

I don't know whether you've seen the telly adverts that BT have put out over the past year or so. You may know that our very own TV superstar Craig has appeared. In these adverts there's a bright light, and from that light come brilliant rays of light that gradually fall to earth. And everyone looks, and you see Craig saying 'Wow'! And these rays touch everyone, everywhere. And at the end of the ad you see the word 'Infinity' in the middle of this bright light.

And I like this advert very much because it works very nicely for us as a picture on various levels:

- Of course we can take it as a picture of God – the Infinite One – the One who was, and is, and always will be – the One whose light touches **everyone everywhere**. And when we really see what He's done, we have to say 'Wow'.
- We can also take it to illustrate the **Bible** – God's Word – the gospel – *'the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes'* – good news for everyone, everywhere. And when we experience its saving power, our response is 'Wow'.
- But this morning I'd like to use the same picture to illustrate the passage we're going to be looking at; because we're going to be reading about things which shed light on **every** part of the Bible; contained in these verses are vital things that we need to understand if we're to understand **God**, what he's **done**, and our relationship with him. And if we don't leave church this morning saying 'Wow', I suggest that we don't really understand God at all.

So then, turn with me, if you would, to Paul's letter to the church in Rome, and chapter 3. Romans chapter 3. Some of the most vitally important verses in the whole of the Bible, verses 21 – 26. The whole Bible, all of God's dealings with his people as recorded in His word, either point forward or back to the events and explanations here in these verses. Rays of light bursting forth to touch the lives of everyone, everywhere. So I hope you've come prepared to listen to God this morning. [Read]

Two exciting words start this section – *'But now ...'* – exciting because they tell us that the writer, here Paul, is going to tell us about a great contrast between what **was**, and the situation that **now** is - *'But now ...'*. We've read the passage, we know he's going to tell us what God has done through Jesus. *'But now Jesus'*. But before we look at the **'now'**, we need to see what it's **contrasted** with in chapters 1 to 3, so that we can be **amazed** at what God's done.

Paul talks about **man's predicament**. Look over to chapter 3, verse 10, man's predicament: *'There is **no-one** righteous, not even one; there is no-one that understands, **no-one** who seeks God. **All** have turned away, they have **together** become worthless; there is **no-one** who does good, not even one.'* A damning condemnation of mankind - *'There is **no-one** righteous, not even one'*. Before the words *'But now'* in verse 21, there is **no-one** right with God, not even one; no-one pleases God, not even one; no exceptions, **all** have turned away.

And verses 10 – 12 are a summary of the letter so far. We read in chapter 1 that people turned their back on God and decided to go their own way. Despite all the evidences of God through his creation and his word, mankind decided they knew a **better** way. They lived **without** God. They lived wicked lives, suppressing the truth – they had **evidence** of the truth, but turned their back on it, and lived godless lives. *'All turned away'*, Paul says.

Chapter 2 even holds a shock for the **Jews**: they had been given God's law, the Ten Commandments etc., to live by. And they thought they were doing well because they were trying to uphold the Law, obey the Law, and please God. But Paul says that even **this** was **not** going to make them right with God. What a shock **that** must have been to those religious Jews. All their lives spent obeying the Law which would not make them right with God.

And Paul says in chapter 3:20, *'Therefore no-one will be declared righteous in his [God's] sight by observing the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of sin.'* By **trying** to obey the law, we realise that we **can't** obey the law! It doesn't put us right with God. Shock, horror!

*'There is **no-one** righteous, not even one'*, Paul says. In the words of Private Fraser in the programme 'Dad's Army', 'We're all doomed!' All mankind was either going the opposite direction to God, or was travelling a path we wrongly assumed was leading us to God. No hope, no way out, only **destruction** lay ahead.

If this letter was filmed, there'd be an intermission here. I remember going to see the film 'Chitty Chitty Bang Bang' at the cinema when I was in my early teens – my memory goes back a long way! There they were, in this car, and the man and woman in the front were arguing as they drove along, and suddenly they realised they were driving towards the cliff edge. Too late. And we see them drive off of Beachy Head. Down they go. There's no way out, no hope, and we expect to hear the **crash** of metal on rock. The film stops, the lights go up and ladies come up the aisles carrying choc ices and cola.

Romans 3:20 – intermission – think about it – there’s no way out, there’s no hope, only destruction awaits. We’re all doomed, and there’s **nothing** we can do about it. We’re separated from God, Isaiah says, by our sin. *‘All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.’* Paul says here in our passage.

But **now** – disaster was averted by Chitty Chitty Bang Bang sprouting wings and flying off – there **was** a way out after all. Everyone cheered. There was a way out, there was hope, destruction averted.

Verse 21 - But now Jesus - there **is** a way out, there’s hope for mankind, our destruction has been turned aside.

*‘But now a righteousness from God, **apart** from law, has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify.’* **But now** signifies something dramatic and earth-shattering has happened, and we played no part in it whatsoever. This was from **God** – God himself did something to make us right with him. God took the initiative to put us right with him. Up to chapter 3:20 we have seen man’s dire predicament, the **problem**; ‘but now’ brings us to **God’s gracious solution**.

God took the initiative to restore man to himself, *‘a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known,’* God had to take this action because there was no-one righteous, not even one, there was no other way man could be made right with God. So now God acted, but this had been anticipated by the Law and the Prophets, in other words, in the Old Testament scriptures. You only have to read through the book of **Isaiah** to see the anticipation of the arrival of One from God who would bring salvation for mankind.

So here we see the outworking of God’s plan of salvation, and all of the Old Testament tells us of God’s unfolding plan of salvation until it reaches its climax and fullness in Jesus. A righteousness from God. But now, since Jesus has come, a new age has dawned. We can be made right with God through Jesus.

We needed God to do something because we **couldn’t**. We **all** fall short of the glory of God; we were made in the image of God but we’ve not measured up to what we should be. Like when you draw a portrait of someone, there’s always something you can’t get quite right – perhaps the nose’s too long, perhaps one eye’s bigger than the other, perhaps the waviness of the hair troubles us. The picture’s distorted. **We’ve** become distorted by our sin, because we’ve turned away, we’ve not sought God as we should have. God needed to act.

God also needed to act because without his rescuing action, God was angry with us.

God is a righteous God. This has to do with his perfect and holy nature. God is righteous. And because of this he can't **abide** sin. He doesn't **accept** sin; he doesn't **condone** sin; he can't just close an **eye** to sin; sin is **abhorrent** to him. Sin makes God angry – not the angry that people become when they lose their cool and burn with rage. But God is angry at sin, because of what it does to his creation – it **pollutes** and destroys. Paul talks of the wrath of God and says in chapter 1:18, *'The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men'*.

So, you see, here's the problem: God wants us to be in relationship with him, but we've all sinned and he can't accept sin. So what does he do? Does he condemn sin, judge all people, and consign all people to **hell**? He **could** – that's what we all **deserve**, **no** exceptions, *'all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.'* The anger of a holy God to sin means that judgement and punishment of that sin has to come. The cross is inevitable and unavoidable, because human sin has to be overcome, and God's anger has to be turned aside.

Man's sinfulness has earned the wrath of God – it's real, it's mentioned over 600 times in the Old Testament alone – God is angry with sin. Do you see that? The first stage of our being made right with God is that we **see** our need of God's intervention, because otherwise we're under the wrath of God, and that will lead to judgement and hell, it's as serious as that. If you don't see **that**, then I fear this passage will mean very little to you at this stage.

God wants to reconcile people to himself, God is love and he wants people in a loving relationship in harmony with himself. Salvation can **only** lie in God's gracious solution through his Son Jesus. **God** provided the solution and that's what we'll be remembering as we take the bread and the wine in a few moments.

Let's consider **what God has done through Jesus to provide the solution**.

Paul's writing to the church in Rome in 57AD, about 20 years after Jesus was crucified. Rome will have been filled with lots of people from different backgrounds and different cultures all mixing together. And the church will have been no different – people from different backgrounds and experiences, their lives touched by God. A bit like Park Hill today.

Paul is anxious to speak in words that they'll **all** understand, and he uses three different pictures to illustrate what God has done: *'all have sinned,'* verse 24, *'and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement, through faith in his blood.'* 4

First picture, then, we're '**justified**'. This picture comes from the lawcourts, the drama of the courtroom. In Paul's time in Israel, the accuser and accused would argue out the case before a judge, and at the end the judge would either say the accused was in the **right**, he would **justify** him, or the judge would say he was in the **wrong**, he would **condemn** him. Justify or condemn. The justified would be welcomed back into the community, the condemned would be **separated** from the community, maybe even condemned to death.

Likewise today, at the end of the trial, the case has been put forward, the accused stands before the judge and with a 'guilty' verdict they're separated from society in prison, with the verdict of 'not guilty' they can return to society, they're free to go.

When I was doing jury service this year, we had a case where a young lad had stolen about £50-worth of stuff from his employers. When we went out to deliberate our verdict, we had **problems** coming to a decision. But the reason wasn't because we couldn't decide whether he was guilty or not, it was because some jury members were adamant that they weren't going to give this young lad a criminal record for something as little as £50. He had **done** it, he **was** guilty, he **did** deserve the punishment.

And I think that all of us would agree that justice has to be done. And as God is perfect, holy, righteous, just, he **has** to punish sin.

But here it says that sinners are justified freely. Justifying, or being justified is God saying that the sinner is not guilty for our sins. This is God declaring you '**not guilty**'. This is God acquitting you and telling you you're free to go. You're justified freely. This is God saying to you, 'You are not guilty' – you're free to be restored to society, but not only to society, but **God's** society, God's **family**; you're free to become a son or daughter of God; you're justified; God declares you 'not guilty'.

This is more than forgiveness, this is more than just saying, 'OK, you've done wrong, but you're forgiven, you've been let off the punishment.' Being justified means that even the **accusations** are forgotten. As the psalmist says, '*as far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us.*' Psalm 103:12. Like the east will never meet the west, neither will we see the guilt of our sins. There is no guilt, no condemnation; you're free to come into God's family.

But how **can** God justify us freely? I've just said that God is just, and has to **punish** sin, and as all have sinned, surely we're all **guilty**, so God has to **punish** us all, doesn't he? So how can we be justified? How can God possibly declare us 'not guilty'?

Isaiah speaks of the suffering servant, he says, *'We all like sheep have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.'* Isaiah 53:6. In a miraculous way, **Jesus** has taken the punishment we deserved on himself. The only sinless man who's ever lived, took on our guilt, **he** became the guilty one, so that the truly guilty ones – all of us, each of us – could go **free**, could be declared 'not guilty', could be justified. It's just as if we'd never sinned, we're **freed** from the guilt of our sins. We're justified freely; **Jesus** was condemned in our place.

We're *'justified freely ... through the redemption that came by Jesus Christ.'* The second picture Paul uses here comes from the market place, that of redemption, being '**redeemed**'.

In the culture of that time, there were masters and slaves. Slaves were owned by their masters. That wasn't always the way we imagine when we think of slaves – some slaves were **happy** at the **security** of their situation in the care of their masters. But the slaves could be made free on payment of a **ransom**, payment of a certain price. And this would be called being **redeemed**, setting them free on the payment of a ransom.

You'll remember we also have this picture of redemption referring back in the **Old** Testament to the time when God freed his people from slavery in Egypt, recorded for us in the book of Exodus. We also have the picture of redemption at the end of the **New** Testament in the book of Revelation, where John speaks of the songs of heaven reserved for those who have been **redeemed**. People bought at a price.

Christians are redeemed people, people bought at a price. **Once** we were slaves to sin, **once** we were slaves to a harsh and possessive master. But now, **Jesus**; we're redeemed through Christ Jesus. Jesus said of himself, *'the Son of man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.'* Mark 10:45. **Jesus** became our ransom price. **Jesus** was the price for our redemption. **Jesus** lived a perfect life of obedience; he was obedient even to that cruel death on the cross. He stepped into our place and paid the price necessary to secure our freedom from sin. Hallelujah, what a Saviour!

Unable to free ourselves, we're redeemed by Jesus' death on the cross.

The price of sin is death – Jesus paid the price: *‘While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.’* Romans 5:8. We’re **redeemed** – we belong to him.

Remember, Paul’s talking about God’s gracious solution to our predicament under the wrath of God, deserving his judgement. The third picture Paul uses is taken from the temple – the picture of a **‘sacrifice of atonement’**.

Right the way through the Old Testament, the Israelites have become very aware that there needs to be some sacrifice to atone for sin, to pay for sin and turn away the wrath of God - his **anger** at sin that we were talking about earlier. God’s anger has to be placated, and the picture of this for those in Old Testament times was in the sacrificing of animals to God, involving the shedding of blood.

But now, Jesus. Any sacrifice **we** could make would be inadequate to turn away the wrath of God, because we’re **sinful**, so any sacrifice would be spoilt by **sin**. So we find God placating his **own** anger in providing a sacrifice which **is** acceptable, because it’s the sacrifice of his own Son, the **only** One who’s lived a sinless life, Jesus. John writes in his first letter, *‘This is love: not that we loved **God**, but that **he** loved **us** and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.’* 1 John 4:10.

‘Look,’ John the Baptist said, *‘the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.’*

God gave himself in his own Son to placate himself; through Jesus who took our place, who bore our sin, who shed his blood and died our death, God saved us from himself. How amazing! Amazing love. On that cross, Jesus removed the guilt of our sin – he justified us, he paid the price for our sin – he redeemed us, he turned away God’s anger from us by bearing its full weight – he offered a sacrifice of atonement.

And all of this through **grace**. God took the initiative, he instigated the plan of salvation, he put it into practice, God presented Jesus as a sacrifice of atonement. It didn’t happen because we **deserved** it, it happened completely and **only** through the grace of God, because he loved us and wanted to rescue us from our sin. God justifies us, removes our guilt, *‘freely by his grace’*, verse 24, unmerited love. He did it all out of **love**, **perfect** love, **undeserved** love, for you. Wonderful grace.

And what do we need to be able to benefit from this salvation? Only faith. Faith that believes that God has made reconciliation with him through the death and resurrection of Jesus. There is no other way of salvation. Religions that rely upon us to work our way into heaven are selling a **lie**. You know **your** heart. I know **mine** – there’s no way that I’ll **ever** be good enough to stand before a holy God. 7

It just won't happen – and I know it. You know it.

Verse 22, *'This righteousness from God comes through faith in Christ Jesus to all who **believe**.*'

*'God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement, through **faith** in his blood.'* Verse 25.

And verse 26, **God** is *'the one who justifies the man who has faith in Jesus.'*

For us to be right with God, to be redeemed, to know the guilt of our sins taken away and God's anger taken from us, we have to have faith in Jesus, the one who **loved** us and gave himself for us.

But now, Jesus. It's all here. The complete gospel of salvation is here in these verses. Thinking back to our original picture of the bright light and rays coming from it touching everyone's life, touching us all, everyone that's ever lived and going to live. Infinity. God's bright light. The infinite God reaching down to finite humanity. Reaching and touching everyone's life. From **him** come the rays of salvation: we're made guiltless before him because Jesus took our guilt and shame; we're made free because Jesus has paid the price of our sin; we don't have to fear God's judgement and anger at sin because Jesus bore the full weight of his Father's anger as he died on the cross

Jesus touches every life everywhere in every generation. Fact. Truth. It's up to us whether we **accept** it and live in **relationship** with God forever, or whether we **reject** it and live **apart** from God forever. No-one can make that decision for us. It's down to you. It's down to me.

But now, Jesus.

I will sing of the Lamb, of the price that he paid for me.