

The Turning Point of the Human Race

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Date: 02 December 2018

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[0 : 00] Romans chapter 3 verse 21 God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement through the shedding of his blood to be received by faith.

He did this to demonstrate his righteousness because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished. He did it to demonstrate his righteousness at the present time. So as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus. Where, then, is boasting? It is excluded. Because of what law?

The law that requires works? No, because of the law that requires faith. For we maintain that a person is justified by faith apart from the works of the law.

Or is it God, the God of Jews only? Is he not the God of Gentiles too? Yes, of Gentiles too. Since there is only one God who will justify the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through the same faith.

[1 : 25] Do we then nullify the law by this faith? Not at all. Rather, we uphold the law. This is the word of the Lord. Thank you, God. Good morning, St. Silas.

My name is Martin Ayers. I'm the senior pastor here. If you're here visiting, it's great to have you. And we've been looking at Romans 3 together. So we're going to... We've been looking at Romans together as a church.

We're going to look at that together. Thanks for those who are serving in the service so far. Thanks for the band. The band had done well because they had a demoralizing email from Matthew on Friday.

He sent them an email. It said that the band's... This isn't a regular team. They've come together. And he meant to write, Dear Incomparable Team. And actually, it came out, Dear Incompatible Team.

And they've recovered from that stain upon their character and are doing a great job. Now, if you can keep your Bibles open at chapter 3, it's on page 1130 of the church Bibles.

[2 : 33] We're going to look at that together. But let's ask for God's help as we turn to his word. Let's pray together. Heavenly Father, we pray that by your spirit you would give us eyes to see the cross and see there your wisdom, love, power, justice, and grace.

And we ask that you give us hearts that feel these truths more deeply and affectingly, that we might be shaped and fashioned according to your will. We ask in Jesus' name.

Amen. So this text that we're looking at today has been described in a number of ways that should make us listen up. Leon Morris, the writer, said this text is probably the single most important paragraph ever written by a human hand.

One sentence in the Greek, verse 21 to 26. The most important sentence ever written. Martin Luther, the reformer, called it the chief point and very central place of this letter and therefore of the whole Bible.

And that's because the but now, at the beginning of verse 21, that Morag read for us, that but now is the turning point of Romans, but it's also the turning point of the whole human race.

[3 : 50] We've been spending time in chapters 1 to 3 over five weeks, five sermons, and we need to pick up this point in Romans again, not just remembering what we've seen, but even feeling it, feeling how desperate the message has been.

It's been dark looking at Romans 1 to 3. Paul said, though, in chapter 1, that he has got momentous news that he's not ashamed of because it's the power of God to save everyone who believes.

That was his headline in chapter 1, verse 17. But why do we need saving? Why do we need a message that can save us? That's what we've been dwelling on since verse 18 of chapter 1 of Romans.

So our first point this morning, you can see an outline inside the notice sheet. Our first point is our need for the cross. Our need is summarized in verse 23 there, where it says, For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.

That is, put simply, we're not who we were made to be. We've seen over the last few weeks there are two clear ways that you can reject God. There's the path of irreligion, and there's the path of religion.

[4 : 58] There's the path of rebellion, and there's the path of moralism. So first, we thought with Paul in chapter 1 about irreligion. I guess most people around us, in the street you live in, in your close, in your workplace, on campus, in high school with you, most people around us are irreligious.

If we're irreligious, we reject the idea of a God who is going to hold people to account, a God who is just, who will punish wrongdoing in the end. And instead, we say to ourselves, nobody gets to tell me how to live.

No one tells me what's right and wrong. I've got the right to make up my own mind what's right and wrong. So that's familiar to us, isn't it, in Glasgow? People think it's absolutely ridiculous, frankly, the idea that there's a God who will punish evil in the world and reward goodness.

They think the universe came into existence out of nothing, through impersonal forces, and eventually it will die out, and the universe doesn't care how we live.

It'll just cool off, and no one will be listening. But Paul has shown us why that view is wrong in chapter 1. God's speaking to us and speaking truth into the culture.

[6 : 14] First, we saw in Romans 1 that God has made himself plain to us. In creation all around us, we should know that there is a creator when we look and see that there is something rather than nothing.

And in our own consciences, God has given us all a sense that there is right and wrong, that they are real things. But because we want autonomy from God, the reason we don't accept that is we're suppressing the truth about God deep down inside us.

A bit like if you're packing a car boot and it's full and you push down to keep it closed. We're pushing down the truth about God. So how does God respond to that?

Well, he's still there. He's perfectly good. He made us to know him and enjoy a relationship with him. And we're taking the good things from him and ignoring him. And he is rightly angry.

So he reveals his anger by taking off the restraints, by handing us over to follow our own sinful desires. Three times in Romans 1, God gave them up.

[7 : 14] He's given them up. He's given us up. We think it's freedom to be handed over like that. It looks like true freedom for a while. And in Scotland, that's how people see it.

Throwing off the shackles of Christian morality. The shackles of God, the God of the Bible. But the truth is, if you choose to live that way for your life, ultimately it is destabilizing.

So we find ourselves still wanting things to make life worth living that are only really true if God is there. Nobody really manages to live as though, ultimately, there is absolutely no purpose to human existence.

There is no real morality. There is no significance to our lives. We are just the impersonal, made complex. No one lives like that. So we don't want God around until someone does something horrible.

Then we need human rights, don't we? We need humans to have dignity. We need a moral framework. Things that are only really there if God is there. The poet Steve Turner has a poem.

[8 : 22] It's called Animals. Animals. He wrote it about a horrible thing that happened in Australia that had been in the news. He could have written it yesterday with the news of a playground in Lancashire where they found razor blades stuck into the slides.

I don't know whether you saw that in the news yesterday. Deliberately left for the children. Let me read you Steve Turner's poem, Animals. The governor said it, and the Daily Mirror agreed.

These people were animals. Men who carve initials into epileptic children are animals. My biology teacher had said it some years before.

He had included us all. Up from the swamp we arose, some with two legs, some with four.

Philosophy professors passed it on, and the word must have spread.

People are starting to believe it. People are starting to act like it. Something will have to be done.

It's clever, isn't it? We know deep down that there is right and wrong, and so we need a God who is just, who will eventually hold people to account for how they live in his world.

[9 : 27] And God assures us in Romans chapter 2, he will repay everyone according to what they have done. It's good news, but it's bad news for us because we've rejected him in our hearts and he is angry with us for how we have treated him and one another.

And that's why we see such evil in our world and people see it and they ask, how can there really be a God who is good when you look at how people live in the world? And the answer in Romans 1 was, the reason that people are living like that is because we've got a problem with God.

And it's to wake us up to that so that we realize we're in desperate trouble. All is not well between us and a good God. We're under his judgment. So then some people try and put things right with God on their own and that is the religious way to reject God.

They turn from irreligion to moralistic religion. Religion is about trying to be accepted by God thanks to your own obedience. So you think, well, there is some kind of God who's out there, but I'm just, if I behave in a certain way and do certain things, I'm hoping that when he comes back, he'll see that I'm one of the good guys.

That's the religious route. And we heard in chapter two of Romans that none of us who chooses that route for life can be good enough for God. And that's because of the frightening beauty of God's law.

[10 : 53] The standards he sets are higher than any of us ever achieve. And the evidence he'll admit into his courtroom on the last day isn't just the things we'd like people to see.

It's everything that we've ever thought and said and done. So we were left last week in chapter three, verse 19, with no defense, picturing ourselves in the courtroom of God, standing in the dock before God, and the charges are read out that go behind our thin veneer of respectability.

So that if you just think about your life and you think about the five worst things that you've ever thought or said or done, they'll be there. They'll be read out in the courtroom. God's seen them.

And when it comes to your defense, you stand in silence. Verse 19, if you have a look, of chapter three. Now we know that whatever the law says, that's the commands of God.

It says to those who were under the law, so that every mouth may be silenced, and the whole world held accountable to God. Therefore, no one will be declared righteous in God's sight by the works of the law.

[11 : 57] Rather, through the law, we become conscious of our sin. The justice of God that we so need for our world condemns us because of how we've treated him and how we've treated each other.

We have nothing to say. And if Romans stopped there, we'd have nothing to complain about. We'd have no escape and no complaints at God's justice.

So our second point is the achievement of the cross. If you have a look with me at verse 21. But now, apart from the law, the righteousness of God has been made known, to which the law and the prophets testify.

This righteousness is given through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. Righteousness is the language of the courtroom. It's a verdict on your life.

In the original language, it's the same word as justified. If you're justified, you're righteous-ified, if you like. It's about meeting a standard. And in God's books, being righteous is meeting the standards of a holy God.

[13 : 07] If you're justified, if you have righteousness, God approves of you. And the righteousness or justification being described here is a gift. In verse 22, it's given to you.

In verse 24, it says, all are justified freely by his grace. In verse 25, he says it's to be received by faith.

Well, faith is just trust or reliance, leaning on God's promise that he will give this to you. I don't know whether you've seen the movie, *The Untouchables*.

It's quite an old film now, but it was about the gangster Al Capone, played by Robert De Niro. And the police force were trying to catch Al Capone during the prohibition. And they eventually get him on trial for tax evasion.

But all through the movie, all through the trial, Al Capone just looks very relaxed and smug. He doesn't look bothered at all. And the police can't work out why he looks so relaxed while all this evidence piles up against him.

[14 : 09] And then Elliot Ness, the police officer, realizes that the jury has been bribed. So whatever Al Capone has done, they're going to find him not guilty.

So he approaches the bench and he speaks to the judge. And then this momentous moment happens in the film as the judge announces that he's going to switch the juries. He says to the clerk, get the jury from the next courtroom and bring them in here and take this jury and put them in there. And it just all kicks off in the courtroom because Al Capone and his men realize he's going to get found guilty. Well, if we picture ourselves in the courtroom of God again and the case against us has been made and the charges have been read out and they're overwhelming against us for how we've lived and we stand condemned, then suddenly there's this different kind of commotion, this different kind of exchange as though someone approaches the bench and then the judge makes this amazing announcement.

He says the charge sheet that's just been read out against you, it doesn't count for you anymore. It's actually been dealt with in a different court, in a different trial by somebody else.

And the penalty for them has already been paid. And instead, we've got this new charge sheet for you and it says that you've lived the perfect life, that you're going to be found righteous.

[15:27] And the judge turns to you and says you can walk free. Thank you for being righteous. Well done. It's a revolution in what would have happened to us.

And the only question is, how? How can a just God offer the gift of righteousness like that to people who don't deserve it? People who fall short of his glory.

People like us who are not who we're meant to be. And we get the answer in verse 25. God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement through the shedding of his blood to be received by faith.

On the cross, something has happened. Jesus is put to death by wicked men. He's the only truly righteous man who's ever lived, the only man who didn't deserve to die.

But something happens there that enables the just God to give a righteousness to everyone who will accept it, who will receive it from him.

[16:29] In verse 25, he calls it a sacrifice of atonement. In Bible language, it's sometimes described as a propitiation. So justification, we've thought about, is the language you'd use in a courtroom.

But sacrifice of atonement is the language of the temple. The wrong things that we do make God rightly angry and the punishment for them is death.

But under the Old Testament law, the high priest could bring a goat into the temple on the day of atonement and sacrifice it to the Lord. And it was a picture of a substitute bearing the penalty for sin in the place of the people to take God's anger away.

It was just a picture, but it prepared us for the cross. That when Jesus died, it was like a great funnel was placed over his head. And God's right anger against all the wrong things that we have ever done was laid upon him at the cross.

In verse 24, he describes it as redemption. So justification is the language of a law court.

Atonement is the language of the temple.

[17:43] Redemption is the language of a slave market. That when someone was a slave, you'd have to pay a redemption price to buy their freedom for them. And in Israel's history, when they heard the word redemption, they thought of when they were slaves.

Their ancestors had been in slavery in Egypt. And God had bought them back. He'd freed them from slavery. But the price that had to be paid to bring them out from the judgment that God brought on Egypt was that every house sacrificed a lamb.

Every house that believed. And the lamb was a substitute for their firstborn son. The ransom price paid. So that's the achievement of the cross.

Verse 25 says that your God shed his blood for you as he died in your place, achieving at immense cost to himself your righteous verdict in his courtroom, becoming your temple sacrifice as he brought the offering you needed and paying your redemption price to liberate you.

So what does the cross demonstrate to us about God? That's our third point, the justice of the cross. Halfway through verse 25, we're told why God did it.

[19:00] He, that is God, did this to demonstrate his righteousness because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished.

He did it to demonstrate his righteousness at the present time so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus. So God was determined to justify people, to have a people who he could give a right verdict on their lives.

They could be his people and live with him forever. But he also had to demonstrate that he himself is righteous and up until that time in human history if you were following God's dealings with people and his promises he looked a bit shifty.

He'd made promises to people that he wouldn't count their sin against them. He'd forgive them. But they weren't very nice people. People like Jacob, the father of Israel, who was a bare-faced liar and deceived his own dad into giving the blessing that was due to his brother to him.

People like David, the Old Testament's greatest king, who saw Uriah the Hittite, who was off fighting for him, saw his wife, liked her, slept with her, and then sent Uriah into battle and told his commanding officer to send him where he'd get killed.

[20 : 23] These people were as bad as you and me. We're not better than them in our attitudes to God and each other, but for them, just as for us, as history rolled on, you could reasonably have asked yourself, how can a just God let these people go unpunished for what they've done?

If you think about your overdraft, especially if you're a student, the time before the cross is a bit like an overdraft building up. It just keeps getting worse.

There's all this stuff going on and God's not dealing with it. He's not punishing it. Sins that he's promised he won't deal with on the last day because he's going to forgive these people for trusting him.

And then at the cross, all of that debt gets taken away. It allows God to justify us by faith and still demonstrate that he is righteous, still demonstrate that he cares how people live in his universe. In other words, what must have happened is that all of the sins of his people were punished on the cross. It's breathtaking wisdom from God that God demonstrates his justice, but he's also able to justify everyone who believes, even though we fall short of his standards because at the cross this amazing swap takes place.

[21 : 51] It's not actually a very popular idea today. We might think to ourselves, why does God need a punishment? Why does he need there to be a payment? Why can't he just forgive and just say it doesn't matter?

He's God. But without there being a penalty for our wrongdoing, we lose God's justice. Did the hurt that we've caused, the pain that we've caused, didn't it count for anything?

And that's an especially significant problem if you've been a victim yourself of something horrible.

Surely we can see that God wouldn't be righteous to sweep any of that under the carpet.

We'd be left with a bad taste in our mouths in the new creation. But wonderfully, at the cross, God has demonstrated in history that justice matters to him.

We see the cross and we can trust that on the last day, everything can be dealt with. And we should remember as well that forgiveness is always costly. Somebody has to pay when there's forgiveness.

[22 : 55] I remember when I was 17 and I scraped my dad's car. I was trying to park it and I botched it up and there was a massive scrape all down the side of the car. And I went to see my dad and I said sorry.

At that moment, he had a choice. He could say, you know, I forgive you, it doesn't matter. But somebody's got to pay for the car. To put things right, someone has to get it resprayed.

Either he does and he absorbs the cost to forgive me or he makes me pay for it because I did it. Forgiveness is costly, isn't it?

Well, in a similar way, what we see at the cross is that a price had to be paid to put things right and God himself paid the price. It's the self-satisfaction of God through the self-substitution of God.

And only in biblical Christianity do you have this picture of God, this revelation of God. So if you lose this meaning of the cross, if you lose the cross, it's good to ask, what did it cost your God to love you?

[23 : 58] So this is the justice of the cross that God demonstrates to the world he is just and he justifies his people as a free gift offered to all so that he invites you today, whatever you've done, however much of a mess you've made, to put your faith in Christ Jesus and you'll be declared righteous, redeemed, forgiven, reconciled to God, a fresh start.

everything sorted out. And the first implication of that comes next. It's our fourth point, the boasting of the cross. If you have a look at verse 27, where then is boasting?

It is excluded. Because of what law? The law that requires works? No, because of the law that requires faith. So if we contributed in some way to our right standing before God, that's the idea of a

law that requires works, if we contributed, we'd have something to boast in. We could look down on other people because they've not managed what we've managed to please God. But instead, God displays the cross and simply invites us to put our faith in him. And so we don't boast. Now, boasting was a military term and it's striking. Almost whenever you see Paul explaining about the cross in the New Testament, he starts talking about boasting. [25 : 29] If you think about a military battle and an army lining up preparing for battle, if you think about Gladiator or the Lord of the Rings, the return of the king, or in Braveheart, what always happens in the movies is that there's a commander usually on horseback and they go riding up and down, don't they, just before the battle across the front line and they shout encouragement to the soldiers.

And what they shout, that's the boast. It's the boast. We're going to win this, boys. Look at our spears. Look at your horses. Look at your muscles. That's the boast. It's where you find your security. It's where you find your identity. That's what I'm relying on. That's what I'm building my confidence on. And all around us, people are building their identity on the things that they do, striving to justify themselves. That's why we get anxious in life, isn't it? We get anxious because we've picked something that we want to boast in, maybe a career, maybe exams, maybe a relationship, an achievement, and so we're scared that we won't achieve what we want to boast in. But when God justifies us by faith alone, only faith, we don't need to be anxious anymore. We can't boast in ourselves. And it means you can never look down on anyone. [26 : 52] We can't boast in being a high achiever or in being middle class or in being working class or in being right wing or in being left wing or male or female or Scottish.

Boasting in ourselves is excluded. But we can boast in Christ. We can boast in him and what he's achieved for us at the cross. And it's wonderful. We need to feel the darkness of chapters 1 and 2 of Romans so that we grasp quite what a mess we were in and what Christ has done so that we make much of him. There was a British stockbroker during the war, Sir Nicholas Wilton, Second World War. He visited Prague just before the Second World War started. and he found families in desperate trouble with no way out, desperate to get their children out of grave danger in Czechoslovakia. So he came back to the UK and he did everything that he could. The government demanded bonds to bring any child into the UK at the time and so he paid the bonds for all these children and he organised permits and travel warrants to get children out and he managed to get eight trains full of children out of Czechoslovakia who would certainly have died if they'd stayed there during the war. [28 : 09] Now years later he found the book in his attic of the list of permits that he'd put together for these children and wondered what had happened to them and it's a bit dated now but some researchers found the children now grown up and there was a story where it was shared on the TV.

We're just going to watch a clip of it now. All the letters. Back here is the list of all the children. This is Vera Diermont now Vera Gissing. We did find her name on his list. Vera Gissing is with us here tonight. Hello Vera. And I should tell you that you are actually sitting next to Nicholas Winton. Hello. And it was just so wonderful. So terribly, terribly touching. Can I ask is there anyone in our audience tonight who owes their life to Nicholas Winton?

[29 : 31] If so, could you stand up please? Thank you. 13 important Debbie comes in to the Innisfilczenia, the youth Well, such is the story of every Christian from the book now of verse 21. And we boast in the cross in what Jesus has done. We see in Christ a man who has died the death that we should have died to give us the freedom that we could never have earned ourselves. So folks, we end these verses as we started them in silence. We came into verse 21 in silence because we had nothing to say in our defense before a righteous God. We stood condemned. But we come out of the other side in verse 31 in a different kind of silence as we're left to gaze at the cross and see such a display of God's righteousness, his love for us, his grace to us, and his wisdom that our only response is wonder and gratitude and praise. So what's your response to the God revealed to us in Romans chapter 3? Some of you might still be thinking it through. This might be very new to you. Please let me urge you to keep reflecting on what you've heard this morning.

Have you grasped before that Jesus died his death for you so that you could have peace with God as a gift? The way back to God is now wide open for you.

[31 : 37] You just have to see your need and turn back to God and accept it. But there might be some here today who know that you want to respond. You feel that now is the first time, it's the right time to receive this gift from God for the first time.

So I'm going to just finish with a prayer that you could pray to receive that gift from Jesus for the first time. And it's printed in the sheets inside the notice sheet underneath the points there.

I'll just have a moment of quiet and then I'll read that prayer so that any of us can pray along to God in our hearts. Heavenly Father, I admit that I have fallen short of your glory.

I haven't loved you with my whole heart and I haven't loved other people as I should have done. I am sorry and I know I deserve your condemnation.

Thank you that Jesus died for me. Thank you that his sacrifice on the cross means that you offer me justification, redemption, and forgiveness.

[33 : 02] I now accept that gift. Please come into my life by your spirit so that from now on I can live according to your will with Jesus as my Lord as I rest confidently in what he has done for me.

Amen. Well, if you've prayed that prayer for the first time today then you've done a wonderful thing and you've started a fresh life with God.

But please let me know or let James know who's leading the service so that we can help you as you think about what to do next. But we're going to sing together as Christians have for 2,000 years of the wonder of the cross.

your first term world who's leading us in what you think about is the the the the the the the the