

Today, we come to **one** of the most important passages in the whole of the Bible. Martin Luther – well, he makes a pretty big claim – that it is THE most important passage in the whole of the Bible – that’s a pretty big call....

We’ve spent the last 4 weeks, going through a long, dark tunnel, hearing all of the bad news, of the terrible predicament we humans are in. The godlessness and sin of humanity, has been a downwards spiral, which gets worse and worse and worse. And as the Apostle Paul has spelled out all of the bad news (in detail), he has led us to the final, inescapable conclusion that no one is righteous – not one.

Both Jews and non-Jews, alike, are **under** sin – they are ruled by sin – controlled by sin... And so no human being, is at all, capable, of being so completely good, that they are righteous before the eyes of a Holy God... Even the Jews who had God’s law – no matter how hard they tried – they could not keep that Law – certainly not to the standard that God required...

And so, if God is a Just God, when we (who are guilty) stand before Him on the day of judgment, what do you expect He’s going to say? ... Even the very best of our deeds won’t earn us enough Brownie points to get us into Heaven. ... We will be judged, and the only **just** judgment – the only **right** judgment, is to be condemned to hell...

What a hopeless; terrible predicament, all of humanity are in...

But today, is the turning point in Romans.... One of the most glorious phrases in the bible, and it’s a phrase that we will

read over and over and over again – is 2 words long – 2 glorious words – “**But now**”...

All **have** sinned; All **have** fallen short of the Glory of God; All **are** subject to judgment; All **are** under sin; The wrath of God **is** being revealed; And the wrath of God **will** boil over in judgment; And on that day of judgment, we will all be held accountable for our sins; and we are all doomed....

But now... Something has changed. The downwards spiral, is leading to judgment – we’re on a highway to hell, but suddenly, there’s an off-ramp...

A couple of years ago, we’d been visiting Robyn’s parents at Imbil (just near Gympie). And on our way home, we had a specialist appointment in Brisbane. So, we were travelling down the Bruce Highway – 3 lanes, everything going beautifully, traffic flowing at 110km/hr, and we’d be arriving at our appointment with time to spare... When all of a sudden, I heard some bad news.... Coming over the UHF, was the bad news, of a disaster up ahead.

I don’t know how, but the “B”-trailer of a B-Double tipper (the big one at the back), had somehow accidentally been engaged, and it was tipping, and it was up in the air, when he went under an overpass, and he hit that overpass at 100km/hr, tore the body off the rear trailer, and it was wedged up under the overpass. And of course, when the truck behind, ran into that, it caused absolute mayhem...

What were we going to do? We would be stuck on that freeway for hours... Where we were – we were still doing 110 (or maybe a little over)... Everyone around us, was

completely oblivious to this disaster that was up ahead... But we knew about it. We'd heard the message on the 2-way... And there was no way we were going to make the appointment... But then, suddenly in front of us, was an off-ramp – there was a way out of it... And we got off that freeway, and got onto the Old Bruce Highway, and we made the appointment on time.

*We were doomed: **But now** – Look, there's an off-ramp – let's take it, and let's take it now....*

We know, that if God is a just God – if He is a God of justice, then He has no other option, but to judge us as guilty. That's what we've been hearing, for the last 4 weeks... And so if God is a God of justice, He **must** judge us as “guilty”...

Except for those 2 precious words “**But now**”...

And today, in V26, we discover that God is not only Just – He is also the justifier.. – He justifies, the one who has faith in Jesus...

And so, there **is** a hope – there **is** an assurance – for the one who has faith in Jesus – that on the day of judgment, we will be justified, through faith in Jesus. We will **not** be doomed. The Lord our God will judge us as “Righteous” “Justified”.

But, how can that be? What's changed? Paul has been relentless in laying down the charges, and convincing us – we're **all** guilty – we're **all** doomed... How then, can we be justified? How **can** we be righteous?

Well, Paul describes it, by using 2 different types of language. He talks in the language of the slave-trade. And he also talks in the language of the law courts.

He says: ²³ for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, ²⁴ and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus

The word “redemption” means to be bought out of slavery. When Paul was laying down the charges against us, he told us that we are “under sin”. Now, that means “we are slaves to sin”. We are captured by it. It rules over us. Sin, has become our master. And so we are incapable of being righteous, because we are under sin....

But as a free gift of God, we are redeemed – we are bought out of slavery to sin. We are no longer “under sin”... Now, that means a price had to be paid. And of course, that price, was the death of Jesus on the cross.

The second type of language that he uses, is the language of the law courts: Righteousness; Just; Justified; Justifier; propitiation.

Now, the first 4 of those words (Righteousness; Just; Justified; Justifier), in the original Greek, all stem from the same Greek root (dikaios).

- I think we know what “righteousness” means, don’t we? - It means we have nothing bad about us – everything we do is right. And of course, the only one who is **truly** righteous, is God. And for us to be righteous, it’s only God who can make us righteous.
- Just: Well, a just judge, is someone who is a righteous judge – who will always judge correctly. And because God is just, and we are all sinners, God can do nothing, but judge us as “guilty”.
- Justified: Well, when somebody was on trial, the judge would have to decide if they are righteous or not. And if the judge was to slam down his gavel and say “Justified”, that means you’re off-the hook – you’re not guilty.
- And Justifier: Well, that’s an uncommon word – it only appears twice in the Bible – once here, and again, about a chapter later in this same book... God doesn’t only judge whether we are righteous – whether we are justified... He also **makes** us righteous – He **makes** us justified...

But how does He do that?

And this is where the 5th word comes in – propitiation (and no, that’s not the Greek – that’s the English word for it). (For our South Africans, the Afrikaans is “versoening” [Fursoonin] which I think means “reconciliation”, but that doesn’t fully explain the word.)

In the Greek, it tells us that God put Jesus forward as a ἱλαστήριον (hilasterion). And that word, is a hard one to translate. The best translation is “propitiation”, but who’s ever heard of that word? Some versions of the bible translate

it as “expiation”, but who knows what that means? The NIV translates it as “sacrifice of atonement”...

It'll be easier for me to **describe** what it means, rather than give you a one-word definition.

Here's an example:

Consider the case of a certain factory worker who was seriously injured on the job. After the doctors had done all they could, he was still left partially paralysed. An investigation revealed that the company was at fault because it did not provide a safe work place nor the proper safety equipment for its employees. Thus, it was liable for the dangerous conditions that resulted in this man's injury and permanent paralysis.

As we all have seen in similar situations, the court will probably award the injured man a great sum of money for his pain, suffering, and permanent injury. Once the company pays the judgment against it, it has expiated its wrongdoings. The demands of justice have been satisfied. The company no longer has any responsibility toward the injured man. That is expiation. They have paid for their wrong-doings – the debt is paid.

But we have not dealt with how the injured man feels toward the company. He may be filled with resentment, bitterness, even hatred. He may spend the rest of his life abhorring the name of that company, even though it has been directed to give him all the money he could possibly use. The debt that the wrong incurred has been expiated or paid for, but the wrath that the wrong incurred has not been propitiated.

*When Christ died, he not only paid the debt for our sins, but reconciled us to God by satisfying the Father's wrath. He was **both** an expiation and a propitiation for our sins.ⁱ*

Now, the word ἱλαστήριον (hilasterion), was used by the Greeks, to describe the way that they would appeased their Gods...

But in the Greek version of the Old Testament, it was used to describe “the Atonement Cover” – The lid of the Ark of The Covenant, or The Mercy Seat.

Alright, the Ark of the Covenant, was this box in the temple – it was kept in the holy of holies. And in it, were the tablets of stone (that the 10 Commandments were written on); Aaron's staff, which had budded; and a pot of manna that God had fed the People of Israel with, while they were in the desert.

And the lid of the Ark of the Covenant, was known as “The Atonement Cover” or “The Mercy Seat”... But in the Greek version of the Old Testament, it was called the ἱλαστήριον (hilasterion). And now here (in Romans) it's telling us that **Jesus** is the ἱλαστήριον (hilasterion). What's the significance of this???? Everything...

Under the old covenant, one day a year, the people were reconciled to God. And it would happen on “The Day of Atonement”. First the priest would have to get right with God. And he would kill a bull, and sprinkle the blood of the bull on the ἱλαστήριον (hilasterion) – on the cover of the ark of the covenant. And then, so the people could be right with God, he would kill a goat, and sprinkle the blood of the goat

upon the ἱλαστήριον (hilasterion) – the lid of the Ark of the Covenant – the Mercy Seat...

Alright, this is the location, that the forgiveness of sins took place. This is the place, where sins were atoned for, and God's wrath, was quenched.

And now Jesus is the ἱλαστήριον (hilasterion):

- He is the expiation – the one who pays the debt of our sins.
- He is the propitiation – the one who quenches the wrath of God. When we are forgiven in the Name of Jesus, we are so completely forgiven, that God forgets all of our sin, and remembers them no more. He has no wrath towards us, because by His grace, He has made us pure and holy in His sight.
- And Jesus Christ, is the place of atonement – Jesus is the one who atones – Christ is the mercy seat.

There once was a time, when the High Priest (once a year), would enter through the curtain of the Temple, and go into the Holy of Holies. And there, at the Mercy Seat, he would sprinkle blood, for the atonement of the sins of Israel... But not any more. When Jesus died upon that cross, the curtain in the temple was torn from top to bottom. And now Jesus is the place of atonement. Jesus Christ is the one we come to, so that our sins are forgiven, and the wrath of God is quenched...

Friends, this isn't just all religious mumbo-jumbo... This is the essence of what Jesus Christ did for us on the cross... He became that sacrifice. He took the penalty, that was due to us.

Our God is both a God of Justice; **and** a God of Mercy. He is not only a **Just** God, but He is also a God who justifies. And He did that, through the sacrifice of His son. Somebody had to pay the penalty of our sins. Someone had to take God's righteous wrath... And the only one who could, is the Son of God Himself. Jesus Christ our Lord and Saviour.

And so by having faith in Jesus Christ as our Lord and Saviour, we are justified – made righteous.

Now, that might raise a question, “What about those who lived in Old Testament times? How can they be saved?”

Well, we're told that we're now made righteous without the Law, but the Law still had (and has) value. The Law and the Prophets bear witness, to our real means of salvation – they bear witness to what Christ would do (and has now done)...

And v25 tells us that God, in his divine forbearance,...**had passed over former sins**. What that means, is that He **didn't** pour out His wrath on humanity as they deserved it. I reckon it means, that He was storing it up, and He settled the accounts at Calvary.

All of the blood of bulls and goats, couldn't ever pay for sins... They were an IOU, to be paid at the cross of Calvary...

But it's not an IOU any longer. It's paid up in advance. God's righteousness has been revealed, because he will not unjustly 'just let people off'. He's paid the debt.

God's righteousness has been revealed, because He has become our saviour. He had the power to save, and that's exactly what He did.. He is Just. And the Justifier, of the one who has faith in Jesus.

In the US, in the days of the pioneers, when those pioneers saw the smoke of a prairie fire approaching, what would they do? Not even the fastest of horses could ever outrun a blaze in that long, dry grass. What they would do, is they would take a match, and burn the grass in a designated area around them. Then they would take their stand in the burned area and be safe from the threatening prairie fire.

As the roar of the flames approached, they would not be afraid. Even as the ocean of fire surged around them, there was no fear, because fire had already passed over the place where they stood.

When the judgment of God comes to sweep men and women into hell for eternity, there is one spot that is safe. Nearly 2000 years ago, the wrath of God was poured on Calvary. There the Son of God took the wrath that should have fallen on us. Now, if we take our stand by the cross, here, in Christ, we stand, justified; holy; righteous; children of God, our righteous saviour. ⁱⁱ

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- ⁱ Green, Michael. 1500 Illustrations for Biblical Preaching. Baker Books: Grand Rapids. 1989. No.1106
- ⁱⁱ Green, Michael. 1500 Illustrations for Biblical Preaching. Baker Books: Grand Rapids. 1989 No.727