

ROM. 1:18 – 4:25

By Ashby L. Camp

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II. Justification by Faith (1:18 - 4:25)

A. The Universal Reign of Sin (1:18 - 3:20)

1. All persons are accountable to God for sin (1:18-32)

a. Humanity's rejection of the revelation of God in nature (1:18-23) -

¹⁸For the wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men who suppress the truth in unrighteousness, ¹⁹because what is knowable of God is evident among them, for God displayed it to them. ²⁰For his invisible [attributes] are clearly seen since the creation of the world, being understood by the things made, both his eternal power and deity, so that they are without excuse, ²¹because having known God, they did not glorify [him] as God or give [him] thanks, but they became futile in their reasonings and their uncomprehending hearts were darkened. ²²Claiming to be wise, they became fools ²³and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for a likeness of an image of mortal man and birds and four-footed animals and reptiles.

(1) That God's saving work, his "righteousing" people through faith, is taking place in the preaching of the gospel is of supreme importance *because* ("For") the terrible wrath of God that ultimately is coming is already being previewed in his wrath upon the ungodliness and unrighteousness of human beings.

(2) God's "wrath" is different from human anger.

(a) As Stott says, "It does not mean that he loses his temper, flies into a rage, or is ever malicious, spiteful, or vindictive. His wrath is his holy hostility to evil, his refusal to condone it or come to terms with it, his just judgment upon it."

(b) Cranfield remarks, "A man who knows, for example, about the far-reaching injustice and cruelty of *apartheid* and is not angry at such wickedness is not a good man: by his lack of anger he shows his lack of love. God would not be the truly loving God that he is if he did not react to our evil with wrath."

(3) Paul makes the point that the wrath of God against sinners, both as previewed in history and completed on Judgment Day, is just because God has revealed himself to all mankind through the creation. In Thomas Schreiner's words (p. 86), "God has stitched into the fabric of the human mind his existence and power, so that they are instinctively recognized when one views the created world." Creation bears witness to God, and yet mankind willfully suppresses that testimony, preferring to go its own foolish way and to create its own gods. Rather than embrace the testimony of creation and give God

the glory he is due, humanity culpably represses that truth and substitutes gods of its own making as objects of devotion and reverence. Paul is focusing here on the idolatry of the Gentile world, a world that had a multitude of images that represented their various false gods.

(4) Paul states in v. 18 that God's wrath is now being manifested from heaven against this culpable suppression and substitution, and in v. 24 he explains the form of that wrath.

b. The divine reaction to human rejection (1:24-32) - ²⁴**Therefore, God handed them over in the lusts of their hearts to uncleanness, so that their bodies are dishonored among them.** ²⁵**They exchanged the truth of God for the lie and worshipped and served the creature instead of the Creator, who is blessed forever, amen.** ²⁶**Because of this, God handed them over to dishonorable passions, for both their females exchanged natural sexual relations for those contrary to nature,** ²⁷**and likewise also the males, having abandoned natural sexual relations with the female, were inflamed with their desire for one another, males with males carrying out shameful acts and receiving in themselves the necessary penalty for their error.** ²⁸**And as they did not see fit to keep God in [their] knowledge, God handed them over to an unfit mind, to do immoral things,** ²⁹**those filled with all unrighteousness, evil, greed, and depravity; full of envy, murder, discord, deceit, and malice; gossips,** ³⁰**slanderers, God-haters, insolent, arrogant, boasters, devisers of evil, disobedient to parents,** ³¹**without understanding, without faithfulness, without natural affection, without mercy.** ³²**They, though knowing God's righteous decree that those who practice such things are worthy of death, not only do them, but also approve of those who practice [them].**

(1) God's wrath is now being expressed in his opening the door to sinful humanity's headlong plunge into wickedness. This foretaste of wrath in these "last days" is God's "handing over" of human beings (vv. 24, 26, 28) to their chosen way of sin and all its consequences. It is something like the parent whose effort to bless his child by providing guidance has been despised for so long that he stops locking up his money, which the child then uses to buy heroin and thus to reap his punishment.

(a) As Stott says, "God abandons stubborn sinners to their wilful self-centredness, and the resulting process of moral and spiritual degeneration is to be understood as a judicial act of God."

(b) That is what is behind Friedrich Schiller's famous comment, "The history of the world is the judgment of the world."

(2) As God "hands them over," we see the depths to which humanity sinks. Their lust finds expression in perverted sex, exemplified by homosexuality. And Paul says that homosexuals receive in themselves the necessary penalty for their error. The sexual degradation they embrace in their rejection of God is punishment in itself; it is part of God's judgment.

(a) Homosexuality in our culture is called "gay."

Whatever the etymology of that word as a reference to homosexuals, the implication of the label to modern ears is that the homosexual lifestyle is a kind of a merry, carefree, fun-filled existence. But that is a lie.

(b) Jeffrey Satinover is a psychiatrist with degrees from MIT, University of Texas, and Harvard and a former Fellow in Psychiatry and Child Psychiatry at Yale University. He points out in his 1996 book, *Homosexuality and the Politics of Truth* (p. 49-52), that homosexual conduct is associated with numerous serious diseases, including several forms of cancer, and with a high suicide rate, the combined result of which is a 25-30 year decrease in life expectancy! It is anything but "gay." (Note that the high suicide rate is not a product of "homophobia" as it is high in countries like the Netherlands that are largely accepting of homosexual practice.)

(c) This doesn't mean, of course, that homosexuals are beyond God's love and concern. The cross of Christ proves forever the depth of God's love for all mankind. The question is not whether God loves the homosexual but whether the homosexual will love God. One cannot love God and live in defiance of his commandments (Jn. 14:15, 14:21-24, 15:10, 15:14; 1 Jn. 2:4-6, 5:3; 2 Jn. 6).

(d) As Christians we must lovingly and patiently call all sinners, including homosexuals, to repentance, celebrate their conversion, and work to integrate them into the community of faith. Our culture appreciates the nobility of "tough love" in other circumstances, such as in training rebellious teenagers or dealing with alcoholics, but demonizes tough love of homosexuals as "homophobia." The church cannot be intimidated. As Christ loved sinful humanity enough to endure public scorning in order to bless it, so we as his disciples must love homosexuals enough to do the same. Those who come to the light will be forever grateful; those who refuse will realize on "that Day" that we were acting for their good.

(e) Paul made clear that the church in Corinth included some who *had been* practicing homosexuals.

[1] He wrote in 1 Cor. 6:9-11: ⁹Or do you not know that unrighteous men will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived; neither fornicators nor idolaters nor adulterers nor passive male participants in homosexual intercourse nor active male participants in homosexual intercourse ¹⁰nor thieves nor greedy persons nor drunkards nor revilers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. ¹¹And some of you *were* these things; *but* you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were pronounced righteous in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God.

[Note: NIV 2011 translates clause in v. 9 "men who have sex with men" and states in the footnote "The words *men who have sex with men* translate two Greek words that refer to the passive and active participants in homosexual acts." ESV translates it "men who practice homosexuality."]

[2] So do not tell me that homosexuals are beyond the transforming power of the Spirit of God. Our culture rejects and mocks this idea with the slogan "You can't pray the gay away," but Paul leaves no doubt that practicing homosexuals can be freed from the power of sin through their relationship with Christ.

(3) Notice that the sinfulness of homosexual conduct is rooted in the creation account. Verse 20 speaks directly of God's creation, v. 25 refers to God as the Creator, and vv. 26-27 allude to the creation of mankind through the use of the adjectives "male" and "female," as in the creation account, rather than the nouns "man" and "woman." Homosexual conduct is contrary to nature in that it is contrary to God's design of mankind as male and female and his intention for their exclusive coupling. So attempts to restrict Paul's condemnation to exploitative forms of homosexual conduct or to homosexual conduct performed as part of idolatrous worship are groundless.

(4) Denials to the contrary notwithstanding, humans know at some level that God is God and that he deserves the utmost honor, and despite that knowledge, they continue to rebel against him and to approve of those who do. They know what they do is wrong and that it deserves condemnation by God. This knowledge is probably due both to the revelation of God through creation and to the "law of the heart" referred to in 2:14-15, the basic moral sense that is implanted within us by virtue of our being made in the image of God. This "general revelation" is sufficient to make all people culpable for disobeying, but "special revelation" is required for people to be saved.

(5) In saying that they *not only* do such wicked things *but also* approve of those who do such wicked things, Paul suggests that their *approval* of wrongdoing by others is even more culpable than their own wrongdoing. Cranfield states (p. 135):

[T]he man who applauds and encourages others in doing what is wicked is, even if he never actually commits the same wicked deed himself, not only as guilty as those who do commit it, but very often more guilty than they. There are several factors involved. . . . To draw attention to the fact [as does the omitted quote from Apollinarius] that the man who does the wrong will often be under great pressure, as for instance that of passion, whereas the man who looks on and applauds will not normally be under any similar pressure, is not at all to diminish the guilt of the doer, but it is to reveal the greater culpability of the applauder. His attitude will very often be the reflection of a settled choice. But there is also the fact that those who condone and applaud the vicious actions of others are actually making a deliberate contribution to the setting up of a public opinion favorable to vice, and so to the corruption of an indefinite number of other people.

(6) And yet we have so-called Christians posting videos on the website of a Bible-despising homosexual activist (Dan Savage) communicating the message that not all Christians are like the ones who say that homosexual behavior is sinful.

This is a direct attack on God and his word masquerading as compassion, and God is not pleased with it.

(7) Paul's unnamed focus in this section is the Gentiles, but Paul makes clear in the next section that the Jew really fares no better in this regard. They too are under the power of sin. One can imagine some Gentiles claiming that their ignorance of God exempted them from his judgment, so Paul insists that all people have some knowledge of God and his will for them.

2. Jews are accountable to God for Sin (2:1 - 3:8)

a. The Jews and the judgment of God (2:1-16)

(1) Critique of Jewish presumption (2:1-5) - **Therefore, you are without excuse, O man, that is, everyone who judges, for in what you judge the other, you condemn yourself, for you who judge practice the same things.** ²Now we know that the judgment of God on those who practice such things is according to truth. ³So do you think, O man, you who judge those practicing such things while also doing them, that you will escape the judgment of God? ⁴Or do you have contempt for the wealth of his kindness and forbearance and patience, ignoring [the fact] that God's kindness is trying to lead you to repentance? ⁵But because of your hardness and unrepentant heart, you are storing up for yourself wrath in the day of wrath and revelation of God's righteous judgment,

(a) Paul now turns his attention to the Jews, but he does not name them expressly until v. 17. As Grant Osborne notes (p. 44-45), "Greater space and effort go into showing Jewish guilt, for they had too little awareness of their actual position before God. They were the covenant people and therefore, they believed, exempt in some fashion from his wrath. Paul shows that that is not the case."

(b) Paul wants the Jewish Christians to understand that their being Jews does not give them a "leg up" on Gentiles when it comes to salvation. Yes, they kept the knowledge of the truth of God that the Gentiles had rejected, but mere knowledge of the truth does not exempt one from judgment; rather, it shows one to be without excuse for sinning. If the sin of those who *deny* the truth is blameworthy, how much more the sin of those who *acknowledge* the truth by using it to judge others? By condemning in others the things one does, one admits the propriety of one's own condemnation. With the Jew in mind, Paul would be referring to such things (from the list in 1:29-31) as greed, envy, strife, deceit, malice, gossip, slander, arrogance, unfaithfulness, and lovelessness.

(c) For Jews to think they could sin and be exempt from judgment (by birthright, by being a Jew) is to show contempt for God's mercy, for his abundant kindness and forbearance and patience in withholding the judgment that is rightfully due the sinner. The purpose of this mercy is not to excuse sin but to stimulate repentance (see, 2 Pet. 3:9).

(d) God will not withhold his judgment forever.

Judgment Day is coming, and though the Jews (those who kept the knowledge of God) had been spared the foretaste of wrath that was already being revealed in the Gentile world (the "handing over"), they were, by presuming on God's kindness, accumulating wrath in advance of that judgment.

(2) The impartiality of judgment (2:6-11) - **⁶who will repay each one according to his works. ⁷To those who, by persistence in good work, seek glory and honor and immortality, [he will give] eternal life; ⁸but to those who are self-seeking and who disobey the truth but obey unrighteousness, [he will give] wrath and anger. ⁹[There will be] affliction and distress on every human being who carries out what is evil, both Jew first and Greek, ¹⁰but glory and honor and peace for everyone who works what is good, both Jew first and Greek, ¹¹for there is no partiality with God.**

(a) God is not going to judge humanity by a double standard – one for the Jews and another for the Gentiles. Just as Jews understand that Gentiles will receive wrath and anger because of their sin, they need to understand that the same goes for them. God's judgment for sin is wrath, whereas his judgment for *unfailing* righteousness (or *persistent* good work) is an eternal life of glory, honor, and peace.

(b) I am with those who believe that Paul is here speaking about the condition for salvation apart from Christ. He is establishing the point that, when it comes to salvation, Jews and Gentiles are in the same position. In other words, the ground at the foot of the cross is level *even for Jews and Gentiles*. Without the atoning death of Christ, we are *all* on our own; we stand before God on the basis of our own obedience and righteousness. If anyone was *unfailingly* obedient – that is, was not self-seeking, did not obey unrighteousness, did not carry out what is evil – he would indeed inherit eternal life on that basis. But, as Paul will show, the power of sin prevents anyone from being good enough to merit salvation. Douglas Moo comments (p. 142):

[T]he context strongly suggests that Paul is not directly describing Christians in vv. 7 and 10. Paul's purpose in 2:6-11 is to establish the principle that God will judge every person on the same basis – by works, not by religious heritage or national identity. Paul's focus is on the standard of judgment. . . .

Paul sets forth the biblical conditions for attaining eternal life apart from Christ. Understood this way, Paul is not speaking hypothetically. But once his doctrine of universal human powerlessness under sin has been developed (cf. 3:9 especially), it becomes clear that the promise can, in fact, never become operative because the condition for its fulfillment – consistent, earnest seeking after good – can never be realized.

(c) Merely being a Jew, merely having that religious heritage or national identity, provides no protection in terms of judgment. Jews, as much as Gentiles, must be in Christ or their works will condemn them.

(d) If I may digress briefly, of course faithful Jews before the coming of Christ received the benefits of his atoning death prospectively. Forgiveness was provided in the sacrificial system of the Mosaic covenant – e.g., Lev. 4:31, 6:1-7, 17:11 – but these repeated sacrifices were only a shadow of the true atoning sacrifice of Jesus, the sacrifice on which all divine forgiveness is based (Heb. 10:1-14). With Christ's death, resurrection, and ascension, the page in salvation history has turned. The old covenant, having served its purpose, has become obsolete (2 Cor. 3:4-18; Gal. 3:15 - 4:7; Eph. 2:11-22; Heb. 8:7-13), so its sacrifices are no longer recognized. The reality has displaced the shadow; the new covenant has replaced the old.

(3) Judgment and the law (2:12-16) - ¹²**For as many as sinned without the law will also perish without the law, and as many as sinned with the law will be judged through the law, ¹³for not the hearers of the law will be righteous before God, but the doers of the law will be pronounced righteous. ¹⁴For whenever Gentiles who do not have the law by nature do the things of the law, these not having the law are a law to themselves. ¹⁵They show the work of the law written in their hearts, as their consciences and commonly held thoughts also testify, accusing or even defending ¹⁶on the day when, according to my gospel, God will judge the secret things of people through Christ Jesus.**

(a) The fact the Jews possess the law of Moses, those commandments given by God through Moses to the people of Israel at Mount Sinai, does not distinguish them from Gentiles when it comes to salvation. In terms of salvation, it is not merely hearing or possessing the law that matters, it is obeying it.

(b) Further, even Gentiles who do not have God's law in written form, the Mosaic law, are not without any "law." Gentiles have some knowledge of God's moral demands – "law" in the generic sense. They have some implanted sense of right and wrong, so they are responsible for basic moral standards. They reveal the presence of this standard when they do such things as obey parents, refrain from murder and robbery, etc. Their individual consciences and the consensus of their community regarding the standard also testify to its existence. That standard, their "own law" (law to themselves), is the standard by which they will be accused or even defended on that Day, and it will be applied to even the secret things.

b. The limitations of the covenant (2:17-29)

(1) The law (2:17-24) - ¹⁷**But if you call yourself a Jew and rely upon the law and boast in God ¹⁸and know the will [of God] and ascertain the things that really matter, being instructed from the law, ¹⁹and are convinced you are a guide for the blind, a light for those in darkness, ²⁰a corrector of the foolish, a teacher of infants, having the embodiment of knowledge and truth in the law - ²¹you, then, who teach another, do you not teach yourself? You who preach not to steal, do you steal? ²²You who say not to commit adultery, do you commit adultery? You who detest idols, do you rob temples? ²³You who boast in the law, do you dishonor God through**

transgression of the law? ²⁴For the name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles on account of you, just as it has been written.

(a) Paul drives home to his imaginary Jewish opponent the foolishness of thinking that mere possession of the law will work for their salvation. If Jews do not practice the truth they preach from the law, they are hypocrites who dishonor God and cause him to be blasphemed among the Gentiles (as was written).

(b) Paul is not suggesting that every Jew commits these particular sins, or even that they are typical among Jews. Rather, these sins are examples of blatant hypocrisy which make the point that obedience to the law is crucial. If mere possession of the law was all that mattered, then even these acts of hypocrisy would not matter. Instead of excusing disobedience, having the law makes it even more offensive.

(2) Circumcision (2:25-29) - **²⁵For circumcision is of value if you practice the law, but if you are a transgressor of the law, your circumcision has become uncircumcision. ²⁶If, therefore, the uncircumcised one observes the righteous decrees of the law, will not his uncircumcision be considered as circumcision? ²⁷And so the one uncircumcised by nature who keeps the law will judge you, the transgressor of the law who has the letter and circumcision. ²⁸For it is not the Jew in outward appearance nor the one circumcised in outward appearance, in the flesh, ²⁹but the Jew in inward reality, the one circumcised of heart, by the Spirit not the letter, whose praise is not from people but from God.**

(a) Neither does circumcision exempt the Jew from judgment. Being marked as a person of God has value only if they live up to it, if they keep the law. If they break the law, their standing with God symbolized by circumcision has been forfeited. Conversely, if someone without the mark of circumcision should keep the law, he will be treated as a person of God, as one possessed of the reality symbolized by circumcision. In that case, he would judge the one who, though having the law and circumcision, transgressed the law.

(b) The "real Jew," the person whose praise is from God, is not the one who looks like a Jew but the one who has been circumcised of heart. The Gentile who obeyed the law would fall in that category, whereas the Jew who transgressed it would not. God is concerned with what you are, not what you look like (hence circumcision is not a criterion of salvation).

(c) A number of scholars, especially in the Reformed tradition, argue that baptism is the New Covenant equivalent of circumcision and conclude that baptism likewise is irrelevant to salvation. This, however, is incorrect. According to the N.T., baptism is not merely a physical rite; rather, it is the moment of *spiritual* circumcision (Col. 2:11-12). It is when the "old man" is removed and one is made new by the Spirit of God.

c. God's faithfulness and Jewish judgment (3:1-8)

(1) The advantage of the word (3:1-4) - **What then is the advantage of the Jew? Or what is the benefit of circumcision? ²Much, in every way. First, that they were entrusted with the sayings of God. ³For what if some were unfaithful? Will their unfaithfulness nullify the faithfulness of God? ⁴Absolutely not! Let God be truthful and every person a liar, just as it is written: "that you may be proved right in your words and will prevail when you contend."**

(a) Having argued, from the vantage point of Christ having come, that possession of the law and circumcision (that is, being Jewish) make no essential difference for the day of judgment, Paul poses an objection that a Jew would raise – "Well if being Jewish doesn't exempt one from judgment, then you are saying there is no advantage to being Jewish."

(b) Paul says "Not so." The advantage of being a Jew extends to a significant number of matters (see, 9:4-5), the first of which is that they have been entrusted with the sayings or oracles of God. That God's word, which includes his promises, came to the Jew is indicative of his special relationship with them. Deut. 4:8 says, "What other nation is so great as to have such righteous decrees and laws as this body of laws I am setting before you today?" and Ps. 147:19-20 says, "He has revealed his word to Jacob, his laws and decrees to Israel. He has done this for no other nation; they do not know his laws."

(c) To this, an objector might ask, "But what advantage is there to having the word of God to those who have been unfaithful to it?" Paul anticipates this by asking, "For what if some were unfaithful?" (Christian Jews were, of course, not unfaithful to that word.) He then makes clear (with a question and answer) that such faithlessness in no way nullifies the faithfulness or trustworthiness of God. Faithlessness will indeed be judged, but that is *according* to God's word, not *contrary* to it. He is equally faithful when he judges his people's sins and when he fulfills his promises of blessings (e.g., Neh. 9:32-33; Lam. 1:18). So unfaithfulness on their part in no way diminishes the word with which they were entrusted. God remains true to that word even if every human being should prove unreliable.

(2) No problem with God's faithfulness (righteousness) being shown in judgment (3:5-8) – **⁵But if our unrighteousness demonstrates God's righteousness, what shall we say? That God is unrighteous for inflicting wrath? (I speak as a human.) ⁶Absolutely not! For in that case, how will God judge the world? ⁷But if, by my lie, the truth of God abounded to his glory, why am I still judged as a sinner? ⁸Why not also say - as we are being blasphemed and as some claim we say - "Let us do evil so that good may come"? Their judgment is deserved.**

(a) Having said that God's "righteousness" (here meaning his faithfulness to himself and his word) is shown even in his judgment of unrighteousness, Paul raises the objection that this would somehow make it unjust or unrighteous for God to judge sin (because sin is ultimately good in that it provides a

platform for the exhibition of God's faithfulness). Just the mention of the idea of God being unrighteous causes Paul to say he is speaking in a strictly human fashion (i.e., through limited human perception).

(b) Paul summarily rejects the idea as absurd. If it were unjust for God to inflict wrath, then he could not judge the world because he is perfectly just. Since he is in fact going to judge the world (that was not an issue), that proves it is not unjust for him to do so. Case closed.

(c) Paul reiterates the objection in v. 7, and then says in v. 8, if you're going to say that then why not say – as some slanderously say about us – that we should sin so good may come of it. God's judgment on such people (those making these claims) is deserved.

3. The guilt of all humanity (3:9-20) – **⁹What then? Do we have an advantage? Not in every respect. For we already charged that all, both Jews and Greeks, are under sin, ¹⁰just as it is written, "There is not a righteous person, not even one; ¹¹there is no one who understands; there is no one who seeks God. ¹²All turned away; together they became worthless. There is no one who shows kindness; there is not as much as one. ¹³Their throats are opened graves; they deceived with their tongues; the venom of asps is under their lips. ¹⁴Their mouths are full of cursing and bitterness; ¹⁵their feet are swift to shed blood; ¹⁶ruin and misery are in their paths, ¹⁷and they did not know the way of peace. ¹⁸There is no fear of God before their eyes."**
¹⁹Now we know that whatever the law says, it says to those with the law, so that every mouth may be shut and all the world may be accountable to God, ²⁰because no flesh will be pronounced righteous in his sight from works of the law, for through the law [comes] the knowledge of sin.

a. The fact God has related specially to the Jews in history does not mean they have an advantage over Gentiles in terms of judgment and salvation. Apart from Christ, everybody is judged on their works, not on whether they are a Jew or a Gentile. And as Paul has already shown in 1:18 - 2:29, all people, whether Jews or Gentiles, are under the power of sin and are therefore guilty before God.

b. To substantiate his point, Paul cites a string of O.T. verses stating that human sinfulness is universal. Certainly some of these were, in their original contexts, hyperbolic statements made to highlight the pervasiveness of unrighteousness without or within Israel, not to deny there were *any* righteous people in Israel. (There were some who were righteous, but they were the faithful, those who were righteous by faith.) Paul is saying these verses are true at a literal level, in terms of humans as they appear before the Lord apart from his grace. Even Abraham and David, in themselves, were "unrighteous" in the sense of being guilty of sin.

c. Whatever the O.T. says ("law" in this wider sense), it says to those to whom the O.T. has been entrusted (Jews). The reason Scripture addresses the Jews is so that *every person* may be silenced, meaning having no defense before God. The idea is that

if Jews, God's chosen people, have no defense before God, then it follows that Gentiles, who have no claim on God's favor, are also guilty.

d. The fact of the matter is that no one will be pronounced righteous in God's sight by doing what the law demands. *If* one obeyed the law flawlessly, one indeed would be justified by doing the law (2:13), but no one does so because of the power of sin (3:9, 10-18). Rather than justification, through the law comes the knowledge of sin. The law provides an understanding of sin's power, as we fail to obey God's commands and incur guilt and condemnation.

B. Justification by Faith (3:21 - 4:25)

1. Justification and the righteousness of God (3:21-26) - ²¹**But now, the righteousness of God has been displayed apart from the law, though being attested by the law and the prophets,** ²²**that is, the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. For there is not a distinction,** ²³**for all sinned and come short of the glory of God,** ²⁴**being pronounced righteous as a gift by his grace through the redemption [accomplished] in Christ Jesus,** ²⁵**whom God set forth to be, by means of his blood, a wrath-averting sacrifice [appropriated] through faith. He did this as a demonstration of his righteousness, on account of the passing over of the previously committed sins** ²⁶**in the forbearance of God, as a demonstration of his righteousness in the present time, so that he might be righteous even in pronouncing righteous the one having faith in Jesus.**

a. Paul has now set the stage (1:18 - 3:20) to make his main point: the availability of God's righteousness to all who respond in faith. This "good news," announced in 1:17, is now elaborated. Martin Luther called this passage, "the chief point, and the very center of the Epistle, and of the whole Bible."

b. Though the law is impotent to save because the power of Sin has ravaged mankind, God has now effected or worked salvation apart from the law through faith in Jesus Christ. This saving activity, while outside the confines of the old covenant, is attested by the law and the prophets, meaning that the O.T. bears witness to the gospel of Christ.

c. This saving work of God is through faith in Jesus Christ – to *all* who believe. Faith is the means by which God's justifying work becomes applicable to individuals.

d. This righteousness is available to and needed by all because there is no distinction between people (esp. Jew and Gentile) that has any relevance to salvation. As Moo states, "Jews may have the law and circumcision; Americans may lay claim to a great religious heritage; 'good' people may point to their works of charity; but all this makes no essential difference to one's standing before the righteous and holy God." The fact of the matter is that all have sinned and therefore fall short of the glory of God, meaning fail to exhibit the godlikeness for which we were created.

e. So any who are pronounced righteous, who are declared acquitted of all charges, are pronounced so as a gift given by God's grace through the redemption (liberation through payment of a price) accomplished in Jesus (at the cross or when sinners become Christians). Our innocence before God is totally unmerited. It is something we simply are incapable of buying.

f. God put Jesus forth, by means of his blood (death), to be a wrath-averting sacrifice, the blessing of which is appropriated by faith. God's wrath is the inevitable and necessary reaction of absolute holiness to sin. God initiated this sacrifice of his Son, this outpouring of wrath, so that he might forgive consistently with his holiness. He is not being persuaded to forgive, as though he is reluctant to do so; rather, he is providing the way to forgive consistently with his nature.

g. God did this, put Jesus forth as a wrath-averting sacrifice, as a demonstration of his "righteousness," here meaning his righteous character or integrity. That demonstration was necessary because he had "passed over" sins committed before the coming of Christ ("in the time of his forbearance"). God "passed over" the sins of the faithful in the sense he forgave them without the demands of his holy justice having (yet) been adequately satisfied. You see, for God to forgive sin without satisfying the demands of his holy justice would make him less than perfectly holy and just. So there was an appearance of a "justice debt" in God's having forgiven sins under the old covenant. With Christ's public crucifixion, that appearance vanished.

h. God's having presented Jesus as a wrath-averting sacrifice not only demonstrates his righteous character (holiness) with regard to his having passed over former sins, but it also demonstrates it with regard to his acquitting sinners in the present because Christ provides full satisfaction of the demands of God's holy justice.

2. By faith apart from works of law (3:27 - 4:25)

a. Initial statement (3:27-31) - ²⁷**Where then is boasting? It was excluded. Through what law? That of works? No, but through the law of faith. ²⁸For we hold that a man is pronounced righteous by faith apart from works of the law. ²⁹Or is God [the God] of the Jews only? Is he not also [the God] of Gentiles? Yes, of Gentiles also, ³⁰since there is one God who will pronounce righteous the circumcision from faith and the uncircumcision through the faith. ³¹Do we, then, nullify the law through the faith? Absolutely not! Rather, we uphold the law.**

(1) Given that salvation is a gift, a work of God that is appropriated by faith, there is no basis for boasting as though salvation was achieved by one's performance or works. Paul is thinking here particularly of Jews and the tendency of some of them to think that their works of law constituted some kind of claim on God. Such boasting is excluded, not by the "law" of works, but by the "law" of faith, that is, by the "rule" that justification is by faith apart from works of the law. (Paul employs the term "law" as a play on the law of Moses.)

(2) If justification is by works of the Mosaic law, then only Jews can be justified. This would imply that God is the God only of Jews. The fact, however, is that, since there is only one God, he is God of both Jews and Gentiles (or else the Gentiles would be left with no god). As the God of both Jews and Gentiles, he (in Christ) justifies in a way that accepts (and transcends) the national and cultural identities of each – that is, by faith. In other words, in the gospel the universality of God's rule is clearly manifested because in it salvation is available to Gentiles as Gentiles. The dividing wall of the law has been removed (Eph. 2:11 - 3:6). Salvation by faith apart from the Mosaic law flows naturally from the fact of monotheism.

(3) In response to Paul's insistence that justification is by faith, to the exclusion of works of the law, some apparently accused Paul of nullifying the law, denying it any usefulness. Paul flatly denies the charge. Rather than nullify the law, Christians "uphold the law," meaning they uphold its transcendent moral requirements. Let me develop this a bit.

(a) The Abrahamic covenant was the fundamental covenant governing the relationship of God with his people. The blessings promised by God to Abraham and his seed were predicated on their trusting God, on their accepting him for who he is (Gen. 12:1-9, 13:14-17, 15:1-21, 18:17-19, 22:15-18, 24:7; Rom. 4:16-17; Gal. 3:6-9).

(b) The Mosaic covenant was entered into hundreds of years later by God and the people of Israel at Sinai (Ex. 20:1 - 24:8). It was an interim, subsidiary covenant given until God's promise to Abraham began to be fulfilled in Christ. It specified the way in which the faith of God's people was to be expressed until Christ came. Its temporary nature is evident in Gal. 3:15 - 4:7 and 2 Cor. 3:4-18; see also, Col. 2:16-17; Heb. 7:11-12.

(c) The Mosaic covenant included the grandest and most complete expression to that time of God's moral requirements, but moral requirements did not begin at Sinai. Mankind was under moral requirements from creation, a fact to which Noah's flood bears solemn witness. Genesis 6:5 states (ESV): The LORD saw that the *wickedness* of man was great in the earth, and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only *evil* continually. Genesis 6:11-13 state (ESV): ¹¹ Now the earth was corrupt in God's sight, and the earth was filled with *violence*. ¹² And God saw the earth, and behold, it was corrupt, for all flesh had corrupted their way on the earth. ¹³ And God said to Noah, "I have determined to make an end of all flesh, for the earth is filled with violence through them. Behold, I will destroy them with the earth."

(d) Some of the commands in the Mosaic covenant were peculiarly covenantal, meaning they were not universal moral desires of God. They erected civil and ceremonial or ritualistic ("amoral") distinctions between Jews and Gentiles, probably (at least in part) to keep the people of God untainted by pagan practices in order to

help them serve as a witness to their Gentile neighbors of the blessed life that exists under God.

(e) A new covenant was instituted between God and mankind through the sacrifice of Christ, the effect of which was to render the old covenant, the Mosaic covenant, obsolete or no longer operative (2 Cor. 3:4-18; Gal. 3:15 – 4:7, 4:21-31; Heb. 7:11-22, 8:6-13). And with the fulfillment in Christ of the planned obsolescence of the Mosaic covenant, the *set of commands* that were part of that covenant, the Mosaic law, ceased to be binding.

(f) That the Mosaic law ceased to be binding is clear from texts like Rom. 10:1-4, Gal. 3:23-25, and Heb. 7:11-14 but also from the fact specific regulations that were part of the Mosaic law — such as Sabbath regulations (Col. 2:16-17; Rom. 14:5-6), food laws (Rom. 14:1 – 15:13; 1 Cor. 10:23 – 11:1), and circumcision (1 Cor. 7:19; Gal. 2:3-5, 5:2-6, 11-12, 6:12-13; Phil. 3:2) — are said to be no longer binding. That is why Paul, a Jew, could declare that he was not under the Mosaic law (1 Cor. 9:20).

(g) Though the *set of commands* that constitute the Mosaic law ceased to be binding, many of the individual commands included in that law have an ongoing or renewed applicability, and indeed find their full expression, in the new covenant. For example, Paul in Eph. 6:2 commands children to "honor your father and mother," quoting from the Ten Commandments in Ex. 20:12 and Deut. 5:16. The Ten Commandments also are reflected in N.T. commands and prohibitions against murder, adultery, stealing, lying, and coveting. Indeed, there are literally hundreds of commands in the N.T. – dos and don'ts – issued by Spirit-inspired writers.

(h) That some commands included within the Mosaic law have ongoing validity while others do not is evident from 1 Cor. 7:19, where Paul says that circumcision is nothing but keeping God's commandments is everything. You say, "Wait a minute – circumcision is a commandment of God," to which Paul would say "I don't mean those kinds of commandments."

(i) The fundamental ethical requirement for the Christian is love (Mat. 7:12, 22:37-40; Rom. 13:8-10; Gal. 5:14), but some specific conduct is loving and other conduct is not. Love is the center, but there are definite requirements on how it expresses itself. As Paul indicates in Rom. 13:9, the command to love your neighbor as yourself encompasses the commands of the law not to commit adultery, not to murder, not to steal, and not to covet (and other commands he does not specify). Thus, the Christian, though not being under the Mosaic law, the set of commands that are part of Mosaic covenant, upholds the transcendent moral requirements that are included in that law (e.g., Rom. 13:8-10; 1 Cor. 10:14; Eph. 6:2).

b. Elaboration with respect to Abraham (4:1-25)

(1) Faith and works (4:1-8) - **What then shall we say Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh, has discovered? ² For if Abraham was**

pronounced righteous from works, he has a reason to boast, but [it is] not [so] before God. ³ For what does the scripture say? "And Abraham believed in God, and it was credited to him as righteousness." ⁴ Now to the one who works, the wages are not credited according to grace but according to debt. ⁵ But to the one who does not work, but believes in the one who pronounces the ungodly righteous, his faith is credited as righteousness, ⁶ just as also David declares the blessing of the person to whom God credits righteousness apart from works: ⁷ "Blessed are they whose acts of lawlessness were forgiven and whose sins were covered. ⁸ Blessed is the man whose sin the Lord in no way credits."

(a) Having made the claim that salvation is by grace through faith for both Jew and Gentile and that boasting before God is therefore excluded, Paul addresses whether Abraham contradicts this claim.

[1] He no doubt chose Abraham because Abraham was revered by the Jews as their "father" and was held up particularly as a model of obedience to God. Moo notes that in Judaism, Abraham's "righteousness and mediation of the promise were linked to his obedience, it even being argued that he had obeyed the law perfectly before it had been given."

[2] Also, Abraham played a decisive role in the formation of the people of Israel and in the transmission of the promise, so he must be integrated theologically into Paul's teaching if that teaching was to have any claim of continuity with the O.T.

(b) The fact of the matter is that Abraham does not have reason to boast before God because, as Scripture says, "Abraham believed God, and it was *credited* [or reckoned] to him as righteousness." This means that, by faith, Abraham had credited to him a righteousness that did not inherently belong to him. His response to God's promise resulted in God reckoning or imputing to him a "status" of righteousness.

(c) If righteousness/salvation is by works, then God is obligated to give it, just as an employer is obligated to give to his employee the wages he has earned. That, however, would contradict Paul's nonnegotiable theological axiom that God acts toward his creatures graciously – without compulsion or necessity. God is indebted to no one. On the other hand, this axiom is honored in the one whose righteousness is a gift given by God on the basis of faith. So obviously the righteousness of Abraham was not earned (not even by his faith – his believing was not a meritorious work).

(d) If *Abraham's* works did not earn his righteousness, then no works will. As John Chrysostom, Bishop of Constantinople from A.D. 398-407, remarked:

For a person who had no works, to be justified by faith was nothing unlikely.
But for a person richly adorned with good deeds, not to be made just from

these, but from faith, this is the thing to cause wonder, and to set the power of faith in a strong light.

(e) Harmony with James

[1] Jas. 2:21 says Abraham was justified by works when he offered his son Isaac on the altar. James means "justified" in the sense he maintained the righteous status previously bestowed on him. One maintains one's righteous status "by works" only in the secondary or derivative sense that biblical faith necessarily and inevitably expresses itself in works. Without works one ceases to be right with God, not because works earn one's righteousness but because the absence of them means there is no longer a living, saving faith. James stresses the works component of faith because he is addressing the error that one can be saved through a nonworking faith, through mere intellectual assent.

[2] Jas. 2:24 says a man is justified by works and not by faith alone. He means not by "intellectual assent" alone. Saving faith is the "yes" of the total person, intellect *and* will.

(f) Paul refers to God in 4:5 as "the one who justifies the ungodly." This is bold indeed, in light of O.T. passages condemning human judges who "justify" the guilty (Isa. 5:23; Prov. 17:15) and in light of Ex. 23:7 where God declares that he will not "justify the wicked." The difference is that "justify" in Rom. 4:5 refers not merely to a judicial decision in which the guilty go free, something that mocks justice and condones evil, but to a *redemption* of the guilty, to their liberation through the great price of Christ's atoning sacrifice.

(g) David also confirms the truth of righteousness apart from works when in Ps. 32:1-2a he declares blessed those whose sins were forgiven, whose sin was not reckoned against them. Righteousness is credited not by counting one's works but by *not* counting one's sin. It's not something you have done but the *forgiveness* of something you have done.

(2) Faith and circumcision (4:9-12) – ⁹ **Is this blessing, then, upon the circumcised [only] or also upon the uncircumcised? For we say: "Faith was credited to Abraham as righteousness."** ¹⁰ **How then was it credited? While being in circumcision or in uncircumcision? It was not in circumcision but in uncircumcision.** ¹¹ **And he received the sign of circumcision as a seal of the righteousness of faith which existed in uncircumcision, so that he might be the father of all who believe while in uncircumcision (so that righteousness may also be credited to them)** ¹² **and the father of the circumcision, to the ones not of circumcision only but who also walk in the footsteps of the faith our father Abraham had in uncircumcision.**

(a) Abraham also shows that the blessing of imputed righteousness, the forgiveness of sins, is for the uncircumcised as well as the circumcised. After all, Abraham's faith was credited to him as righteousness before he was circumcised.

Circumcision was simply an after-the-fact confirmation of what was already present by faith. It did nothing to effect the transaction.

(b) He received circumcision as a sign of his preexisting righteousness by faith so that he might serve as the father of all who believe, both Jew and Gentile. Because he believed while uncircumcised, he is the father of Gentile believers. Because he believed and was *also* circumcised, he is qualified to be the father of all Jewish believers, that is, those who follow in Abraham's faith by believing God's promise in Christ. It is through faith, and not through incorporation into the nation of Israel, that one becomes Abraham's spiritual "child."

(3) Faith, promise, and the law (4:13-22) – ¹³ **For the promise to Abraham or to his seed, that he would be heir of the world, was not through law but through the righteousness of faith.** ¹⁴ **For if those of the law are heirs, faith has been emptied and the promise has been nullified.** ¹⁵ **For the law produces wrath. (And where there is not law, neither is there transgression.)** ¹⁶ **For this reason, namely that it may be according to grace, it is from faith, so that the promise may be certain to all the seed, not only to the one of the law but also to the one of the faith of Abraham, who is the father of us all** ¹⁷ (just as it is written, "I have made you the father of many nations") in the sight of God, in whom he believed, who gives life to the dead and calls the things not existing as existing. ¹⁸ He believed against hope on the basis of hope, so that he became the father of many nations, according to what had been said, "So shall your seed be." ¹⁹ And without weakening in faith, he considered his own body, which had already "died" (being about a hundred years old), and the deadness of Sarah's womb. ²⁰ Yet he did not waver in unbelief with regard to the promise of God but was strengthened in faith, giving glory to God ²¹ and being fully persuaded that he is able to do what he has promised. ²² Therefore, "it was credited to him as righteousness."

(a) The reason Paul, contrary to the standard Jewish view, made no mention of the law in tracing the spiritual descendants of Abraham is that the promise to Abraham (and/or his seed), which Paul summarizes as being (with his lineage) heir of the world, was realized not through the Mosaic law but through the righteousness of faith.

[1] The land promise given to Abraham came to be seen in Judaism as symbolizing a broader promise of ultimately inheriting the world (Kruse, 212-213). Paul endorses that view but sees the fulfillment of the promise in light of Christ and all that is promised in him. The saints will receive the world as their inheritance in the sense their destiny is life in a redeemed creation, a matter Paul will address in chapter 8.

[2] Kruse (p. 213, n. 122) quotes the following from Severian of Gabala, a bishop in Syria at the end of the fourth century: "Paul says that the righteous will inherit the world because the ungodly will be thrown out and handed over to punishment on the day of judgment, but the righteous will possess the

universe which remains, and will have been renewed, and the good things of heaven and earth will be theirs."

(b) For if the inheritance was to be realized through the Mosaic law, then one would believe in vain and the promise would never be fulfilled because no sinful human being can adequately obey the law (see, e.g., Gal. 2:16). Rather than securing the inheritance, the law produces even more wrath. It turns "sin" into the more serious offense of "transgression," and though Paul does not mention it here, it actually stimulated and provoked disobedience in the unregenerate heart.

(c) The inheritance is realized through the righteousness of faith rather than through the law so that it may be a given as matter of grace rather than as an obligation (see Gal. 3:18). It being given as a matter of grace not only glorifies God, who is obligated to no man, but also ensures that the promise will come to fruition and that it will do so for *every* descendant of Abraham, for both Jews and Gentiles of faith (the one of the law = Jewish believers; the one of [only] the faith of Abraham = Gentile believers). Abraham is the father of the faithful in all nations, just as it is written, "I have made you the father of many nations."

(d) The God in whom Abraham believed is described as he "who gives life to the dead and calls things not existing as existing." God's giving of life to the dead is pertinent to Abraham's case in that his body "had already died" and Sarah's womb was dead (v. 19). God's calling things not existing as existing is pertinent to Abraham's case in that God declared him the father of many nations before it was so (in time).

(e) Abraham believed "against hope, in an attitude of hope." He believed contrary to human hope or expectation (e.g., "they were rescued against all hope") and with hope or expectation in God. From a human perspective, Abraham had every reason to give up the attempt to produce a child through Sarah. But despite the way things looked, he believed in God and thus fully expected that his promise would be fulfilled. This faith resulted in the fulfillment of the promise – he has indeed become the father of many nations, the father of the faithful throughout the world.

(f) Abraham did not waver in unbelief with regard to the promise. Rather, his faith gained strength from its victory over the hindrance created by the conflict between God's promise and the physical evidence. In this strengthening of his faith, Abraham gave glory to God. The more one believes despite the apparent impossibility, the more God is exalted as the one who is trusted to do the seemingly impossible.

[1] Paul is referring to Genesis 17:15ff. where Abraham is told by God that Sarah will bear him a son. I say that because he says Abraham was "about a hundred years old," which is how old he was in Genesis 17, and he mentions that Abraham considered the condition of his and Sarah's bodies, which is just what he did in Gen. 17:17. So whatever you make of Abraham laughing at the promise and asking

whether a son will be born to him and Sarah, Paul says it was not a case of: (waver-
ing/doubting/being divided) (because of/in) (unbelief/disbelief).

[2] Because Paul is referring to Gen. 17:15ff., where God gives the more specific promise that *Sarah* would bear Abraham a child despite the fact they both were infertile, the question of whether Abraham's fathering of Ishmael in Genesis 16 reflects a lack of trust in the promise God gave in Gen. 15:4-5 is outside the scope of his remarks. But Abraham's fathering of Ishmael need not imply that he was doubting God's promise to give him a physical descendant through whom would come a multitude of offspring. The promise in Gen. 15:4-5 did not specify that this descendant would come from Sarah, and Abraham may have come to believe mistakenly that fulfillment would come through one other than Sarah. Perhaps impatience on Abraham's part and pressure from Sarah's distress over being childless (Gen. 16:2) contributed to his viewing the promise that way.

[3] Most commentators understand Gen. 17:17 to be an example of doubt on Abraham's part regarding the promise. If so, then Paul in Rom. 4:19-20 means that, despite the doubt he experienced, Abraham never lapsed into unbelief or abandoned his trust in the promise.

[4] But I am not convinced Abraham is doubting God's promise in Gen. 17:17. It could be he is laughing at the picture of him and Sarah as parents. In other words, he may not be laughing because he doubts God can do such a thing but laughing at the thought of God actually doing it. In that light, the questions are essentially questions of awe, "Will God overcome even the impossibility of our age to provide this blessing? Wow!" Either way, with or without an initial passing doubt, Abraham faces squarely the seeming impossibility of the promise and believes that God will do it anyway. (Sarah's laughter, on the other hand, is rebuked because it was laughter of doubt [Gen. 18:10-15].)

[5] Abraham's request regarding Ishmael in Gen. 17:18 need not be a reflection of doubt. God's promise is both amazing and humbling, so humbling in fact that Abraham says to God (17:18) that it would be enough if Ishmael could live under his blessing. In 17:19 God says, in essence, "No, your humble willingness to be satisfied with Ishmael being the child of promise will not alter my intention to bless you more greatly than that." He then says in Gen. 17:20-21 that he will also bless Ishmael, in keeping with Abraham's obvious love and concern for Ishmael, and repeats that Isaac will be the child of promise.

(g) Because he maintained his faith in God's promise, it was credited to him as righteousness.

(4) Faith of Abraham and the Christian (4:23-25) – ²³ **But "it was credited to him" was not written for his sake alone ²⁴ but also for our sakes, to whom it is going to be credited, those who believe on the one who raised Jesus our**

Lord from the dead. ²⁵ He was handed over because of our trespasses and was raised for the sake of the pronouncing of us righteous.

(a) The statement in Scripture that it was "credited to [Abraham] as righteousness" was also written for Christians, for those who, years after Abraham, would trust in God's promise in the gospel (which fulfills God's promise to bless the world through Abraham!). As Abraham believed in the God who gives life to the dead and calls the things not existing as existing, so Christians believe that God raised Christ from the dead and will raise us also and believe that he has already called as existing the eternal blessing which he has in store for us. We are *now* righteous, but from the standpoint of Abraham, our "crediting" was in the future.

(b) The God in whom we believe is the one who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead. Jesus was handed over (by God – 3:25) to be crucified because of our sin and was raised for the sake of our justification.

[1] Paul puts it this way for rhetorical balance; he does not intend to separate our justification from Christ's death. Our justification was effected by both his death and his resurrection.

[2] His death was the atoning sacrifice for our sins. His resurrection may be linked to our justification in that it confirms that the atoning sacrifice has been accepted, and thus provides a sure basis for the faith through which justification is received. It may be, however, that Christ's resurrection allowed him to complete the "sacrificial rite" by entering into the presence of God on our behalf. According to the O.T., the High Priest not only offered the sacrifice but also sprinkled the blood on the altar in the Most Holy Place (Leviticus 16). Jesus, our Great High Priest, not only offered himself as a sacrifice by shedding his blood on the cross; he also entered heaven itself "once for all by his own blood" and appeared for us in God's presence (Heb. 9:12, 24; see, Heb. 6:19-20; 10:19-22).

3. Grant Osborne writes (*Romans*, IVP, p. 123-124):

So Paul has now summed up his points. In 3:21 – 4:25 his doctrine of salvation by faith alone, apart from works, is complete. At the heart of his doctrine is the fact that Christ's death was a "sacrifice of atonement" (propitiation, 3:25) that paid the price for our sins ("redemption") and resulted in God's legal decision to pronounce us "right" before him (justification, 3:21-26). The key is faith rather than observing the law, and this means that God is the God of the Gentiles as well as the Jews (3:27-31). To prove this, Paul turns to Abraham, the father of the nation and the one who precedes Moses (4:1-25), showing that faith has precedence over the law as the means by which one participates in salvation.