day when his end-time verdict of guilty will be leveled against us.

But now. Never have two ordinary words sounded so sweet.

But now. there is light breaking through the dark clouds chapter 1 verse 18 to chapter 3 20.

[9 : 21] But now. There is hope. There is good news. But now apart from law the righteousness of God has been disclosed and is attested by the law and the prophets.

If you were here when we looked at chapter 1 the first sermon in this series you might remember or you can look it up for yourself that Paul says that in the gospel the righteousness of God is being revealed.

And by that we saw that he meant that God gives to us in the gospel what he requires from us God gives to us what he requires from us his righteousness in chapter 1 Paul speaks of this gift of righteousness being presently revealed in the preaching of the gospel but in this chapter in chapter 3 verse 21 Paul is referring to the once off time in history when this righteousness from God for us was disclosed the greatest but now moment in the universe when Jesus died on the cross and although it had been disclosed although it was disclosed at that time this but now good news of a right standing given apart from the observance of the law had always been attested to by the law and the prophets

Paul says that is the whole of the Old Testament is consistent with was leading up to is fulfilled by this disclosure this but now moment this revelation certainly it was only understood in part but as Paul has already shown us in Romans in chapter 1 by his quote from the prophet Habakkuk and as he will go on to show in chapter 4 as he talks about Abraham it was always the case that God's righteousness came to people by faith apart from the law the righteous will live by faith Abraham believed God and it was credited to him as righteousness the law was not effective in saving people because it gave people no power to keep it but it showed how desperately sinful they were that even if they wanted to they couldn't keep the commands of

God because they were rotten through and through it taught them that sin required sacrifice and ultimately it drove people to trust in the mercy of God to forgive them by his grace just as he had entered into the covenant with them by grace just as he had brought them out of Egypt by grace and this is what Paul is teaching now for there is no distinction verse 23 since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God they are now justified by his grace as a gift let's stop there for a moment look around to get a clearer understanding of what Paul is saying that God has done for us and as we look around we see we're in the courtroom it's the end of human history it's judgment day

[13 : 21] God is bringing his verdict against each person who has ever lived the evidence has already been heard we know the plea it has to be guilty and we know what the punishment is eternal separation from God eternal destruction in hell but now in this courtroom there is a change

in the verdict for all those who have faith in Jesus instead of calling us guilty as we ought to be God has chosen to justify those who believe to declare us not guilty to acquit us to put us in right standing with him and we haven't earned this verdict at all we haven't you know done our good behavior we haven't earned it it is a gift given freely by grace simply received by faith but if we were to stop there wouldn't we find ourselves in a terrible bind yes

God in his sovereign freedom can choose to do whatever he wants but his choices will always and must always accord with his righteous holy character so how does acquitting the guilty when they have paid no price accord with the holiness of God how can he give them a right standing before him when he says in his word that the person who sins shall die how does simply believing in Jesus make up for the countless ways in which we have all rejected his glory offended against his divine majesty as the old prayer book says lived for our own pleasure worshipped our man made idols even just leaving the created

God out of our everyday life enjoying all that he has made for us but ruling ourselves provoking most justly his wrath and indignation against us kind of makes God seem like an American president you know kind of handing out pardons at the end of his term in office despite the fact that the people haven't paid their sentence and they're most certainly guilty of their crime kind of leaves everyone feeling a little off and wondering when the rules got changed I think sometimes Christianity can be preached or understood like that God's just changed his mind about you and it leaves many non Christians feeling a bit off like that Muslim girl in my class but it affects Christians too if we have a doubt about how God can actually be righteous in fully acquitting us and declaring us to be righteous there will always be a little gap a little snag in our hearts that makes us wake in the middle of the night or speaks at us when we're alone and says you know your sin hasn't really been dealt with that declaration of forgiveness was too easy you know it's not really effective for you especially after that last sin you did I think God's going to change his mind on you that righteousness that you reckon you've got is too cheap God's going to make you pay something otherwise it's not fair not just a time in purgatory a continual sacrifice in the mass more good works it's presumptuous to believe that you will go to heaven on a free gift you better keep trying to earn it or God could change his mind again well friends of course you know the answer forgiveness might be free to us but we must never ever believe that it was cheap for

God if we do we diminish the righteousness and glory of God and we undermine the very foundation of our standing with God and you know that you may have heard that exact expression time and time again but even you must continue to feast your soul on this truth because the devil is working hard day and night friends to steal it from our hearts and that's why of course we mustn't stop in the middle of verse 24 but we continue on to the end of verse 24 and into verse 25 there is a way that God is able to justify us freely by his grace as a gift and yet remain God remain righteous remain holy there is a way for God to be serious on sin and bring sinners into his holy presence there is a way for God to be just and the one who justifies as

[19 : 25] Paul will conclude in verse 26 and it is because our justification our acquittal only comes verses 24 and 25 through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus whom God put forward as a sacrifice of atonement by his blood effective through faith let's take these two key ideas in this verse and a half redemption and sacrifice of atonement or propitiation and look at them a bit more closely so that we can really feast on them firstly redemption Paul has already spoken of us as all alike under the power of sin where it's prisoner where it's slave yet in the ancient world both prisoners of war and slaves could be bought back or ransomed for a price this was called redemption it wasn't good enough just to negotiate or plead or hope for release a price had to be paid yet what price would be great enough to release the whole human race from such captivity such bondage only

God himself come as a man the only one who was never under such bondage over whom sin had no power mark 10 45 the son of man came not to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many the father walks up to the slave trader the general in the army and he swaps us he pays the price in his own son that is not cheap forgiveness he made him who knew no sin to be sin for us he redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us and it seems such a travesty but it is such a triumph of grace secondly sacrifice of atonement or propitiation

Paul has told us that the wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all wickedness so not only must our bondage to sin be broken the wrath and punishment of God against our sinful self centeredness must be taken it must be dealt with a sacrifice of propitiation must be made now propitiation is not a word we use in normal speech as you can tell I can't even say it and I don't think

I've ever used it in a regular sentence and so lots of Bibles put another word here they often use something like what we've got in the NRSV a sacrifice of atonement some of them like to use the word expiation which is quite different from propitiation but propitiation is a very helpful word for us because it is the strongest word in

English that does justice to what Paul means he's not talking about just a covering over of sins like a kind of disinfectant wiping out germs or something which some people use the word expiation to talk about he is not using just a symbol from the Old Testament some people like to talk about the mercy seed of God that was in the temple no he is actually speaking here of Jesus as a fully efficacious sacrifice that deals with our core problem the wrath of God against us it is true God will not acquit the guilty and condemn the innocent so in Jesus God became the guilty one for us to take upon himself the wrath of God to exhaust it to appease it completely by the sacrifice of his body his life in his blood it says that is what propitiation means and although it might be a strange word and a very hard word to say hold on to it because in it there is the sweetest freedom from fear Jesus has fully drained the cup of God's wrath on your behalf there's none left for you and so when we are in him when we put our trust in him when we put our faith this draining of the wrath of God is effective for us we have full confidence that we live in the but now right standing before God let's go back to our Muslim girl for a minute it's not surprising to me that in following a religion that denies that Jesus Christ went to the cross they actually talk about someone swapping with Jesus on the way so that it wasn't him hanging there it's not surprising to me that a religion that teaches that cannot believe that the

[25 : 57] God of the Bible is a just and righteous God and why is this no surprise because as Paul says in verse 25 and 26 the cross is the ultimate demonstration of God's righteousness righteousness it not only functioned within God himself to maintain his righteousness whilst giving it to us the cross functions as a public display a public demonstration of God's righteousness verses 25 and 26 he did this to show his righteousness because in his divine forbearance he had passed over the sins previously committed it was to prove at the present time that he himself is righteous and that he justifies the one who has faith in Jesus in looking around the world it could very well be said of

God that he has not dealt with sin as he originally promised from the beginning of time it seems like he has been kind of all talk and no follow through he told Adam and Eve that on the day they ate the fruit they would surely die and yet they lived long lives they were mercifully clothed by him and given many offspring yes they did one day die and yes we talk about them having a spiritual death but why not then King David the man described as a man after God's own heart was actually a murderer a rapist an abuser of his power and yet the prophet Nathan declared to him that God had put away his sin and that he would not die each day you and I and everyone else don't give God the glory that he deserves bringing upon ourselves the sentence of death yet we are not struck down we go on living as though nothing is wrong but now

Paul explains it was in God's divine forbearance that he passed over the sins previously committed that is in not bringing the punishment of death immediately on each sinner God wasn't being lazy or unrighteous or morally lax God was being patient he was forbearing with our sin so that at the cross he could show himself righteous as well as bring us to repentance the cross makes the gospel truly good news because it is the demonstration that the only God of the universe is a God of grace and truth a God of mercy and justice a God of holiness and love by the price Jesus paid for our redemption on the cross by the sacrifice he became in his blood as a propitiation on the cross we are now completely and unshakably justified in

God's sight and this justification is not a you are forgiven you may go it's a you are accepted you may come you may come into my family into my house into my presence forever more you may come so then what becomes a boasting it is excluded by what law or principle by that of works no but by the law of faith for we hold that a person is justified by faith apart from works prescribed by the law or is God the God of Jews only is he not the God of Gentiles also yes of Gentiles also since God is one and he will justify the circumcised on the ground of faith and the uncircumcised through that same faith because of the cross there can be no boasting for any of us

Jew or Gentile of our merit before God each of us is completely humbled and comes only by faith which is not something that we do to merit God's favour faith is simply reaching out of the hands the heart the mind the will the life to receive the gift of Jesus in our place there is only one God God the Jews affirmed that every time they said the Shema hear O Israel the Lord your God the Lord is one

and if there is only one God there can be only one way to be right with him and if it's by Jesus for the Gentiles it's by Jesus for the Jews it's by Jesus for the Muslims it's by Jesus for all of us and by him only appropriated into our lives simply by faith well is this relevant to us in the church today or is this word about boasting just a word to the

[31 : 49] Jews do we boast do we believe that there are different means of salvation well I don't think so we may not boast as such but do we ever put on a facade that belies our need of grace I think we do I think sometimes we pretend that we're better Christians than we are better people than we are when we're in home group or over supper or when we're talking to our minister or when we're discipling someone when we do this aren't we forgetting that the cross has already told our secret we've already been busted as sinners who have to be saved by grace through faith when we hide our flaws when we gloss over our struggles when we pretend we've got it all together aren't we somehow implying to others that we no longer need the merits of

Jesus death on our behalf every day aren't we pretending that we're not sinners saved by grace aren't we pretending that the cross hasn't told our secret well this might be just my struggle but if it is a struggle for others here let's be open with each other so that we can actually show people what grace is truly about day to day we can help each other walk more deeply in that grace putting off the old life and putting on the new in its power because that's where the power of the Christian life is isn't it it's in God's grace it's in the cross of Christ not in false piety in a gritting of the teeth continuing the walk by the flesh when you started in the spirit it's in the life of grace it's in the life of the cross and it's in the life of the cross where the law has its true place and so Paul ends this passage by saying do we then overthrow the law by this faith by no means on the contrary we uphold the law the law shows us how God wants his people to live the law has been fulfilled in Christ in his life and death and yet as those in Christ we have both fulfilled it and we strive to live according to it as it has been shaped for us in the New Testament why not because it earns us anything for we are justified freely by his grace as a gift through Christ's redemption of us and his propitiation in his blood to God we uphold the law because we are followers of the one who is just and the one who justifies the one who takes sin seriously and completely forgives those who believe we uphold the law because who wouldn't want to serve worship trust a God like that you but