**THE GOSPEL: JUSTIFIED THROUGH FAITH IN JESUS**

**(Romans 3:21-4:25)**

***“…for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.” (3:23-24)***

Do you know what this year marks the anniversary of? I’ll give you hint: it’s the 500th anniversary. It’s the Reformation! On October 31, 1517, Martin Luther went to Wittenberg Castle church in Germany and publicly posted his 95 theses. These were clear, scripturally-based complaints against the serious abuses of the Roman Catholic Church in his day. Before long, a revolution began, in which Luther defiantly insisted that the Bible is the ultimate spiritual authority and that people are saved not by their good works or through the sacraments, but by God’s grace, through faith. The Latin phrase *sola fide*, or “faith alone”, became the rallying cry of this revolution, and was inspired directly by the passage we’ll be looking at today. This passage contains perhaps the purest form of the gospel we can find in the Bible. It is so foundational to everything we believe. Though it contains some terminology that seems complicated at first, it is so spiritually rich and deep. Let’s invite the Holy Spirit to come and make these truths fresh in our hearts once again.

**I. Justification through faith in Jesus (3:21-31)**

Through the last few chapters, Paul has made a shocking indictment against humanity: *“There is no one righteous, not even one…” (3:10).* More than that, every single one of us is totally corrupted down to our very core and deserving of God’s wrath. It is not that we made a few minor slip-ups in the face of impossibly high standards; no, we are shameless rebels who have usurped the throne of the King of the universe. We’ve cast God’s glory to the ground as if it were nothing and set up our own idols. We’ve flipped right and wrong on their heads and delighted in the vilest of practices. It is our entire being, our whole mindset that invites God’s judgment. And the worst part is, deep down, we think we are pretty good! We think that we can make God our debtor and earn our salvation by our righteous deeds. This is utter foolishness. That’s why Paul concluded in 3:20, *“Therefore no one will be declared righteous in God’s sight by the works of the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of our sin.”* Far from saving us, God’s law serves to condemn us as lawbreakers. This is bad news for all mankind.

Having proven man’s guilt, man’s accountability before God and man’s utter helplessness to justify himself through works, Paul finally returns to the good news about God’s righteousness that he first proclaimed in 1:17. Look at 3:21. ***“But now apart from the law the righteousness of God has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify.”*** The words ***“but now”*** mark a colossal turning point between the Old and New Testament eras. This was ushered in by the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. For in Jesus, the righteousness of God was made known in a new and totally unexpected way. The words ***“righteousness of God”*** are better translated “righteousness from God”, for what Paul is talking about here is a righteousness that is given by God as a gift to mankind. Although the law says we deserve only wrath, God instead gives us of his own righteousness. And even though this gift comes apart from the works of the law, it is far from unbiblical. In fact, the Law and the Prophets point to and are ultimately fulfilled by it. The promises to the Patriarchs, the sacrificial system, the messianic prophecies…all these point to God’s gift of righteousness now revealed in Jesus.

What amazingly good news this is! But how can we possibly trade God’s wrath for God’s righteousness? How can we receive the gift? Verses 22-23 read, ***“This righteousness is given through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference between Jew and Gentile, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God…”*** Every person, without exception, has fallen far short of God’s holy standards. But without favoritism, God has made his gift of righteousness available to all sinners. The only requirement is simple faith in the person and work of Jesus Christ. As we know, this is much more than head knowledge about the facts surrounding the gospel. It is not simply learning, but *leaning*. Knowing that there is nothing righteous within ourselves, we put all our weight upon Jesus and his finished work on the cross. We let go of any and all ideas of supporting ourselves and trust solely in God’s grace; not 95%, not 99.99%, but 100%.

This brings us to the very heart of the gospel. In verses 24-26, Paul beautifully describes what we are called to believe and how this belief transforms us in the eyes of God. Paul achieves this by using a series of key salvation images, including “justification”, “redemption” and “sacrifice of atonement”. By exploring the deeper meaning locked up within each of these terms, we can obtain a richer, more glorious picture of the gospel as God intended us to have.

*First, justification.* Let’s read verse 24a all together. ***“…and all are justified freely by his grace…”*** This first salvation image is derived from the courtroom. “Justification” is the opposite of condemnation, and it has two connotations. In the negative sense, it means to be declared “not guilty”; in the positive sense, it means to be declared “righteous”. Jesus used this language himself in the Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector in Luke 18. In this parable, a Pharisee offers a self-righteous prayer, boasting in his pious lifestyle. But a tax collector sincerely repents before God, praying, *“God, have mercy on me, a sinner.”* Jesus then says, *“I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted” (Lk 18:14).* The tax collector was declared “righteous” in God’s sight, and we too are justified the moment we put our faith in Jesus. This is because justification is not something we do, but a one-time act of God towards us. In response to our faith, Jesus’ righteousness is imputed to us so that we are no longer guilty, but innocent in God’s sight. We are quite literally covered in the righteousness of Christ.

But how can God, in his perfect justice, declare us innocent when we are really guilty? The Bible says, *“Acquitting the guilty and condemning the innocent — the LORD detests them both” (Prv 17:15).* We must not misunderstand. When Paul says that God justifies sinners, he is not saying that God is declaring us to be sinless, or that he makes us sinless in that moment. Rather, justification is a legal declaration that we are set free from the *penalty* for sin that we rightfully deserve. God can do this without compromising his justice because our sins were fully paid for on the cross. God condemned sin in Jesus’ body so that anyone who believes in his sacrifice for their sins will no longer be held liable to punishment. As Christian author John Stott put it, justification is “God’s righteous way of righteousing the unrighteous.”

This reality should profoundly impact our current relationship with God. For it means when God looks at us, he no longer sees our disgusting sins. Instead, he sees the beautiful, imputed righteousness of his Son. Can you imagine? When God looks on you, he sees Jesus’ perfection! He considers our sins completely forgiven, wiped away, so that we can live in peace before him without any barriers. David, after committing adultery and murder, confessed his sins and experienced this grace of forgiveness personally. So he joyfully confessed, *“…as far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us” (Ps 103:12).*

Paul leaves no room for misunderstanding about the grounds of our justification when he says, ***“freely by his grace”.*** Because it is a one-time gift to be received through faith, it involves zero contribution of our own. Faith itself is not a work of our own, but an instrument through which justification is given to us. Therefore, it would be right to say that our justification is not based on the worthiness of our faith, but on the worthiness of the one who is believed in. This has two important consequences. The first is that we can enjoy full assurance of our salvation, as it depends on Christ’s completed work on the cross rather than our own efforts. By accepting Jesus’ triumphant declaration from the cross, *“It is finished” (Jn 19:30),* we can have perfect peace from condemnation (Ro 8:1). Secondly, this means that all pride and all boasting are nullified. As Paul makes clear in verses 27-30, no one has any right to boast in grace that God has freely given. Can anyone boast about how good they are at receiving a gift? This has major implications for our lives. It means we have no right to look down on anyone, no right to be critical of their shortcomings. We were condemned on death row due to our sins until Jesus came before the Judge and said, “I will die instead. Let this one go; they are innocent now.” Ask yourself: Do I truly appreciate this grace that I’ve been given? Do my interactions with others show that I’ve been saved by grace?

*Second, redemption.* Now let’s read all of verse 24 together. ***“…and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus…”*** This second salvation image is derived from the marketplace. In fact, we use the word “redeem” in everyday life, like when we redeem something we want with a coupon. But the word “redemption” actually has its origins in the slave trade. It refers to the action of a free person buying a slave out of their bondage by payment of a ransom. This word comes up several times in Exodus, when God is said to have “redeemed” his people from their slavery in Egypt. Through the heavy cost of the blood of the Passover lambs, God purchased Israel as his own people and brought them out of their bondage and into the Promised Land.

The language of redemption continues in the New Testament, but in a much more meaningful way. For the freedom that mankind really needs is freedom from sin and all its ugly consequences. Sin is not something we can casually choose to play around with as we please. It is a cruel taskmaster. It makes us miserable, forcing us to serve meaningless idols. It forces us to live at a sub-human level, and eventually takes our lives. Worst of all, we are powerless to free ourselves. But Jesus came to change this. John 8:34-36 say, *“Jesus replied, ‘Very truly I tell you, everyone who sins is a slave to sin. Now a slave has no permanent place in the family, but a son belongs to it forever. So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.’”* Jesus came to redeem us from our bondage to sin and bring us into the family of God. The only way that this was possible was at the highest cost. Jesus says in Mark 10:45, *“For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”* It was with his own life that Jesus purchased us. In light of this, Apostle Peter could confidently declare, *“For you know that it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you from your ancestors, but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect” (1 Pe 1:18-19).*

What does all this mean for us today? It means that we are not the true owners of our own lives; we belong to our Lord Jesus, who purchased us! He owns us twice over as both our Creator and our Redeemer. Accepting this completely transforms our perspective. We start to consider what our Master’s will for us is in both the short term and for the long haul. We can make radical decisions to devote ourselves to things that have eternal value rather than empty, fleeting pleasures. Can you confidently confess “My life is surrendered over to God’s will”? Let’s remember that Jesus set us free for a wonderful purpose, not to go back to slaving away in sin, but to live for God’s glory in true joy and freedom! *“It is for freedom that Christ has set us free” (Gal 5:1).*

*Third, sacrifice of atonement.* Look at verse 25a. ***“God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement, through the shedding of his blood—to be received by faith.”*** This third salvation image is derived from the temple precincts. It is a many-faceted term that illumines exactly what Jesus’ sacrifice was. It probably reminds you of the animal sacrifices performed in Old Testament times. Indeed, this phrase can be used to refer to the atonement cover of the ark of the covenant. It was just above this cover that God promised to dwell and meet with his people. Moreover, this cover was sprinkled with blood once a year by Israel’s High Priest on the Day of Atonement to atone for the sins of the whole community.

Furthermore, the phrase “sacrifice of atonement” carries with it the idea of “propitiation”, which is basically the appeasing of God’s righteous anger. Since we are deserving of God’s wrath, it must be unleashed upon us or else turned away onto something or someone else. This is the whole basis for the sacrificial system. God said in Leviticus 17:11, *“For the life of a creature is in the blood, and I have given it to you to make atonement for yourselves on the altar; it is the blood that makes atonement for one’s life.”* We thus see that an atoning sacrifice is not something given by man to God, like a pagan offering, but something that God provides for man in his mercy. It does not win God’s love, but is provided *because* of God’s love. Through animal sacrifice, God was teaching his people that sin is costly, incredibly costly, demanding lifeblood. And unless God provides a substitute, it is our life that must be forfeited.

But the Old Testament sacrificial system was merely symbolic. It had no real power to atone for sins, as Paul says in verse 25b, ***“…in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished”*** (also Heb 10:4). It was all simply a powerful shadow of the greater realities brought to fulfillment in Jesus Christ. Through his death on the cross, Jesus literally became our substitute. The wrath we deserved due to our sins was poured out upon him. This was so much more effective than animal sacrifices because of who Jesus is: the sinless Son of God. As both God and a perfectly sinless human being, Jesus was the perfect substitute. While we could never pay for anyone else’s sins, let alone our own, Jesus satisfied God’s wrath by his own perfect sacrifice. This is the message of God’s love through the gospel. We can thus summarize the message of the cross as follows: God himself appeased his own righteous wrath by giving his very self in the person of his Son. The source of our salvation, the grounds of our salvation, the means of our salvation and the end of our salvation — it is all God.

Bringing all these ideas together, we find that the gospel is the most remarkable story of unfathomable love. It’s not about rules or traditions or finding ways to make ourselves feel good. It’s the story of how the God of the universe substituted himself in our place so that we might not be destroyed under the weight of his holiness. He bought us out of our slavery to sin to make us his own dearly loved people. By his one-sided grace, he declares us righteous in his sight, asking only that we put our absolute trust in him as our loving Father. This is the gospel that violently shook Luther’s world. All the suffering Luther endured from his guilt, the burden he felt of not feeling good enough no matter how hard he worked, was lifted away when he put his faith in the God who forgives by grace. *Sola fide* filled Luther’s heart with a joy and passion he had never known before so that he lived his life to the full for the glory of God. When those around him were awakened to the true gospel, it ignited a revolution that is still going on today. We must each ask ourselves, am I living with biblical, gospel faith? Am I fully leaning on the person of Jesus Christ and his completed work? Do I derive great peace and joy out of the love God has shown me through the cross? Are my identity and calling grounded in receiving and sharing the grace of God? The true gospel maximizes God’s glory and unleashes the full potential of the Church and of each individual believer. Don’t you want to live with such conviction? May God help us to deeply repent of our self-righteousness rooted in pride and take hold of the blessings he paid so dearly for us to enjoy.

**II. Faith that God credits to us as righteousness (4:1-25)**

After Paul’s emphasis on the importance of faith rather than works, he knew many would distort his teaching or refute it as unbiblical. So in chapter 4, he goes to great lengths to show that “salvation by grace, through faith” is not only biblical, but the way God always deals with mankind. By using Abraham as his main example, he shows us the kind of lifestyle that leads to justification and gives glory to God, which we should strive for.

Paul’s main argument is built around 4:3, ***“What does Scripture say? ‘Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.’”*** This quote from Genesis 15:6 comes from a critical time in Abraham’s life. Abraham was having a midlife crisis because he still had no children, and God’s vision for him to become a great nation was a mere pipedream. So God took Abraham outside and simply gave him a promise: *“Look up at the sky and count the stars — if indeed you can count them. So shall your offspring be” (Gen 15:5).* The next verse says that Abraham simply believed God, and that God then “credited” righteousness towards Abraham’s “account”. As Paul points out, this happened before Abraham was given the covenant of circumcision and long before the law was given. So then, salvation by grace, through faith, predates all these and proves that one’s salvation relies solely on the promises of God. Paul’s conclusion on this matter is in verse 16, ***“Therefore, the promise comes by faith, so that it may be by grace and may be guaranteed to all Abraham’s offspring—not only to those who are of the law but also to those who have the faith of Abraham. He is the father of us all.”***

What, then, did Abraham’s faith look like? What is this faith that God credits to a person as righteousness? Paul beautifully summarizes this in verses 18-22, pointing out a few key details. First, Abraham believed that God could do the impossible, even in a humanly hopeless situation. Despite feeling that he and his wife Sarah were as good as dead, Abraham believed that God, who can even raise the dead, would yet give them a son. Second, Abraham believed that God’s words were as good as gold. Because God promised it, Abraham believed it. This simple faith hurts our ego, but gives immense glory to God. And third, Abraham did not waver through unbelief, but was strengthened in his faith to keep believing to the end. It is true that Abraham had his moments of anxiety and doubt. But throughout the hills and valleys of his life, he persevered in faith and God did not hold his moments of weakness against him.

Now look at verses 23-25. ***“The words ‘it was credited to him’ were written not for him alone, but also for us, to whom God will credit righteousness—for us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead. He was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification.”*** This is a great reminder that when we talk about genuine faith that leads to salvation, it is much more than a cheap, flimsy assent to church doctrine. The kind of faith that God credits to us as righteousness is a real, dynamic, uncompromising, unquestioning, unrelenting faith. Like Abraham, we must believe that God is Lord over our lives and can do the things that we know are impossible under our own power. We must believe that what has God promised to us in his word he will fulfill. We must believe that his kingdom, his glory and his heavenly reward are all worth pursuing with all our hearts in this life. And we must have resurrection faith that he has power to raise the dead. Not only does the very gospel about Jesus rest upon it, it is also our clear hope. For we believe that God will not only raise us to inherit his future kingdom, but that he is giving life to spiritually dead people here and now. No matter how hopeless the situations seem, God is giving life to the dead and calling his people to live by faith. How very precious this faith is!

Today we went back to the heart of the gospel. We learned that in Christ, God has become our Justifier, our Redeemer and our Substitute. We are called to serve a God who is awesome in holiness and love, a God who forgives our sins and declares us righteous regardless of our weaknesses as we live by faith in his Son Jesus Christ. Let’s not repeat the mistakes of the Church in generations past by allowing our own self-righteousness and love of the world to bury these precious truths. Let’s live with an unswerving, persevering faith in what God has already done in Christ and in what he has promised yet to do.