

## B. The Remedy for Sin (3:21-4:25)

From the very first verse Paul made evident to his Roman readers the gospel emphasis of his epistle. As with his self-introduction, Paul's consideration of and greeting to the saints at Rome was saturated in the gospel of Jesus Christ (1:1-7). So also the gospel was the focal point and motivation in his intense longing to visit and minister to the Romans (1:8-15). The reason was that Paul viewed every aspect of his own life, faith, calling, and ministry as being grounded in and directed toward the gospel. Much more, he did not simply *affirm* the gospel; he was *unashamed* of it (1:16-17). That is, he was ready and eager to uphold without apology or compromise the truth of *righteousness by faith alone in Christ alone*, despite the fact that he knew full well this doctrine deeply offended the pagan religionists, Jewish legalists, and humanistic moralists of his day, even as it continues to do in every generation.

The reason for Paul's unapologetic conviction was his understanding that the gospel is the sole remedy for man's plight, whatever may be his confidence of personal, religious, or societal righteousness. All people - the upright, Mosaic Jew as well as licentious, pagan Gentile - stand condemned in their self-idolatry. This was a crucial truth for Paul to establish, for it is precisely the self-confidence and self-deference that attend man's depravity that are the barrier to his embrace of the gospel. It can never be overemphasized that man's fallen condition does not lead him to despise or forsake righteousness; it compels him to despise and forsake *God's* righteousness as his entire refuge and hope. The pride of self-idolatry extols righteousness and exults in its pursuit; it abhors the comprehensive humiliation of self that characterizes a life of faith. Thus it was necessary for Paul - in order to substantiate his exclusive claim and personal confidence in the gospel - to demonstrate in an unequivocal way the common lot and universal need of all mankind. To the extent that he failed to *universalize* the human condition and the need for an entirely divine remedy he would fail to establish the gospel as "*the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes.*"

### 1. Justification and the Righteousness of God (3:21-26)

Having accomplished his goal of demonstrating that the gospel is both applicable and necessary for every human being, Paul returned to the specific matter he previously introduced in 1:16-17, namely the content, function, and significance of the gospel. This context may be subdivided into four parts, each building upon those that precede it.

- The first addresses the *relationship* between the righteousness of God in the gospel and the Old Testament, particularly the Law of Moses (3:21). This single verse is foundational, for it introduces the issue of law vs. gospel and establishes the framework for Paul's further argumentation in 3:27-7:25.
- The second subdivision reiterates the sole, appointed *means* for men's appropriation of God's justifying righteousness apart from the Law, namely *faith in Jesus Christ* (3:22-23).

- In the third context Paul disclosed the *mechanism* by which faith appropriates God's righteousness (3:24-25a). Because faith in Christ does not satisfy God's just demands against human unrighteousness, how can a person be justified by faith? The answer lies in the vicarious atoning work of Jesus Christ.
- Finally, Paul explained the *significance* of God's way of salvation as revealed in the gospel: it is entirely *Theocentric* and *Christocentric* (3:25b-26). That is, it shows God's relationship with men to be **unilateral**. God alone has satisfied His demands upon men - both with respect to their guilt and their obligation of personal righteousness - in the Man who is God. For this reason there can be no boasting among men; God is absolutely just, but also the sole justifier of sinners.

By way of introduction it is important to recall that Paul's perspective on all theological and biblical matters was *redemptive-historical*. That is, he viewed the movement of human history - and so also the biblical record of that history - through the lens of God's eternal redemptive purpose in Christ. For this reason he regarded history as being partitioned into *two ages*, with the redemptive work of Christ as the point of demarcation. In God's sovereign providence according to His eternal will, everything prior to Christ's cross presupposed, anticipated, promised, and prepared for it, and everything subsequent to it has reference to it. This Christocentric view of history was foundational to Paul's thinking and lies at the heart of his argumentation throughout the Roman epistle, even as it does all of his letters.

Human history is therefore *salvation history*. And because scripture acts to record history and provide God's interpretation of it, the Bible must be regarded preeminently as the *revelation of redemption*; the redemption that has its focal point in the cross of Christ. Thus it is not merely true, but indeed *necessary* and *inescapable* that all the Law, Prophets, and Writings should have spoken of Jesus just as He Himself insisted.

Given this overarching Christological perspective, it is evident that Paul's transition in 3:21 is not temporal or logical as much as it is redemptive-historical. In other words, rather than indicating chronological movement or a logical transition in his argument, his use of the adverb *now* is concerned with the world's transition from the age of *promise* and *pedagogy* under the Law into the "new age" of *fulfillment* in Christ (ref. 2 Corinthians 3:1-18; Galatians 3:1-4:5; Ephesians 2:11-3:11; Colossians 2:16-17; cf. also Hebrews 11:32-40, 12:18-24; 1 Peter 1:10-12; etc.). This understanding is crucial to grasping Paul's argument, most especially how it is that the righteousness of God is manifested *apart* from the Law while at the same time being witnessed to *by* the Law.

In considering 3:21-26, then, the matter of first importance is Paul's conspicuous emphasis upon the *righteousness of God* as constituting the heart of the gospel. This emphasis is clearly evident from his introduction of the gospel in chapter one, and is continued and developed in the present six verses:

- The context both begins and ends with a double reference to God's righteousness (cf. 3:21-22 and 3:25-26).

- Sandwiched between these references is Paul's explanation of how the righteousness of God becomes the property of sinful men, with the result that they are rendered fully righteous before Him.

Because the phrase, *righteousness of God*, is the focal point of this context, it must not be misunderstood. The flow of Paul's thought indicates that the point of reference for its interpretation is 1:16-17. As he there had in mind God's justifying action on behalf of men and how it reflects upon His own righteous character, so it is also the case with the present context. Paul's concern was first of all with righteousness as a divine *gift* by which God justifies men. As such, he was speaking of God's righteousness from the vantage point of its being the marrow of the *gospel*: the fact that the *righteousness of God* comes to men through faith (3:21, 22) demonstrates *God's righteousness* - His integrity in upholding His justice and in keeping His word of promised grace - thereby showing Him to be "*just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus*" (3:25, 26).

- a. Beginning, then, with the first subdivision, Paul introduced this six-verse context with a profound statement regarding the relationship between the righteousness of God in the gospel and the Law of Moses:

*"But now apart from the Law the righteousness of God has been manifested, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets"* (3:21).

In returning to the subject of the gospel Paul reiterated first of all that it bears an important relation to the Old Testament scriptures, and more specifically the Mosaic Law. Consistent with his redemptive-historical perspective, Paul presented that relationship as being one of *discontinuity* as well as *continuity*. Specifically, though the Law *witnessed* to the righteousness of God that is in the gospel (continuity), this righteousness has now been introduced and manifested *apart* from the Law (discontinuity).

Paul began his Roman epistle by noting that the gospel "*was promised beforehand through the prophets in the holy Scriptures*" (1:1-2), and here he expanded that same declaration: as much as the prophets bore witness to the gospel, so also did the Law (3:21b; cf. Matthew 11:13-15). That the Law was intended to serve a prophetic role is frequently overlooked, but this fact yields two crucial insights into the relationship between the Law of Moses and the gospel.

- 1) The first is that the Law of Moses does not constitute the final word of revelation or divine interaction with men. While most, if not all, would agree with this assertion *in principle*, many deny it in their doctrinal formulation and practice. This is especially the case with historical Covenant Theology and its doctrine of the one *Covenant of Grace*. For by reducing all of the biblical covenants to so many expressions of one so-called "covenant of grace," Covenant Theology effectively eliminates the very real and crucial distinctions between them, especially those between the Old and New Covenants.

Because numerous nuances of understanding exist within Covenant Theology, oversimplification is unfair and is to be avoided. Nevertheless, it remains that, as a formal theological system, Covenant Theology fails to recognize the *fully* promissory and transitory nature of the Law of Moses. The primary way it does so is by partitioning the Law into three discrete categories: *moral*, *civil*, and *ceremonial*. This scheme was introduced by Thomas Aquinas in the Middle Ages and later picked up by John Calvin, through whom it became a dogma within Reformed Theology.

By subdividing the Mosaic Law in this way Reformed theologians have been able to uphold the undeniable biblical principle of *promise-fulfillment* while yet preserving an overarching continuity in the upward movement of redemptive history. This continuity has its focal point in the principle of *law*. Specifically, the so-called civil and ceremonial aspects of the Law are said to have been fulfilled in Christ's person and work, so that they no longer continue in the present, "new covenant" administration of the Covenant of Grace. Thus the members of Christ's New Testament Church are not bound by dietary restrictions, the obligation of blood sacrifices, the various civil ordinances peculiar to theocratic Israel, etc.

The moral law, however, was fulfilled by Christ only in the sense that He *interpreted* and *clarified* it for the Christian Church of the present age. Thus the moral law - regarded confessionally as "summarily comprehended in the Ten Commandments" - continues in essentially the same form *and with the same force of personal obligation and conformity* as it imposed under the Law of Moses. In this way the New Testament instruction regarding the Law (Old Covenant) is said to be upheld: all of the Law has indeed been "fulfilled"; the passages teaching the "passing away" of the Law can be referred to civil and ceremonial components; and, most importantly, the continuity of the Scripture and redemptive history can be maintained through the vehicle of the unchanging "moral law" and the perpetual obligation it imposes upon all men.

*"Under the old covenant, the moral law was revealed at Mount Sinai in a composite and complex form [though it is said to have existed in its essence from the point of creation]. The Ten Commandments were supplemented by the ceremonial laws, civil laws, and a penal code. This complex form, together with the sanctions, often made the law a burden. Jesus carried that burden and is the perfection of righteousness."*

*"Under the new covenant, the law can never again be read, interpreted, or applied apart from Jesus Christ. He modeled the perfection of the law and **simplified** it. The ceremonial laws, civil laws, and the penal code have been abrogated, and the moral law has received further **clarification** in the person and teaching of Jesus Christ."* (Willem VanGemeren, Five Views on Law and Gospel)

VanGemeran, who is a Reformed theologian in the Westminster tradition, is clear in his insistence that Jesus fulfilled the “moral law” by clarifying it for men, not by *fully satisfying* its demands on behalf of men. This is a crucial distinction that profoundly affects how the Christian views himself in relation to the principle of law. In all fairness, VanGemeran would argue along with the Westminster Standards that men are not justified by keeping the moral law, but through faith in Christ who perfectly obeyed it. Nevertheless, he upholds the Reformed position (usually associated first with Calvin) that personal conformity to the moral law *as law* is required of every believer and is vitally necessary to his sanctification.

*“The law [moral law] is an instrument of the Holy Spirit by which he teaches believers to understand and to do God’s will. Sometimes he may use it as a ‘rigorous enforcement officer’ to bring us into conformity with the will of God. **This use is the most important use of the law.**”*

(Five Views, emphasis added)

In other words, VanGemeran insists that the Christian’s sanctification depends absolutely upon his instruction in and compliance with the moral law. This is so much the case that the Holy Spirit, as the architect of sanctification, uses the law as His “rigorous enforcement officer” in order to compel Christ’s people - even if by intimidation - to live as they ought. Not surprisingly, this perspective on the Law of Moses leads VanGemeran and others within the Reformed tradition to find Paul’s teaching regarding the Law confusing and even contradictory. In the same essay he observes:

*“I wholeheartedly agree with Ladd’s frustration with Paul’s view of the law: ‘Paul’s thought about the Law is difficult to understand because he seems to make numerous contradictory statements.’”*

That men who hold such a view of the Law of Moses would be confused by Paul is perfectly understandable. For Paul knew nothing of a three-fold division of the Law, much less of an ever-present “moral law” that is the essential basis of the believer’s growth in sanctification (Romans 6:1-7:6; 2 Corinthians 3:1-18; Galatians 3:1-29, 5:1-26; also Ephesians 1:15-23, 3:14-19; Colossians 2:11ff).

This is not to say that Paul believed that the Christian has no responsibility toward practical holiness; it is impossible to read his epistles and reach such a conclusion. In fact, it is precisely Paul’s emphasis upon obedience that provokes the charge that he was self-contradictory: though he constantly insisted upon the believer’s *freedom from law*, he also declared: “*what matters is the keeping the commandments of God*” (1 Corinthians 7:19). This apparent contradiction notwithstanding, his denunciation of circumcision - a core commandment of the Law - provides important insight into what Paul meant by the phrase “commandments of God.”

When Paul's teaching is considered carefully, it becomes evident that He exalted *true* holiness, but he denounced the idea that the Christian has any relation to the Law of Moses, or even to the principle of law *as law*. The principle that moves the believer forward in his conformity to Christ is not the pedagogical oversight of law, but the renewing and transforming power of the Spirit of adoption (2 Corinthians 3:18; Galatians 5:16ff). Jesus did not promise His disciples a clarified insight into the law and its use by the Spirit as His "enforcer;" He promised the Spirit *Himself* who, as Christ's own Spirit, would take what was His and disclose it to them, thereby transforming them into the same image "from glory to glory" (cf. John 16:13-15; Romans 8:9-11, 28-30; 2 Corinthians 3:1-18; etc.).

Again, this must not be construed as implying that the Christian has no moral or ethical obligation. Jesus Himself declared that His people are to obey His commandments (John 14:1-15:17). At the same time, the characteristics of this "command structure" must be clearly understood:

- First and foremost, Jesus' command is that of *love*. All authentic obedience is nothing more than the outworking of love. And because love for Christ implies true *faith* in Christ, it is evident how Paul could insist that "*whatever is not from faith is sin.*" The Bible in its entirety flatly rejects all "obedience" that is not "faith working through love" (Galatians 5:1-6; cf. Matthew 22:35-40).
- Secondly, Jesus' imposed the obligation to obey *Him*, not a fabricated category of law called "moral." This is not to say that obedience to Christ bears no relation to the morality expressed by the Law of Moses, but it is to insist that the Christian is not under the Law, but rather is "in-lawed" to Christ (1 Corinthians 9:19-23).

The principles that define man's right relation with God were indeed expressed in the Law of Moses. For the Law was the terms of the covenant by which Israel, as God's chosen, beloved "son," was to live in intimate communion with Him. In that sense it showed Israel what it is to be a "true man" living out his identity as divine image-bearer. Furthermore, from the fall in Eden God has continued to communicate these principles of righteousness to men as He has sought covenant union with them. But what must not be overlooked is that this ongoing revelation was *prophetic*; as much as it revealed what God demanded of His fallen image-bearers in order for them to be reconciled to Him, *it promised that He would meet that demand on their behalf*. Their hope and great consolation lay in God's own righteousness being given to them by faith. Throughout all of redemptive history God presented Himself as the redeemer, deliverer, provider, and perfecter of His people. All that He required of them was submissive faith; that they would find Him to be their sole refuge and fortress; their sole object of trust and gratitude (Psalm 18:1-3).

It is this understanding that lay behind Paul's declaration to the Romans that the righteousness of God, as now manifested in the gospel, was *witnessed* by the Law. The Law was prophetic and *Christocentric*; in setting out its just demands upon God's unfaithful covenant "sons" it also promised the coming of One who would be a true covenant Son, a true "Israel" (Isaiah 49:1ff; Matthew 11:7-14; Luke 24:13-27; etc.). Yahweh was Israel's Redeemer, and He promised that His redemption would extend beyond the merely physical and temporal to the sovereign deliverance of the souls of His people. This understanding of the Law of Moses as *prophecy* yields a more biblical perspective regarding Jesus' claim that He came to *fulfill* the Law. To the Reformed community this claim is interpreted as Jesus *confirming* the Law, and most others understand Him as saying that He *kept the legal demands* of the Law. While there is truth in the latter, it fails to view Christ's fulfillment in terms of the prophetic nature of the Law. Preeminently, He fulfilled the Law in that it *spoke* of Him and promised His coming and His gospel.

2) The second insight Paul provided in verse 3:21 actually comes first in his statement, but is best understood by addressing the prophetic quality of the Law first. This second insight is that the righteousness of God - as the very marrow of the gospel - has been manifested *apart from* the Law. Many have construed Paul's point to be that God's righteousness has come to men apart from their *doing* the works of the Law. While this is not untrue, it overlooks the redemptive-historical emphasis of his argument. *Paul's concern here was not with the righteousness to be found in keeping the Law, but the role of the Law in the upward movement of redemptive history.* His meaning is that the manifestation of God's righteousness as His endowment to men did not come about through the Law.

- Paul was not intimating that God ordained two ways of obtaining righteousness, one through the Law and one through the gospel. He was not saying that now a *new* way of righteousness has been manifested apart from the Law of Moses. The Old Testament also teaches that human righteousness is only obtained through the receipt of God's own righteousness through faith, *but it does so within the framework of promise and expectation, not realization* (John 1:14-18; Galatians 3:1-25; Hebrews 7:1-10:18).

- Paul's point was that the obtainment of God's righteousness through faith - a principle *attested in* and *promised by* the Law - was not *realized through* the administration of the Mosaic Law. The sense in which this is true becomes more evident when it is remembered that the "Law" is synonymous with the Old Covenant. It is not the Old Covenant that has manifested the gospel of divine righteousness; it is the *New Covenant*. The covenant made at Sinai was typological, and therefore merely *promissory* and *prophetic*.

Moreover, because the Old Covenant was promissory and prophetic, it was also *transitory* (Jeremiah 31:31-34; 2 Corinthians 3:1-18; Hebrews 8:1-13). It carried forward and added to the expectation of the gospel of righteousness by faith, but it did not usher it in; it served as a pedagogue until the Seed should come to whom the promise had been made. But now that the promised Seed has come, the Law has served its purpose in the upward movement of redemptive history; the Law of Moses has found its own prophetic fulfillment in the New Covenant: “*but now that faith has come, we are no longer under a tutor*” (Galatians 3:19-4:5).

- This is precisely what Paul meant by his insistence that the righteousness of God that is by faith - in other words, the *gospel* - was witnessed by the Law. The Law of Moses does not itself constitute the righteousness of God with respect to men, but was designed only to *bear witness* to it and serve as its handmaiden. This is a vital distinction, for it indicates that the Mosaic Covenant must be viewed first and foremost as an *instrument of prophecy* rather than a code of biblical ethics. Whatever its contribution to biblical ethics, it must be understood and approached from the perspective of its promise of and fulfillment in Jesus Christ.

The Law, prior to and along with the prophets, *promised* that the day would come when Yahweh would deliver His people from their captivity to unrighteousness, just as He repeatedly delivered covenant Israel from their countless oppressors and subjugators. Each of these discrete acts of redemption testified to God’s covenant faithfulness, thereby bolstering the promise and hope of the future, great redemptive event they merely portrayed and anticipated. The Day of Yahweh was coming; a day of righteousness in which He would destroy the enemies of His kingdom and His people; a day of righteousness in which His faithfulness would be exalted as He delivered His people, clothed them with His own righteousness, gathered them in, and established them in His true kingdom forever. The day of Yahweh’s righteous salvation was indeed coming, but it would be manifested at the cross of Christ and not at Sinai; it was to be manifested in a fulfillment witnessed by the Law but not found in it.

“‘Behold, days are coming,’ declares the Lord, ‘when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah, not like the covenant which I made with their fathers in the day I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, My covenant which they broke, although I was a husband to them,’ declares the Lord. ‘But this is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those days,’ declares the Lord, ‘I will put My law within them, and on their heart I will write it; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people. And they shall not teach again, each man his neighbor and each man his brother, saying, “Know the Lord,” for they shall all know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them,’ declares the Lord, ‘for I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more.’” (Jeremiah 31:31-34)