

the sin with Bathsheba), Paul also hints that God’s faithfulness will also be demonstrated through the judgment of unbelieving Israelites.

- To the objection that God is unjust to punish unfaithful Jewish people since their sin serves as a means to bring God glory (vv. 5, 7), Paul essentially answers that “the ends do not justify the means” (EBR, 58; vv. 6, 8). God is still right to judge sinners even though he uses their sin for good purposes, including his own glory.
3. The Guilt of All Humanity (3:9–20): “Paul accomplishes three purposes in this final paragraph of his opening argument in the letter (1:18–3:20): (1) he concludes his indictment of humanity with the chilling verdict that ‘Jews and Gentiles alike are all under the power of sin’ (v. 9); (2) he illustrates his indictment from the Old Testament (vv. 10–18); and (3) he draws a conclusion from his indictment: the law cannot save (vv. 19–20)” (EBR, 58).
- At first glance, Paul’s assertion in **verse 9** that the Jewish people are not better off than the Gentiles (“**Do we have any advantage? Not at all!**”) might appear to contradict what he said in verses 1–2. However, in verses 1–2, Paul is speaking of the advantage of having special revelation, specifically the OT. In verse 9, Paul is speaking of an advantage regarding personal salvation. Ultimately, most Israelites rejected the revelation given to them because they, *like the Gentiles*, were “**all under sin.**” Paul is moving from speaking of what distinguishes the Jewish people from the Gentiles (i.e., their covenant relationship and the accompanying special revelation) to speaking of what they have in common with the Gentiles (i.e., their bondage to sin). It is important to note that Paul does not merely say that all are sinners, but he says they are “**under the power of sin**” (which is the NIV’s way of correctly paraphrasing what Paul means by “under sin,” as it might appear in a more word-for-word English translation). The very real power that sin has over all humans (except Christ) is personified as a king or a master.²⁶
 - Of course, the power that sin has over people is demonstrated in sinning. Paul demonstrates the pervasiveness of sin by quoting several OT passages (vv. 10–18).²⁷ “Paul uses absolute negative language to emphasize that human sinfulness is all-inclusive. Absolute negative language avoids misunderstanding and emphasizes universality without exception. For example, ‘Absalom has struck down *all* the king’s sons, and *not one of them is left*’ (2 Sam. 13:30)” (Naselli, 48).
 - In **verse 19**, Paul refers back to these OT quotations (“**whatever the law says**” = what was said in vv. 10–18) and notes that the Jewish people (“**those who are**

²⁶ This will become more apparent as we go through Paul’s letter. “For instance, sin is described as reigning (5:21), enslaving (6:6), ruling (6:12), and exercising lordship (6:14). People are described as slaves to (6:16, 17, 20) or freed from (6:18, 22) sin” (Schreiner, 171).

²⁷ For the specific OT passages cited and the logic behind Paul’s ordering of the quotations see esp. EBR, 59.

under the law”), those who originally received these Scriptures and lived within its jurisdiction, are included under their indictment.²⁸ The Law was given to the Jewish people for the purpose (“**so that**”) the “**whole word**” might be “**accountable**” (the CSB has “may become subject to God’s judgment”).

- Why would the Jewish person’s accountability under the Law of Moses make the whole world liable to God’s judgment? Paul is making here a “from the greater to the lesser argument” (Moo, 214). If the Jewish people, with all their privileges, could not keep God’s law, then nobody could, and God is right to condemn all people. When we read about the Jewish people in the Scriptures, we might as Gentiles make the mistake of thinking we are “reading someone else’s mail,” but it is important to remember that they are part of the same human race; we share the same human nature, and in many ways, they are representative of all of us. If they failed to keep God’s law, then we would also fail and do fail to keep God’s law.
- This failure also means that the keeping of the Law of Moses could never justify anyone because of the power of sin over human lives (v. 20). Instead, the Law made men more conscious of the power of sin over their lives (cf. Gal 2:21ff).
- There is some debate over the meaning of the phrase “**works of the laws.**” Some have argued that Paul is speaking narrowly of the specific things that separated Jewish people from Gentiles, such as circumcision or food laws. However, this would not fit with Paul’s argument in this section, which says that mankind *can do nothing* that would make them right with God. Therefore, the majority position throughout Church history has rightly understood Paul to mean that keeping any laws will not justify a sinner, whether that is the Law of Moses or, by extension, any other list of requirements. This option not only fits best with what Paul says here but with what he says in other NT letters (e.g., see how he contrasts confidence in Christ’s work with “confidence in the flesh” and “everything” in Phil 3:3–11).
- It could be that verse 20 should start with “because” (NASB) or “for” (ESV, CSB, NET) and be understood as the *reason* for what Paul has just said in verse 19. However, the same word can be translated as “**therefore**” (NIV, KJV, NKJV). Paul is likely concluding everything he has said from 1:18ff and making an *inference*—because of the pervasiveness of sin, no one will be able to make themselves right with God through law-keeping. Righteousness will have to come another way!

²⁸ As we progress through Romans, we will notice that Paul uses “law” in several different ways. Depending on the English translation we are using, these differences are sometimes noted by the use or non-use of capitalization, but these decisions about capitalization have to be made by each group of translators. Here in 3:19, Paul is using “law” the first time to refer to the OT just quoted, which included quotations from the Psalms. When Paul uses “law” the second time in v. 19, he is likely refers more specifically to the Law of Moses, that is, the code of laws under which the people of Israel were to live. Both of these might be properly translated with a capitalized “Law,” but they are likely distinct.

B. Justification by Faith (3:21–4:25)

- In the previous large section (1:18–3:20), Paul made the case that all humanity stands equally condemned before God regardless of ethnicity or religious tradition. Furthermore, this condemnation reveals God’s righteousness because he has a just cause for this condemnation—humanity has rejected both general revelation (including their own conscience) and special revelation (e.g., the giving of the Mosaic Law). Not only do all people commit sins, but they are also “**under the power of sin**” (3:9; see also the footnote in CSB); that is, they, in their own strength, are enslaved to sin with no hope in of themselves of ever getting out from under this predicament. In this section (3:21–4:25), Paul explains how (1) God can remain righteous in saving some of these justly condemned sinners and (2) how sinners can receive this salvation.

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

- Luther called this paragraph, which is actually one long sentence in the original text, “the chief point, and the very central place of the Epistle, and of the whole Bible” (quoted in *EBR*, 66). Moo calls it the “heart” of the section that runs from 3:21–4:25 (Ibid.). Leon Morris calls it “possibly the most important single paragraph ever written” (173).
- As Moo’s outline suggests, justification is the topic of 3:21–26. Justification is a concept closely related to righteousness, with the close connection perhaps obscured somewhat by our English translations. One Greek noun and one Greek verb sharing the same root as that noun stand behind the translations *righteousness*, *justice*, and *justify*. A related noun is translated as *justification* (cf. Rom 4:25). As we work through this passage, it might be helpful to give a definition of this “justification,” which will be supported by the text of Scripture: “Justification is an act of God by which He judicially constitutes and declares a sinner to be perfectly righteous and forever treats him as such” (McCune, *STBC*, 3:93).
- “**But now**” (v. 21) draws attention to the shift that has occurred with the coming of Christ. Jesus brings a righteousness (a perfect record of keeping the moral law) that is “**apart from the Law**,” in other words, he brings a way of being made right with God, which was not available through keeping the Law of Moses. Although, this righteousness was something “**to which the Law and the Prophets testify**.” “Paul makes clear that although God’s activity of making people right before him takes place outside the parameters of the law of Moses, it is an activity that the Old Testament looks forward to and predicts” (*EBR*, 67).
- Paul further describes this righteousness as one that is given “**through faith in Jesus Christ**” to everyone who believes, whether they are Jews or Gentiles (v. 22). Some argue that the phrase behind “**through faith in Jesus Christ**” (e.g., NASB, NIV, ESV, CSB, etc.) might be better translated as “through the faith of Jesus Christ”

(e.g., footnote in NRSV) or “through the faithfulness of Jesus Christ” (so e.g., NET, CEB, footnote in CSB).²⁹ This alternate translation is grammatically possible. For example, a similar expression in Romans 4:16 means “**the faith of Abraham**” and not “faith in Abraham.” However, the traditional translation “**faith in Jesus Christ**” reflected in nearly all English versions is most likely correct. There is nowhere in the NT that clearly refers to us being saved because of Christ’s *faithfulness* or *faith*.³⁰ Furthermore, at this point in Romans, Paul is emphasizing faith in God rather than Jesus’ own faithfulness (see esp. 4:3). This conclusion about the translation “through faith in Jesus Christ” also seems supported by Galatians 2:16, which uses the phrase “through faith in Christ Jesus” and then further defines that phrase with the additional phrase “**have put our faith in Christ Jesus.**”

- It should also be noted that Paul chooses to describe this righteousness as something received **through** faith, as opposed to some other preposition that he might have chosen, such as “on account of” or “because of.” People are not saved on account of their faith in Jesus, “a construction that might encourage the notion that faith makes a contribution and has some merit. Rather, it is through faith that salvation is appropriated. Faith is simply a mode of receptivity (‘the hand of the heart,’ as Frédéric Godet puts it). Faith receives what God bestows but adds nothing to the gift” (Harrison and Hagner, 70).
- Rather than being redundant,³¹ Paul’s assertion that this righteousness comes “**to all who believe**” emphasizes the universal nature of this righteousness. This righteousness gained by faith in Jesus is advantageous for anyone and everyone who trusts in Christ. This phrase is an integral part of Paul’s argument in the letter.
- The *reason* why this salvation is received by “**all who believe**” is because (“for” in v. 22b in many English versions) God does not make a distinction between ethnicities or nationalities when it comes to salvation. The *reason* why God does not make a distinction when it comes to the offer of salvation is because (“**for**” in v. 23) everyone, regardless of their background, has sinned and needs God’s salvation. Everyone has sinned and is falling short of “**the glory of God.**” Humans were

²⁹ This alternate translation is defended in the commentaries and books of such scholars as Richard Hays, N. T. Wright, Daniel Wallace, Michael Bird, and Richard Longenecker. The underlying Greek phrase, like many phrases in every language, is ambiguous. This ambiguity may be seen in the KJV translation “by faith of Jesus Christ.” So these scholars are correct that this translation is a possible way of removing the ambiguity, but the context in Romans and the use of similar phrases in Paul’s other writings remove the ambiguity and point us in the direction of the traditional translation and interpretation—Paul is referring to people who put their trust **in** Jesus.

³⁰ This does not mean that there are not places in the NT that emphasize the importance of Jesus’ righteous life to our salvation. It just means that Jesus’ righteousness or what is sometimes called his “active obedience,” i.e., his perfect keeping of God’s moral law, is never described using the Greek word that might be translated as *faith* or *faithfulness*.

³¹ Here I am responding to one of the arguments for those who prefer the translation “the faithfulness of Jesus.”

created to reflect God’s glory, but we have abandoned that calling and demonstrate a craving for glory in vain pursuits. We are still waiting for the day when sin will be removed, and we will once again perfectly reflect God’s glory to the degree that a human can. The plight is universal, so God has rightly made the solution universal.

- **Verse 24** resumes the discussion from verse 22a, where Paul mentions “**all who believe**” and explains in more detail what he means by believers receiving righteousness. These believers are “**justified**” by God. That is, they are declared to be right as if they had kept God’s moral law even though they have not. This is a legal declaration by the righteous Judge (1) given freely (“**freely by his grace**”) and (2) made possible “**through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.**” At this point in his argument, Paul is not talking about God’s additional work of making sinners righteous—a work often referred to as *regeneration* and *sanctification*.³² This additional work will be discussed later in the letter.
- In English, it is probably easiest for us to visualize **verse 25** as the beginning of a new sentence (see, e.g., NIV and CSB). Here, Paul begins a description of this Jesus who has provided us redemption from the tyranny of sin (recall here that sin has already been pictured in 3:9 as a master that has enslaved us). God presented Jesus as a “**sacrifice of atonement**” or “propitiation.” A “propitiation” is a sacrifice that satisfies God’s just wrath towards sinners. Paul likely chose this particular word because it was used of the “mercy seat” on the ark of the covenant in the tabernacle/temple where Israel’s civil sins could be atoned (cf. Ex 25:17–22; Heb 9:5), but where the people of Israel were never ultimately made right with their God in a manner that would qualify them to enter the coming eternal kingdom (cf. Heb 9:6–28).³³ This particular “propitiation,” which was far greater than anything done under the Mosaic Law, was *accomplished by* Jesus’ death (“**his blood**”). The benefits of this “propitiation” are *received* “**by faith.**” The *purpose* of this “propitiation” was to “**demonstrate his righteousness.**” The propitiation was *necessary* “**because,**” during the OT, God patiently allowed *believers* to continue in their sins without a sacrifice that removed the wrath that those sins deserved (“**he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished**”).³⁴ At the end of verse 25,

³² My reason for making this distinction will become more clear as we get to Rom 4.

³³ It is very likely that even the Gentile believers in Rome would have recognized a reference to the “mercy seat” from their own study of the OT and their familiarity with Judaism. However, even outside the OT, the Greek word translated here as “propitiation” was used of things, or even people, who appeased the wrath of the gods. For example, an inscription near Ephesus from the late first-century BC describes Caesar Augustus as an “instrument of reconciliation” (the same word that Paul uses here in Rom 3:25) because Caesar brought peace and was therefore thought to have appeased the gods (Thielman, 211).

³⁴ I think it more likely that Paul is talking here about believers going unpunished rather than all people in Israel going unpunished. All people in the OT economy could continue to be a part of the covenant community of Israel and receive temporary blessing in this life through the forgiveness offered by the Mosaic sacrificial system. However, during this same time God was also forgiving believers and he did so on the basis of Christ’s sacrifice. See for example:

“**his righteousness**” refers to God’s justice. That is, it was not wrong or unjust for God to not punish the sins of OT believers (to the degree that those sins deserved) and even welcome them into presence at death because Christ’s death paid for their sins.

2. “By Faith Alone” (3:27–4:25)

a. “By Faith Alone”: Initial Statement (3:27–31)

- “Certainly, the centrality of the law in the Jewish religion made Jews susceptible to such a tendency; but all people, being fallen, exhibit the same tendency: Greeks, boasting in their wisdom (see 1 Cor. 1:19–31); Americans, boasting in their ‘American way of life’; and all too many Christians, boasting in their ‘good deeds’ instead of in the grace of God” (Moo, 268). “Boasting is excluded not only by the common plight of humanity in its inability to keep God’s law (3:10–20) but also by God’s completely gracious solution to that plight in the atoning death of Christ” (Thielman, 213). As Paul puts it in Galatians 2:21, “I do not set aside the grace of God, for if righteousness could be gained through the law, Christ died for nothing!”
- In **verses 27–31**, Paul again uses a question-and-answer format with a fictional opponent to make the following points:
 - Our ability to boast about salvation is eliminated because our salvation is received through faith, not by our works (i.e., our own efforts; **v. 27a**).
 - The principle (this is how Paul is using “**law**” in v. 27) that excludes boasting is the principle of faith (**v. 27b**). Paul can say this because (“**for**”) people are declared to be righteous by faith, not by works (**v. 28**).
 - Paul then asks the question in verse 29 and points out that God saves both Gentiles and Jews. His fictional opponent should accept this because there is only one God; there is not a different God for Gentiles. This one God will declare righteous both Jewish and Gentile people through the same means (i.e., their faith; **v. 30**).
 - Finally, the fictional opponent asks in **verse 31** whether this principle of faith abolishes the Law. Paul responds, “**Not at all! Rather, we uphold the law.**” At this point, Paul does not explain what he means by “**uphold the Law**” or “establish the law” (ESV, KJV). A complete answer will come once we reach Romans 6, but Paul might at least hint towards an answer in his discussion in Romans 4 about Abraham and especially David.

“Although God punished sinners during this period, he also justified ungodly people such as Abraham (4:5) and forgave wicked people such as David (4:7)” (Thielman, 212).

- b. “By Faith Alone”: Elaboration with Respect to Abraham (4:1–25): “The writers of the Old Testament and Jews after them regularly traced their national and spiritual standing back to Abraham. Therefore, if Paul’s gospel is to make sense of the Bible as a whole, he has to show how it stands in continuity with God’s promises to Abraham. This he seeks to show in Romans 4...” (*EBR*, 74).
- i. Faith and Works (4:1–8)
- Abraham might have appeared to be an example that contradicted Paul’s teaching in 3:21–31. However, despite how Abraham was presented in first-century Judaism (cf. *Jub* 23.10; *Pr. Man.* 8), the OT clarifies that Abraham was himself a sinner. However, God “**credited**” righteousness to him when he “**believed**” (cf. Gen 15:6; quoted in Rom 4:3).
 - This declaration that Abraham was righteous is not recorded in Genesis 22 when Abraham offered Isaac in Genesis 22, but in Genesis 15 when Abraham believed the promise made to him by God. Furthermore, Genesis 15:6 itself appears to be making a statement about something that occurred earlier in Abraham’s life (i.e., when he was called in Gen 12; cf. Heb 11:8). In other words, Abraham’s obedience was not the basis of this “crediting.”
 - Abraham had nothing to boast about—his salvation was gracious. If he had done something to earn his salvation, then God’s grace would not have saved him (**vv. 4–5**). Instead of Abraham working for salvation, God looked upon Abraham, who was a sinner (cf. Gen 12:10–20), and declared him to be righteous (as if he had perfectly kept God’s moral law) when Abraham believed. This is what Paul means by God justifying “**the ungodly**” (**v. 5**).
 - We should not misunderstand the quotation from Genesis 15:6 to mean that “faith” was the basis of Abraham’s justification or that “faith” is itself a work that we do to merit God’s favor. Instead, faith “is the very absence of all work, of all claim on God. Whereas systems of justification by works all look to the worshipper to produce the desired righteousness, Paul is speaking of a system that requires him to produce nothing. All he does is to reach out in faith for God’s good gift” (Morris, 199).³⁵
 - Furthermore, this same work of justification is also illustrated by the life of David (**vv. 6–8**), who was also a sinner but considered himself “**blessed**”

³⁵ Even the works that we as believers produce by the Spirit are not the basis for God declaring us righteous. This must be the case for us to call our salvation gracious and it is the only way we can have assurance because our works in this life will always be imperfect. “Our justification depends entirely on the mercy of God and the merits of Christ: when faith apprehends these, it is said to justify. Now, if you ask our opponents [i.e. Roman Catholic opponents] in what sense they ascribe justification to charity, they will answer, Being a duty acceptable to God, righteousness is in respect of its merit imputed to us by the acceptance of the divine goodness. Here you see how beautifully the argument proceeds. We say that faith justifies not because it merits justification for us by its own worth, but because it is an instrument by which we freely obtain the righteousness of Christ” (Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* 3.18.8).

because God did “not take into account” his sin (“**whose sin the Lord will never count against them**”; Ps 32:1–2 is quoted here; David makes a similar statement in Ps 103:8–12).

ii. Faith and Circumcision (4:9–12)

- Abraham’s justification also illustrates that justification is not based on circumcision. Abraham was circumcised long after he was justified (**v. 10**).³⁶
- Circumcision served as a sign of the covenant with Abraham and as a seal for Abraham’s faith, but it was not the basis for that faith. Circumcision, at least for Abraham, confirmed that justification had taken place.
- Since Abraham was justified before his circumcision, he can be the “**father of all who believe but have not been circumcised**” (**v. 11**). Furthermore, because he also was later circumcised, he can be the father of those who are circumcised *and* have the same faith as him (i.e., believing Jewish people; **v. 12**). In other words, there is ultimately one family of people who have the kind of faith possessed by Abraham, and this family includes both Jewish people and Gentiles (cf. Gal 3:29—“If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s seed, and heirs together according to the promise”).

iii. Faith, Promise, and the Law (4:13–22)

- This section gives the *reason* (“for” in NASB, etc.; **v. 13**; restated again in **v. 16**) why Abraham can be the “father” of those who do not follow the Law of Moses. The promise that Abraham would be the father of many nations did not come as part of the Law. Galatians 3:17 notes that Abraham received this promise 430 years before the Law was given.
- The *reason* why this is so important (“for,” **vv. 14–15**) is because if the promise could only be realized through keeping the Law, no one would receive the promise since the Law was impossible to keep. The Law “**brings wrath**” because, as chapter 2 explained, it is not perfectly kept. In fact, once the Law was given, people were even more accountable because they were breaking clearly stated commandments (the word translated “**violation**” in **v. 15** refers to crossing known boundaries or violating known laws; many English versions translate it as “**transgression**”; cf. “through the law we become conscious of our sin” in 3:20).
- In **verses 18–22**, Paul describes Abraham’s faith. Abraham believed God’s promise that he would be the father of many nations despite not having any children and being past the time when having children was physically

³⁶ At the very least, the circumcision of Abraham takes place in Gen 17 and the reference to his justification occurs in Gen 15. However, as I mentioned above, it is very likely that Gen 15 is referring to a justification that took place earlier in Abraham’s life, so the gap of time could be even greater.

impossible for him and his wife. So, when God gave the promise, he spoke of nations that did not yet exist (“**things that were not,**” v. 17), but Abraham believed that they would come to exist. He believed God. This is the essence of faith—God tells us something, and we believe it.

- We know from the story of Abraham recorded for us in Genesis that Abraham sometimes struggled with what God had promised, but when God viewed Abraham’s entire life, it could be said in general to be the life of a man who “**did not waver through unbelief regarding the promise of God, but was strengthened in his faith and gave glory to God**” (v. 20). It is important to remember that it is not the strength or quality of our faith that makes it saving faith, but the *object* of that faith.

- iv. The Faith of Abraham and the Faith of the Christian (4:23–25): In **verse 23**, Paul clarifies that what happened to Abraham (recorded in Gen 15:6) was not unique. Those who put our trust in the God who raised Jesus from the dead are also “**credited**” as righteous, i.e., we are justified (v. 24). In **verse 25**, Paul’s statement that Jesus was “**delivered over**” for “**our sins**” is a pretty straightforward way of speaking of Jesus’ death on our behalf. However, it is unclear what he means by “**raised to life for our justification.**” It likely refers to Christ’s vindication, which we now share. He did not deserve death, and God’s vindication of him was demonstrated by his resurrection (cf. 1 Tim 3:16).

III. The Assurance Provided by the Gospel: The Hope of Salvation (5:1–8:39): “Both 5:1–11 and 8:18–39 affirm, against the threat of tribulation and suffering, the certainty of the Christian’s final salvation because of God’s love, the work of Christ, and the ministry of the Holy Spirit. This theme, the “hope of sharing in God’s glory” (see 5:2 and 8:18, 30), brackets all of chaps. 5–8. Assurance of glory is, then, the overarching theme in this second major section of Romans. The verdict of justification, which Jews relegated to the day of judgment, has, Paul proclaims, already been rendered over the person who believes in Jesus. But can that verdict, “hidden” to the senses, guarantee that one will be delivered from God’s wrath when it is poured out in the judgment? Yes, affirms Paul. Nothing can stand in its way: not death (5:12–21), not sin (chap. 6), not the law (chap. 7)—nothing! (chap. 8). What God has begun, having justified and reconciled us, he will bring to a triumphant conclusion, and save us from wrath” (Moo, 319).

A. The Hope of Glory (5:1–21)

1. From Justification to Salvation (5:1–11)

- We that have been “**justified through faith**” have received (1) “**peace with God,**” (2) “**access... into this grace in which we now stand,**” and (3) “**hope of the glory of God**” (vv. 1–2). The first refers to the fact that the hostility between God and us has been removed. God no longer has a reason to pour out his wrath upon us. The