

If you've done very much study of the Bible or theology, or if you've paid attention to very much Bible teaching (especially here at FBC) and listened to the words and concepts and ideas we use, or really if you've ever spent much time just thinking about God and His word, you likely know that the Bible is full of mysteries that are difficult to wrap our mind around fully. Mysteries like, "Where did God come from? Who made Him? How can He not have a beginning?" That can be a tough concept to make sense of. Or the mystery of how God can be one and three at the same time, one God eternally existent in three persons, the Trinity. Not three Gods. Not one God in three parts. Not one God who appears in different forms at different times. But the Father, who is fully God, the Son, who is fully God, and the Holy Spirit, who is fully God, and yet they are distinct from one another and only one God. That

can be challenging to sort out. Or how Jesus can be one person, one being, but with two natures, truly God and, at the same time, truly human. Not either/or, but both/and.

Try to do the math on that one. Or this one: how can God be both all-good and all-powerful at the same time when terrible things continue to happen? If He can stop them but chooses not to, how can He be good? If He would stop them, but can't, how can He be powerful? By the way, those are the kinds of questions I get in children's Sunday School every week, in case anyone wants to help out in there. But those are difficult questions. Riddles. Mysteries.

There's another hidden mystery you may not have ever thought about or wrestled with or even been aware of. It's found in the book of Exodus, in the 34th chapter. It's even been called the riddle of Exodus. But in this passage,

Moses has gone up on Mt. Sinai to receive a copy of God's commandments, His law, and here's what we read in Exodus 34:5-7, "The LORD descended in the cloud and stood with him there, and proclaimed the name of the LORD. The LORD passed before him and proclaimed, 'The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children's children, to the third and the fourth generation.'"

Did you catch the mystery? Did you hear the riddle? On the one hand, God declares that He is merciful and gracious and slow to anger and loving and faithful. And He

says specifically that He forgives iniquity and transgression and sin. And we've heard that. We know that. We like that. We're thankful for that. God forgives...but. Did you catch what came after that "but?" But who will by no means clear the guilty. He does not leave the guilty unpunished. We call that justice. God is a just God. He doesn't just let the guilty off the hook. He can't. If He did THAT He wouldn't be just. It would be like a judge who simply declared every single defendant who came into his courtroom "not guilty" and let them all go free. God doesn't do that. He is just. But how does that work exactly? Because He just made 2 contradictory statements. He is forgiving, but He is just. Well how can that be? How can God both forgive iniquity, transgression, and sin AND by no means clear the guilty. It doesn't add up. It doesn't make sense. You can be one of the other,

but not both, right? It's a riddle. It's a mystery. How can a just God forgive sinners? That's the question.

Well the Apostle Paul answers the question, solves the mystery, **unravels the riddle** in Romans 3:21-26. If you've been here for the past few weeks, you know that beginning in 1:18 he has laid out his case establishing the guilty of all humanity; every single individual stands condemned and convicted before a holy God. And because God will by no means clear the guilty, because He will not let the guilty go unpunished, we deserve and should expect His wrath to be poured out on our sin. So Paul has the second part of that riddle covered. We get it. It makes sense. But what about the first part? If our guilt is established – your guilt, my guilt – how is there any hope of forgiveness? Can we be saved? Can we be delivered?

Can we be rescued? And if so, how? This morning I want us to read together Paul's answer, God's answer, to the reality of sin and guilt and wrath and judgment and condemnation. I want you to listen for the key, the explanation. I want you to listen for words like justification and redemption and propitiation. And I want you to really appreciate and delight in what theologian Leon Morris called possibly the most important single paragraph every written. The paragraph Martin Luther described as the chief point of the whole Bible. And I want you to see what God has to say to those facing certain judgment for their sin. Let's read together Romans 3:21-26 [READ].

So the question is, "How can a just God forgive guilty sinners?" And Paul gives his answer in three parts. First, he explains how the saving righteousness of **God is**

manifested. How it is revealed or made known. But we have to start with what Paul even means by the word “righteousness.” The Bible uses that same word to describe something God IS, something God DOES, and something God GIVES. And while I think all three of those are connected, here, I think Paul is stressing that third meaning. When He talks about the righteousness of God being manifested, he’s talking about God’s saving righteousness, His justifying righteousness, His gift that He gives to sinners whereby He declares them righteous. He’s already talked back in 1:17 about God’s righteousness being revealed. Then in 1:18 he shifted to God’s wrath being revealed. Now he comes back to righteousness. And he’s made the point that, before Jesus came, any attempt to earn or achieve this righteous status before God by doing your best to keep the law only led to

failure, frustration, and guilt. Because nobody does keep the law, and nobody can keep the law (demands, requirements). So every attempt to be acceptable to God through law-keeping just continually reminds you of your own failure and inability and sin. But now, a new day has dawned. A new age has come. A new era, a new covenant has been inaugurated. NOW, the righteousness of God, from God, has been manifested APART from the law. NOW, this righteous status, this right standing, is completely separate from your own personal obedience or works or self-righteousness. Your works contribute NOTHING to this kind of righteousness, not in preparation for it, in partnership with it, or in support of it. In fact, the whole system of the law was never intended to earn righteousness. Because no one has ever been able to accomplish the kinds of works, the number of works, or

the consistency of works necessary to justify us before God. Let me say it more simply. Because your good deeds and obedience to the rules would NEVER be enough to make you acceptable to God, He had to reveal His righteousness a different way, apart from rule-keeping and laws and commandments. Completely distinct from that old system.

But at the same time, the old system – the law and the prophets – bear witness to the gospel. They pointed to and prepared for God's true righteousness to be revealed. The whole OT sacrificial system was intended to do just that.

The fact that God dwelt among his people in a tent and then a temple built by human hands pointed to God coming and dwelling in the midst of them as one of them.

Human priests who served as mediators between sinful

men and a holy God pointed to the coming of a perfect high priest who would never die. Animal sacrifices offered to atone for the sins of the people pointed to a single, final, perfect sacrifice that would cleanse from sin once and for all. We just saw how Paul used Scripture after Scripture in vv.10-18 to show how the law magnified humanity's need for a better righteousness. So even though this righteousness was manifested apart from works of the law, the law served to point to it. The whole Bible points to the gospel.

This righteousness, however, comes through faith in Christ. Faith alone is the means by which God's gift of right standing comes to men. It does not come by the keeping of commandments. Many people mistakenly believe that God's opinion of us is determined by how

good we are, how obedient we are, how well we keep His rules. Paul says here it is by faith alone, trusting rather than earning. So there is not room for boasting, no room for pride, no room for a sense of superiority. For you to be declared right with God, you have to trust entirely in work that you had NOTHING to do with except that your own sin made it necessary. It does not come by a general, nondescript belief in God. I can't tell you how many conversations I've had with families preparing for the funeral of their loved ones, and I ask about their family member's faith or about their spiritual life, and the only answer I get back is, "Oh, he believed in God." What they mean is that he acknowledged the existence of a supreme being. And my heart breaks because even the demons believe there's a God. What Paul is talking about here is a personal, deliberate, whole-hearted, casting oneself on the

person and work of Christ. It's recognizing your own sin and helplessness and desperation before a holy God and entrusting yourself entirely to the work accomplished by the life, death, and resurrection of His Son. And this is available for ALL who believe. For ANY who believes. Jew, Gentile, young old, rich, poor, male, female. There is no distinction between believers. The righteousness of God comes by faith alone in Christ alone to ALL who would believe. That's how His saving righteousness is manifested.

The second part of Paul's answer is to explain how the saving righteousness of **God is accomplished**. He begins this section by reaffirming what he's already established: the universality of sin and guilt. ALL have sinned. That's why a universally available gospel is needed, because of

universal guilt. There is no distinction between believers because there is no distinction between sinners. When it comes to your standing before God, it doesn't matter who you are or what you've done or where you're from or who you're related to or what title you bear. ALL humans fall short and continue to fall short of His glory. We fail to reflect the glory entrusted to us at creation. We fail to faithfully display His image in which we were created. We fall short.

And so it is necessary that justification come freely as a gift. That word justify means to declare righteous. When God justifies a sinner, He declares that individual to be righteous. It's a legal verdict, an acquittal of all charges against you due to your sin. And it happens instantaneously the moment someone believes. In the

instant your heart is transformed and you trust in the person and work of Jesus, the final verdict God will pronounce over you at the final judgment is secured. And it is given freely. It comes freely from God, meaning that He is not compelled or coerced to give it. He is not constrained by anything other than His own will. And it comes freely to us, meaning that we don't have to pay anything for it. It is a gift. It is totally unmerited, undeserved. Or more precisely, contra-merited. It's not just that we didn't earn it; we did everything to NOT deserve it. It is purely by God's grace that we are justified.

But just because it is free to us doesn't mean there was no cost. Paul says our justification is provided to us through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus. That word redemption indicates a deliverance, a setting free, usually

through the payment of a price, a ransom. Think of a prisoner released from his cell or a slave being released from his bondage. We were captive to sin, enslaved to death, in bondage to certain judgment. And in His mercy and grace, God set us free, much like He set the people of Israel free from their slavery in Egypt. But in their case, their freedom was enacted simply by the powerful arm of God working sovereignly to deliver them from a bondage they didn't deserve and had done nothing to cause. In our case, we were in bondage because of our own sin. We were justly imprisoned. And so in our case, a price HAD to be paid, and a price WAS paid. It was a price paid by God and borne by Christ. It was a payment that completely satisfied the demand of justice so that we, the guilty ones, might go free. The price paid was the life, the infinitely valuable blood, of Jesus.

Paul says that God put Him forth as a propitiation by His blood. Who put Him forth? God did. Who designed and intended and initiated the death of Jesus? Was it the Jewish religious leaders? Was it the Romans? Was it Herod? Was it Pilate? Paul says each of those played their role, but God was the One to initiate the cross. God put Jesus forth publicly. Isaiah 53:10 says, "Yet it was the will of the LORD to crush him; he has put him to grief..." In Acts 2:23, Peter declares that Jesus was "delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God,... [but was] crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men." In Acts 4:27 the church at Jerusalem prayed, "...in this city there were gathered together against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the

peoples of Israel, to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place.” God put Jesus forth. And He put Him forth as a propitiation, a sacrifice that absorbs or satisfies wrath. God’s righteous wrath – not some irrational, capricious, vindictive rage, but His just judgment against sin – was poured out on Jesus in place of us. God provided the substitute, and He absorbed the judgment so that His wrath was turned away once and for all for those who would receive that payment by faith. Christ has paid all the price there is to pay for those who would believe. That means if you do believe, there is no more price for you to pay. You don’t have to continue to try to atone for your sins. It’s been done. He has absorbed all the wrath of God the Father against sin. There is no more wrath or anger or judgment or condemnation for you to bear. That’s how beautiful and valuable the life and death of Christ are.

ALL your sin and ALL your guilt can be completely eliminated by one life, by one death, the death of the God man, Jesus.

Which brings us to the third and final part of Paul's answer: how the saving righteousness of **God is just**.

Paul begins here by declaring that Christ's sacrifice was a demonstration of a character trait of God. Now if I asked you to finish the following sentence – The cross of Christ is how God shows His _____ - what would you say?

Love? Grace? Mercy? Forgiveness? All those things are true. But here, Paul emphasizes that the cross is how God shows His righteousness, His justice. The cross is the means by which God demonstrates the part of His character that requires sin to be punished. Remember the riddle of Exodus, “who will by no means clear the guilty, let

the guilty to unpunished?” So why was the cross necessary to show God’s justice? Well Paul says it’s because God, in His forbearance, had passed over former sins. In His mercy and patience, God had suspended His full judgment on the sins of OT saints. He didn’t ignore them; He simply set them aside temporarily. He declared people like Noah and Abraham and Sarah and Isaac and Jacob and Moses and Gideon and Samson and David and Jonah righteous even though they were sinners. The problem was, their sin was never adequately paid for under that old system. The best they could do was offer animal sacrifices, but the book of Hebrews makes it clear that the blood of bulls and goats can never take away sin. So God forgave them, but their sin was never dealt with. If God had left the situation like that, what would that make God? Unjust. If God allowed sinners to stand before Him

without adequate satisfaction ever being made for their crimes, He would be unrighteous. And so, to maintain His just character, His attribute of righteousness, someone had to pay for their sin. Who would? Who could? Jesus, on the cross, hundreds, even thousands of years later, would die to pay for the sins of Noah and Abraham and Sarah and David and all the rest. God's saving righteousness to those before Christ worked like a credit card. When you use a credit card, you take possession of the purchase now and the bill comes later. But to be more accurate, think of it like you give your child a credit card when they go off to college. They're can use it for food or clothes or fuel. When they use the card, they take possession of the benefit immediately. The bill comes later, and when it comes, it comes to someone else who pays it in full. When those OT saints put their faith in God,

faith in a coming Messiah, they were forgiven immediately. They took possession of the benefit of God's grace right then and there. The bill for their sin came later, and when it came, it came to Jesus, and He paid it on the cross. Paul says that this sacrifice shows God's righteousness to them, but also to everyone from the cross forward. It shows God's righteousness to us. That justice that would have been called into question and potentially compromised was instead vindicated because of Christ's sacrifice.

And the ultimate reason for it, Paul says, is so that He might be both just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus. Christ died on the cross so that God might maintain His just character AND, at the same time, act to justify believers. In the cross, God shows His justice and

His generosity. He upholds the demands of the law – Christ accomplishing it for us – and He upholds the just punishment for sin – Christ taking it for us. Only through the cross can God maintain His righteous character even while justifying sinful people.

So what was the riddle of Exodus 34? How can a just God forgive sinners? God maintains His justice by pouring out His righteous wrath against our sin on Jesus, the willing substitute, so that if we will trust fully and only in the person and work of Christ, we might be forgiven of our sin and declared righteous in His sight. That's the good news. And either you have believed that today, or you haven't. Either you've trusted in Jesus and been justified in His sight, or you haven't. And it's not a trick question. It's not a mystery. If you've come to a point in your life where you've

been brought to the end of yourself because of your sin and cried out to God to save you, if your heart has been transformed so that you love what you didn't used to love and you hate what you didn't used to hate, then Christ's sacrifice has been applied to you and you have been declared righteous in His sight. If you haven't done that, the invitation stands open. Turn from your sin, trust in Jesus, be forgiven, be cleansed, and receive new and eternal and abundant life today.