

Enough Joy for All Our Tomorrows

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[0 : 00] The following message is given by Walt Alexander, lead pastor of Trinity Grace Church in Athens, Tennessee.! For more information about Trinity Grace, please visit us at TrinityGraceAthens.com.

! Today is Paul's most important letter, perhaps what is the most important book in our entire Bible. Even this morning we'll look at what is considered the most important paragraph in the whole Bible, so it'll be exciting to dive in. So we're going to begin in verse 21 through 26, so this is Romans chapter 3, verse 21.

But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the law and prophets bear witness to it.

The righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.

[1 : 25] And are justified by His grace as a gift through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus. Verse 25. Whom God put forward as a propitiation by His blood to be received by faith.

This was to show God's righteousness, because in His divine forbearance, He had passed over former sins. 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.

May God bless His Word and the preaching of His Holy Word this morning.

Have you ever wanted to go back to being a kid again? To go back to waking up to a morning of cartoons and sugar-loaded cereal?

To go back to sleeping good before alarms and aches and anxieties woke you up? It's only as you get older that you hurt yourself while you're sleeping.

[2 : 47] So maybe you just want to go back to where you can sleep anywhere. Or maybe just go back to a time when life was much more simple. I find myself from time to time wanting to go back.

One of those times occurred Easter Sunday this past year. We had worshiped together that morning over live stream. Then in the afternoon, our family threw together a simple last-minute Easter egg hunt.

We hid eggs all over the yard, some in trees, some in bushes, some in planters, some right down there in the center of the yard for my youngest son to find.

And this year, we did something a little bit different. We put five bucks in a golden egg. I know, big spender. So we hid this golden egg with five American dollar bills in there.

And we gathered the children on the porch to get excited. And they were pumped, as all kids are. We made them keep their eyes closed. You know, no opening your eyes until the competition starts.

[3 : 50] And we checked to make sure they were ready, shoes tied, whatever they needed, baskets in hand. Then we unleashed them on the hunt. And my oldest two immediately looked beyond the ones in the center of the yard and hunted for the hard to find eggs, especially that golden egg.

They ran to the yard, tossing egg after egg in their baskets, darting this way and that way in the sight of the best eggs and the most eggs. It was a race against time to capture these eggs.

My youngest son, however, went straight for the first egg he saw in the center of the yard. He scooped it up, plopped down, and immediately began opening the egg.

And my wife and I ran to him, come on, son, the hunt is on. There's eggs everywhere. What are you doing? Quick, keep hunting for eggs before your wicked brother and sister come and take them all.

But he was not swayed. He wanted that egg open, and he wanted it open. Now he wanted to see what was going on, what was inside it.

[4 : 59] So we helped him open up. And then we said, all right, all right, so you see, now go out and find more eggs. There's an egg over there. Go get it. Go get it. Right? Now, even the other kids began joining in at this point, encouraging him to keep hunting and keep finding the eggs.

But once he saw that inside that first egg was a fruit by the foot, he was finished. He ripped it open and began eating.

We kept trying to get him to find more eggs, but it was over in his mind. We eventually tossed a few more eggs in his basket, but the hunt ended with all of us laughing on the front yard as he swung fruit by the foot over his head and chomped down on it with delight.

And I thought, I want to be a kid again. Now, I wouldn't mind a few more egg hunts, but what I mean is I want to enjoy what I have.

I don't want to get caught up in the race for more eggs. I don't want to be paralyzed with fear of the future. I don't want to spend my life thinking of the next thing.

[6 : 07] Whatever it is, I want to chomp down with delight on the goodness I have right there in my hands. I want to live with simple, full-hearted joy.

I believe all of us do. Beloved, in just a few days, 2020 will turn the page to 2021. I've never looked forward to a new year more.

But a change in the calendar won't change our hearts. Nor will a vaccine or a recount and a new president or a more certain future.

We need something else with enough joy for all our tomorrows. This morning, we're going to dive into Romans 3, discuss the only source of enough joy to satisfy us in this life and in the life to come. Where we're going is there is enough joy in the substitutionary death of Jesus for all your tomorrows. Substitutionary, just a word for saying there's enough joy in the death of Jesus in your place for all your tomorrows.

[7 : 23] And like I said, we're diving into this extremely important passage. You know, C.E.B. Cranfield, who many would say is the most important commentator on Romans, said this is the innermost meaning of the cross.

Martin Luther said it's the chief point and the very central place of the epistle of Romans and of the whole Bible. John Piper said it's the most important paragraph in our Bible. We're going to unpack it.

We could spend six weeks on this passage. We're going to unpack it through three words. Three words. The first one is propitiation. Propitiation.

Now, propitiation. Propitiation is one of those Asian words in the Christian life, and it's a word that takes us into a world that we're often unfamiliar. It brings images of sacrificing animals and spilling blood at a shrine.

But before we take up this word, we must understand where it comes in the book of Romans. This is Romans chapter 3. From the beginning of the book of Romans, Paul has been seeking to bring us before the one true God.

[8 : 23] As he does, he tells us, what he tells us about ourselves is not pretty. He tells us, quite frankly, that we stand and we deserve judgment before God.

In Romans 1, he tells us that the wrath of God has been revealed from heaven, and that everyone knows the truth. God makes it plain in all that he's made, and everyone knows the truth, but that we all refuse to believe what is plainly true and choose to live for the lie.

Whether we call ourselves religious or whether we don't call ourselves religious, our deepest problem is not merely that we disobey God and defile our consciences, as Romans 2 tells us, our deepest problem is that we break out to live for what we want.

We establish a law for ourselves, our law that we abide by, which is living for ourselves and worshiping, in so doing, idols. Not made of wood or stone, but if anything, we value more than God. In so doing, we push God aside and put ourselves in first place. Now, you may be modest, or at least falsely modest, and you say, I don't want to be first, but let me ask you, when you look at your high school graduation picture, or perhaps the latest family reunion picture, which face do you go to first?

[9 : 45] Whose hair do you analyze? Or how about when you get in an argument, a big one, one of those World War III type, one in ten years argument, and you go away steaming, think of all the things you should have said, wish you had said, all the comebacks you should have uttered.

Who wins? I've had plenty of arguments, but never lost a mental rerun. I want to be first.

It's ingrained into me because of sin. I want to be the center of the universe. I want my wants and my desires to direct all things, and so do you.

Which is why we have so many problems, and this does not sit well with God. He wants to be the center of the universe, and so he announces the end for all who stray like this.

No one does good, not even one, and all stand guilty and deserving of judgment before God. As he says at the beginning of Romans 3, all mouths are stopped before the Lord.

[10:50] But Paul tells us this news not to slam the door of judgment in our face, but to open a door of astounding grace. Look in verse 25. He says, So after all that setup, after that setup of our guilt and our deserving of eternal judgment before God, God unveils Jesus Christ, and he unveils him firstly by calling him a propitiation.

Now, that word is translated in different ways. I don't know what copy of the scriptures, translation of the scriptures you have before you. It could be atoning sacrifice, expiation, or propitiation.

Propitiation is the right word, and propitiation does bring us before an altar where sacrifices are made. And the simple meaning of propitiation is it's the act by which someone becomes more propitious or favorable.

So propitious just means favorable, happy, generously, kindly, favorably disposed towards us. And so ancient religions would sacrifice animals to make their gods happy.

You know, if they were going across the sea, they would sacrifice. They'd make a sacrifice.

Sacrifice the incense or sacrifice the animals to the god of the sea so that they would have safe passage. Or if they needed rain for crops, they would sacrifice to the god of rain.

[12:21] Or if they wanted fertility, they wanted prosperity from the womb, they would pray. They would sacrifice to the god of fertility. And that's how they would make this god propitious, make him favorably disposed, kindly disposed to them.

And so the goal of the sacrifice was to make God happy and ensure that he would be kind. In a similar way, God put forward Christ as a propitiation, as a sacrifice to make God favorable towards us.

Now we might think, why did God put forward Christ? That seems cruel. He's the son of God. Why would you put forward your own son? And what could be so bad that it required the sacrifice of the son of God?

And that's where we have to read the rest of the verse to understand. Whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood to be received by faith. This was to show God's righteousness because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins.

Show God's righteousness because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins. And so propitiation reminds us that the cross is not first and foremost about showing God's love.

[13:37] It is first and foremost about demonstrating God's righteousness. This verse, the back half of this verse, 25, introduces a crisis.

Throughout the Old Testament, God had passed over former sins. Yes, God punished and judged sin at times and yet every single instance of sin should have received immediate judgment before God.

So what happened to Adam and Eve when they sinned in the garden? Why did the whole universe not fold up into itself and Adam and Eve spent eternity in hell? What happened when the people of Israel gathered around a golden calf as we studied last week and said, You let us out of Egypt. You did it. What happened when King David, the man after God's own heart, sinned and committed adultery with Bathsheba? What happened when the whole nation turned against him in unbelief and idolatry?

Surely he sent them into exile, but why wasn't he through with them forever? All of it begs the question, is it okay? All the Old Testament begs the question, is it okay for God to pass over sins?

[14:49] Is it okay for God to accept temporary sacrifices and ultimately pass over the eternal consequences of sin? Now, if your house was robbed tonight, and I hope it's not, would you be okay if the person just asked for forgiveness?

Or would you want restitution? Would you want to be paid? Perhaps you would be fine with forgiveness, but is it okay for God to just forgive? Is it okay for him to just pass over sin?

Would he still be a righteous God if cries of injustice still went out through all creation? The answer is obviously no.

But the verse tells us he was not merely passing over sin. He was continually provoked by each and every sin, but was withholding punishment so that he could unleash punishment on Jesus Christ.

That's what that verse means. This would show God's righteousness because in his divine forbearance, he had passed over former sins. So he had passed over these sins.

[16:10] He had looked over them. Now, he didn't sweep them under the rug. No, he held back his furious wrath so that he might unleash it on Jesus Christ.

Just as the blood of the first Passover lambs on the doorpost allowed him to pass over the houses of Israel that night. So the Lord was planning to put forward Christ as a final Passover lamb so that he might pass over all those who receive him by faith.

To put it together, God put forward Christ as our propitiation. To receive the wrath of God that has been stored up for every generation, past, present, and future.

This verse introduces us to the very heart of what it means to be saved. The late R.C. Sproul tells a story of walking across campus as a college student and someone came up to him and said, Are you saved?

I remember being asked that same question as a sophomore at the University of Tennessee. And he answered, Saved from what? What are you saved from?

[17:26] Many of us say we're saved, but do we realize what we've been saved from? According to Romans 3, we have not been saved from a meaningless life. We've not been saved for our best life.

Now, we've not been saved from an unfulfilled life or a life of loneliness. We have been saved from the wrath of God. God put forward Christ, who is perfect in every way, in our place as a substitutionary sacrifice to exhaust the wrath of God that we deserve and to fulfill God's justice. That's why it's so right that so many authors say propitiation is at the heart of Christ's sacrifice. Before God can give forgiveness or acceptance, His wrath must be exhausted and His justice satisfy.

Our only hope for being saved is in the blood of Jesus Christ. Point two. So, propitiation.

Jesus Christ is a wrath-absorbing sacrifice. Point two. Redemption. Redemption. Redemption takes us into another place. So, propitiation took us into the temple where sacrifice would be altered.

[18:39] Redemption takes us into the marketplace. Until recently, the redemption was a common financial term. Someone would redeem a mortgage by paying back all the missed payments.

Someone would sell a watch or some other item to a pawn shop with plans to redeem it and buy it back in several weeks. And so, redemption is a common concept in our Bible. After delivering the people of Israel from slavery, God declared Himself to be their Redeemer.

And He provided for them. And the most common way redemption is used in the Old Testament is through the kinsman-redeemer. If someone came into a jam, perhaps they had lost their land or their house or lost their spouse or come into great debt.

Whatever the reason, a close member was expected to come and redeem them. To come in and protect them, provide for them, and produce offspring for them.

So, if your brother died, you would take up his wife and continue his family for him. They needed a Redeemer.

[19:44] They needed a kinsman. That's just kind of one of the family. One of the kin. A kinsman-redeemer. The most powerful picture of this is the book of Ruth. The story centers on two widows.

One is named Ruth. A Moabite woman named Ruth. And her mother-in-law, Naomi. They had, or Naomi had left the people of Israel.

She had left Jerusalem. And gone to Moab. And her sons had married Moabite women. And they had, then all her sons died.

Her husband died. They had no husband, no children, and no land. And they journeyed from Moab to Bethlehem in search of redemption. And what unfolds is an incredible story.

In looking for fruit, Naomi tells Ruth, like a good mother-in-law, where to glean in the field from a distant relative named Boaz. And Boaz is this generous man.

[20:41] His wealth overflows in generosity. And Naomi invites her to his table and fills her arms literally with barley. Boaz is a righteous man.

He sees this need and sees his need to intervene. And before long to redeem Ruth. Now, there's not much upside here for Boaz.

We don't see that as much when we read the text ourselves. She was a Moabite. Which it was legal to marry a Moabite woman. She had a mother-in-law.

One can imagine an ad in the Bethlehem Star that said, Single Moabite woman, widowed, childless, with mother-in-law, seeks well-to-do Bethlehem businessman with view to marriage.

Must love mother-in-law. But he did. It's an incredible story. Boaz went to the elders of Bethlehem.

[21 : 47] He told them his intentions to pay down her debts and to marry her. He spread out his arms quite literally of protection over her and provided for her. He took her to himself. He reversed the course of her life.

He redeemed her. The story closes. And the Lord gave her a son. Who would be the great-grandfather of King David.

The New Testament introduces us to another redeemer. The man Jesus Christ. Now, an interesting thing develops in the understanding of redemption. In the New Testament, redemption centers on our moral dilemma in the New Testament.

Redemption, according to the New Testament, is not to rescue us from a life of loneliness. Or from our failures. Or from a life of emptiness. Or incompleteness. Our greatest problem is our moral problem.

And so, redemption is focused on our moral problem. Our separation from God because of sin. And our slavery to sin. David Wells sums it up pretty well.

[22 : 53] In a psychological world, which is the world we live in, we want therapy. In a moral world, a world of right and wrong and good and bad, we want redemption.

In a psychological world, we want to be happy. In a moral world, we want to be holy. In the one, we want to feel good. But in the other, we want to be good.

And so, Jesus Christ centers on a moral world. He introduces us to a world of right and wrong.

And a way to make us holy. Look in verse 24. He says, We've all sinned and fall short of the glory of God. 23. And are justified by His grace as a gift through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.

In Christ, God forgives our many sins and frees us from slavery to sin. Redemption, if I could put it this way, it focuses on the negative aspect of the cross.

[23 : 57] It focuses on the negative aspect of the cross. It focuses on the negative things that must be taken away in order for us to be made right with God.

And I think the idea, the idea, I don't think, the Bible says the idea is our sins were placed upon Jesus Christ. On the cross, all our sins were imputed to Him. They were credited to Him.

2 Corinthians says He became sin. This doesn't mean that He became a sinner. Rather, it means that He became sin in the sense that all the debt and penalty for our sins was placed upon Him.

And on the cross, Jesus paid the debt and penalty for all our sins. Now, I know some of these things might be running together, but you get the idea. He was put forward in our place.

And all the negative things, all the sin and the guilt that was in us and on us went to Him and on Him.

[24 : 56] Colossians 2, 13 and 14 tells us what that accomplished. He said, and you who are dead in your trespasses and uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with Him, having forgiven us all our trespasses by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands.

This He set aside, nailing it to the cross. And two things are going on here. Jesus pays the debt and penalty for our sins. He canceled, you see it right there, He forgave us all our trespasses by canceling the record of debt.

All of our sins accumulated a massive debt. A guilt before God, but a massive debt in His economic world. And so we had a massive debt.

Jesus pays the debt and penalty for all our sins, securing forgiveness from those debts. All of our debts have been fully paid by Jesus Christ. All of our debts have been canceled. All the warrants for our arrest have been ripped in two.

That's what that means. Forgiveness is a marketplace term. It's tied to redemption.

[26 : 05] It's freeing us from the penalty of those debts. But Jesus also frees us from slavery to sin, giving us new life.

And that's what's going on at the beginning of verse 13. And you who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with Christ. Your debts have not only been freed.

So if you were enslaved to debt, you know, the lender is a slave. What is it? What is it? Borrow is a slave to the lender. Take Dave Ramsey again.

But the borrower is a slave to the lender. And that's the same thing that's going on there. The debts had not only amassed a massive debt before God, but they had enslaved us in death.

We were dead in trespasses and sins. We were enslaved to the evil one. And you have, we have been brought to death, brought from death to life. Our chains have been broken.

[27 : 08] We've been made new. The Bible, Romans 6 tells us that sin no longer has a power over us any longer because of the redemption that is in Jesus Christ.

Because of all that occurred in him standing in our place as our substitutionary sacrifice, it's as if we died to all of our debts and we died to death itself so that we might be set free.

Now, that should elicit tons of joy. One of the, just a terrific story about this is Dostoevsky, Fyodor Dostoevsky at 1849, a young Dostoevsky, was imprisoned in St. Petersburg with a group of other revolutionaries and sentenced to die.

The men were marched out into a square in their burial shrouds, like a burial gown, I guess. The firing squad was gathered.

So, I mean, he's about to die. I mean, they're loading the weapons in his earshot. The drums sounded. Death was seconds away.

[28 : 28] Then, at the last instant, a messenger arrived on horseback. The execution was stayed by the clemency of the Tsar.

The original sentences would apply with hard labor, but nevertheless, their lives they would walk away with. This author writes, One man broke down crying, singing, Long live the Tsar.

Another went mad. Dostoevsky was brought back to his cell and suddenly overcome with joy. I cannot recall when I was ever as happy as on that day.

I walked up and down my cell and sang the whole time, sang at the top of my voice, so happy to be given back my life.

That is redemption. That's the picture of redemption, to be given back my life. Yes, it should elicit far more joy than Dostoevsky had before a firing squad that just took his earthly life.

[29 : 35] It should elicit untold joy because of the reality that God has been satisfied and we've been set free from all our penalties before him.

And wonderfully, and I don't have time to dive into this, his work of redemption just continues. The ripple effects continue and continue and continue. You know, he's redeemed us and blessed us with untold spiritual blessings.

Every good and perfect gift comes down from a love. He's called us sons and daughters, cleansed us of guilt and stain, and his work of redemption continues.

The whole creation groans. That's what we sang about a few minutes ago. It groans for Christ. And we get snippets of this when we look forward to that final day.

And so you see the value of these terms and that propitiation, this rapid-sorving sacrifice, redemption, this sacrifice that takes away all the penalties against us.

[30 : 38] That sets us up for point three, justification. Another massively important word. If you opened up a systematic theology, this would be a whole chapter. The most important word.

Justification takes us into another context. And so it's so fascinating that this one passage is loaded down with metaphors. It's as if we can't...

There's no one metaphor that captures all of the work of Christ on our behalf. And so justification takes us into the courtroom. We've often heard the gospel preached to us as if in a courtroom.

We get that from justification. Justification is the positive counterpart to redemption. Redemption was profoundly negative. We are freed from our debts. We're freed from our penalties.

But justification, we're not... It's not talking about what we're freed from. It's what we're freed for.

We're declared righteous. Look down there in verse 24. He says, We were justified by His grace as a gift through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.

[31 : 41] So we've been justified by His grace as a gift. We rehearsed earlier. All have sinned and are guilty before God. They've fallen short of the glory of God.

They stand in need of help before the judgment of God. And so the logic of this passage is that God put forward Christ to be a sacrifice for our sin. And in punishing Christ, God remained righteous and His wrath was satisfied.

Our sins were forgiven and we were justified. So the idea is that redemption took away all the negative in our account, all the debts in our account, but justification filled it with positive.

How can this be? I mean, you think forgiven is one thing, but justified, a hell-deserving sinner, justified, makes no sense at all. Paul connects this for us in verse 26.

If you look down there in the second half, he says, It shows righteousness in the present time, so that He might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus Christ. The idea is in putting forward Christ as a propitiation in our place, God showed Himself to be just.

[32 : 50] We already handled that. God showed Himself to be just. God satisfied His justice by exhausting His wrath on Jesus Christ.

All those who trust in Jesus Christ, the wrath of God against them is exhausted. So God is just. No man can say God is not fair.

God is just. He's righteous. You see the number of times righteousness is in this passage. But, in putting forward Christ as a perfect sacrifice in the place of guilty sinners, God has shown Himself to be the justifier of those who trust in Jesus Christ.

So what God did on the cross, it's not enough to exhaust His wrath to forgive our sins. We must be made holy to approach Him.

His eyes are too pure to look on evil. Even the angels, the seraphim, they cover their eyes. It's only the holy.

[34 : 08] And so what this verse introduces to us is a double exchange. Just as our disobedience and sin was credited to Christ's account, and He suffered, He exhausted, He endured the full wrath of God for our sins, so His obedience and righteousness was credited to ours.

So our disobedience and sin was credited to Him. He endured the punishment. But because He was righteous, because He obeyed the law, and every word, thought, and deed, all of His righteousness was then, in the same moment, credited to us.

And 2 Corinthians 5.21 plums the depths when it says, For our sake, for our sake, He made Him who knew no sin to be sin, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God.

There you see it right there. You see this exchange. All of our sin was placed on Him who knew no sin, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God.

The idea is that we cannot just be cleared of our debts. We must be morally righteous to approach God. And so God sends forth His very righteousness, the righteousness of Jesus Christ to us, so that we might enter the presence of God without the fear of God's wrath.

[35 : 31] Now, I want to read a quote that's a little tedious, but I think it gets at the righteousness that's going on and how vital it is.

And John Murray says, The righteousness of Christ is the righteousness of His perfect obedience, a righteousness undefiled and undefilable, a righteousness which not only warrants the justification of the ungodly, but one that necessarily elicits and constrains such justification.

God cannot but accept into His favor those who are invested with the righteousness of His own Son. The idea behind this passage is that this solves the riddle, is that we who have sinned in every way, not only do we need our debts cleared, but we needed to be made righteous.

We could not perform or perfect or produce a righteousness of our own, so God clothed us. He sent forth a righteousness of Jesus Christ that constrains God to act favorably towards us because of this righteousness.

And I love the way He says, You cannot defile it. No matter how ugly your sin and shame are this day or any other day for the rest of your life, you cannot defile your righteousness because your righteousness is Jesus Christ.

[37 : 03] You cannot nullify it. You cannot undo it. You cannot weaken it through your weak faith and through your weak heart. It is the righteousness of Jesus Christ.

The idea is that you are never more loved and accepted by God than the moment you believe in Jesus Christ because the moment you believe in Jesus Christ, you are clothed with His righteousness.

And God cannot but accept you in His Son because Christ's righteousness never changes.

