

Romans 3:21 The Great transformation

Introduction

Romans 3:21-26 has been described as ‘possibly the most important paragraph ever written’ (L.L. Morris, *Romans*, p. 173). Leon Morris, an Australian Anglican Bible commentator and New Testament Scholar and one of the greatest Bible expositors in the second half of the last century was well placed to make such a judgement. Paul’s letter to the Romans was a carefully produced treatise on the essential truths of the Gospel proclaimed by Paul and other early Christian preachers. It was a summary of what they proclaimed. Paul has great confidence in this Gospel (Romans 1:16-17) as a remedy for humanity’s greatest needs. Yet he needed to take two and a half chapters of this book to demonstrate our need of God’s good news. Only someone who grasped that they are a sinner and in need of God’s gift of salvation would want to put their faith in Jesus Christ, the One through whom we are saved. Only when we truly understand the bad news can we really appreciate the good news. If your GP told you I have good news and bad news to give you as a result of the tests you recently undertook – which would you ask for first? For me that is a no-brainer! I want the bad news first in order to contextualise the good news to come. In such a context the doctor might say unfortunately you have been diagnosed with cancer, but the good news is that it has not spread to another place in your body, as far as we can tell, and we are optimistic that there is a high chance of removing the cancer because we have caught it fairly early and with this particular cancer there is a high rate of success following early intervention. The bad news is that you may need to go through chemotherapy or radiotherapy (or both), but I am very hopeful that the course of treatment will be successful. This is a bitter-sweet pill to swallow. As a patient in such a setting you might have been expecting that news, but hoping your fears were unfounded. However, the bad news –which is genuinely bad news- is not the last word, instead an obstacle to be overcome. The problem of human sin need never to be the last word; the guilt that we can feel following mistakes we (or sometimes someone close to us) make – which for some people can be disabling and even lead to their death can be overcome through the intervention of God’s amazing grace. The fallout from the Jimmy Savile case claimed another victim on 14 October 2012, when the former TV presenter’s nephew died on 5 Nov 2012. Vivian Savile had barely eaten or drunk since the disclosures about the man he ‘hero-worshipped’ came out. Within weeks of this sad scandal coming out this man a keen cyclist lost the ability even to walk very far and died a relatively short time later, according to his family [BBC News website 5 Nov.2012]. The world is so full of bad news, yet Paul reminds us we have a message of good news that gives us a *hope and a future* (Jeremiah 29:11). Our Bible verse for 2012 which I have not quoted too often in sermons this year is particularly apt. It is God’s promise to Moses for the people of Israel who were uncertain about their future and were afraid of what might be in store for them if they went forward in the direction God appeared to be leading them. God’s promise was this: *The Lord Said: My presence will go with you and I will give you rest* (Exodus 33:14). It is part of the Scottish psyche to focus on the bad news –there always has to be a ‘but’ to good news! Actually it’s the opposite with the Christian Gospel. In a world of bad news it is the ultimate good news of what God has done for us in Jesus Christ. ²¹ **But now apart from the law the righteousness of God has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify.** ²² *This righteousness is given through faith in Jesus Christ to all who*

believe. There is no difference between Jew and Gentile (Romans 3:21-22). The best known verse in the Bible is John 3:16: *For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life.* What is it that God did to demonstrate His love to us? How did that love effect our salvation and reconcile us to our heavenly Father? What is the contrast between the old way in the Jewish faith and this new gospel that Paul is proclaiming?

1. The contrast and transformation in Paul's own life.

If being good and ticking all the moral and social boxes were sufficient to get to heaven then Saul of Tarsus (Paul the apostle) would have made the grade. He could have had himself in mind when he addressed the orthodox Jew's objections to his gospel in Romans 2:17-3:9. After all in a passage that recorded part of his personal testimony Paul told the Church at Philippi these words: *If someone else thinks they have reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more: ⁵circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; ⁶as for zeal, persecuting the church; **as for righteousness based on the law, faultless.**⁷ But whatever were gains to me I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. ⁸What is more, I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them garbage, that I may gain Christ ⁹and be found in him, **not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ**—the righteousness that comes from God on the basis of faith.(Philippians 3:4-9). A devout Jew, an outstanding university student, possibly the most able rabbinical student in what might loosely be called Jerusalem 'University' appeared to have everything going for him. He had looked down on the followers of 'The Way' those who placed their faith in Jesus of Nazareth. Yet on an extraordinary day on a journey to Damascus with his fellow vigilantes off to arrest followers of Jesus, like American bounty hunters of the nineteenth century, his life was transformed. Luke records several accounts of this extraordinary event in the Book of Acts. Acts 9: 4-6 tells us: *He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?"⁵"Who are you, Lord?" Saul asked. "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting," He replied. ⁶"Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do."* Meanwhile in Damascus the local believers have been having some prayer meetings. They have been reminding the Lord that this man –Saul of Tarsus –was so bad that the Lord ought to keep him out of Damascus as he could only do harm not any good. A key leader in that church was a man called Ananias. Luke continues with the story: *In Damascus there was a disciple named Ananias. The Lord called to him in a vision, "Ananias!" "Yes, Lord," he answered.¹¹ The Lord told him, "Go to the house of Judas on Straight Street and ask for a man from Tarsus named Saul, for he is praying. ¹²In a vision he has seen a man named Ananias come and place his hands on him to restore his sight."¹³ "Lord," Ananias answered, "I have heard many reports about this man and all the harm he has done to your holy people in Jerusalem. ¹⁴And he has come here with authority from the chief priests to arrest all who call on your name."¹⁵ But the Lord said to Ananias, "Go! This man is my chosen instrument to proclaim my name to the Gentiles and their kings and to the people of Israel. ¹⁶I will show him how much he must suffer for my name."*¹⁷ Then Ananias went to the house and entered it. Placing his hands on Saul, he said, "Brother Saul, the Lord—Jesus, who appeared to you on the road as you were coming here—has sent me so that you may see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit."¹⁸ Immediately, something like scales fell from Saul's eyes, and he could see again. He got up and was baptized, ¹⁹and after taking some food, he regained his strength (Acts 9:10-19). Ananias had a huge problem. Saul's track record was so bad. He was not sorry for what he had done, but wanted to do more of the same –a million miles from an apology. It had never entered the head of these Syrian believers that God might want to do a work through this unwelcome young man. Ananias had a problem – had God made a mistake. He knew what this man and his friends had been up to and he wanted to go*

no-where near them. Would he take a faith step for the sake of the Gospel? Now that God had apparently opened a new chapter in this man's life would he be willing to consider what God might be doing in Saul's life? It is in the light of this extraordinary transformation by God in Saul's life that we read Romans 3:21 ²¹ **But now apart from the law the righteousness of God has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify.** Are we willing to exercise sufficient confidence in the Gospel to take risks to share our faith in word and action with people who need Jesus? Do we need to pray for boldness to ask the Lord to make us like Ananias who in actual fact did far more than we probably will ever have to do –he put his life on the line! Saul of Tarsus had been an enemy of the Gospel *but now* had been transformed by the grace of God. Some years ago, when the apartheid scandal was being address in South Africa, our colleagues in the Baptist Union of South Africa and the Baptist Convention of South Africa recalled a momentous day when their networks of Baptist Churches (the one mainly but not exclusively white in racial terms and the other almost exclusively black in membership) met to resolve the differences between them. Various meetings had taken place but many members in their respective churches were sceptical that the issues that had held up their friendship in the Gospel had been resolved. This was a real problem as that day's gathering was a communion service. The large church was pretty full but the members of the respective bodies sat separately for the service. The leaders wondered how to take things forward. Although I have forgotten much of the detail now those present were asked to write down the things they had against individuals or the other collective body and write them down on a piece of paper. They were then asked to come forward and place them in some kind of receptacle underneath the communion table. They were asked to allow the blood of Jesus to cover the hurts and sins of the apartheid era, intended or unintended, and allow a new beginning to take shape with the past left with the Lord. I cannot pretend that a queue quickly formed that day, but slowly and steadily members of both groups came forward and tears flowed as God was at work in their midst. **But now apart from the law the righteousness of God has been made known** amongst Baptist Christians in South Africa. The Gospel of transformation of Paul's day is the gospel we have to proclaim in our generation, in our community –is it not? Is it not? As we model this gospel we commend Christ to people *without hope and without God in the world* (Ephesians 2:12b).

2. The contrast and transformation revealed in the gospel

(a) **From wrath to welcome** Paul, earlier in this Gospel, in Romans 1:18 stated the big problem for humanity: *The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of people...* In order to earn ones way to heaven meeting God's perfect standard is required –if self-righteousness is the way to go. However, God knows that we can never obtain that standard and so He took the initiative to deal with our sin and to give us the gift of the right standing (righteousness) of Jesus who died in our place as our substitute on the cross. This is what Paul was referring to when he wrote: **But now apart from the law the righteousness of God has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify** (Romans 3:21). Sin cannot be overlooked, it must be punished. Has there been a time in your life when you acknowledged you are a sinner and in need of His grace? It is these people to whom Jesus extends His welcome and forgiveness of sins. Paul goes on to say in Romans 3:22: *This righteousness is given through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference between Jew and Gentile.* Everyone must come to Him the same way- by faith. Do you need to take this step of faith today?

(b) **From condemnation to justification** (Romans 3:23-24a) *for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, ²⁴ and all are justified freely by his grace...* Our salvation is not like a mortgage on your home that is only cleared after a lifetime or twenty-five years when all the

payments are made. Jesus made all the payments for your salvation and mine. It is a free gift which He offers to us –obtained at the cost of His life on the cross. *For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—⁹ not by works, so that no one can boast.¹⁰ For we are God’s handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do* (Ephesians 2:8-10). This is so important to grasp because our calling to do good works is a response of love and gratitude to God for His goodness to us in Christ, rather than out of fear that He might throw us out of His family for making a mistake or failing in some aspect of our Christian discipleship. Now the follower of Jesus whose claim to faith is genuine will show evidence of a love for the Lord in their desire to gather for worship with His people and a desire to serve in a variety of different ways to show the reality of what is going on in our lives. They will ask him to help them discern the right priorities for their life and make the time for what is at the top of God’s ‘list’ rather than giving God the ‘spare change’ of their time. Paul’s letter will proceed on the basis of this secure status for God’s people. For example in Romans 5:1: *Therefore, **since** we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ,² through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand.* He spells this out more strongly in Romans 8:1-2: *Therefore, there is **now no condemnation** for those who are in Christ Jesus,² because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit who gives life has set you free from the law of sin and death.* There are some people who never have grasped this issue and others who struggle with acceptance of God’s welcome and cannot seem to stop condemning themselves. This is not a new teaching of Paul. John 3:17-18 highlights Jesus’ teaching on this point: *For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through Him.¹⁸ **Whoever believes in Him is not condemned**, but whoever does not believe **stands condemned already** because they have not believed in the name of God’s one and only Son.* Do you need to change your status before God? He expects every person to take that personal responsibility. Do you need to grasp His forgiveness and welcome and value your security in Christ?

(c) **From bondage to freedom** People sin most of the time because they enjoy it. Too often ministers and other preachers have misrepresented the motivation people have for violating God’s Law. A lot of the time, at least to begin with, it may bring pleasure. The problem comes later in the consequences of small acts of fraud or minor acts of sexual deviancy, or a few little lies, or whatever it may be, might appear useful even enjoyable and enabling us to progress our lives smoothly in the present. However, these issues accumulate over time and what once may have been a minor matter having little impact on our lives can become a major problem enslaving the one who thought they were in control. How many people addicted to nicotine, alcohol or drugs (or ?) would have taken the first puff or the first drink had they known how things would turn out. Freedom for such people has become a form of bondage. The good news of the gospel we proclaim speaks into this situation as well. Paul in Romans 7:6 declares: *But now, by dying to what once bound us, we have been released from the law so that we serve in the new way of the Spirit, and not in the old way of the written code.* How do we gain from this change? Just a few verses earlier the apostle in Romans 6:22 he states: *But now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves to God, the benefit you reap leads to holiness, and the result is eternal life.* One of the sad things when a church hasn’t seen anyone converted for years is that they (we?) can quickly forget the liberation experienced by a person truly set free to be who God wanted them to be in Christ when they are converted.

(d) **From exclusion to inclusion** all churches say that new people are welcome to join them, but how many people within those churches actually mean it? How many silently or even audibly grumble because somebody is sitting in my row or pew? When new people get involved in a church they may do tasks in a different way or bring a different perspective on familiar approaches to ministries- and someone may be annoyed because ‘we’ve always done it this way?’ The list of potential irritations or adaptations that can be required in the big scale of things may be modest, even if it doesn’t feel that way. However, we need always to

remember, ultimately, it's not about me and my preferences, but about God and giving Him the glory through the conversion of sinners and our collective transformation as Christian disciples to be like Jesus. Paul had to emphasise this point particularly to Jewish followers of Jesus who were not all thrilled at Gentiles coming to faith. In Ephesians 2:13-19, in particular, this truth is explained. ¹³*But now in Christ Jesus you who **once were far away have been brought near** by the blood of Christ.*¹⁴*For He himself is our peace, who **has made the two groups one** and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility,* ¹⁵*by setting aside in His flesh the law with its commands and regulations. His purpose was to create in Himself one new humanity out of the two, thus making peace,* ¹⁶*and in one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which He put to death their hostility.* ¹⁷*He came and preached peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near.* ¹⁸*For through him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit.*¹⁹***Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God's people and also members of his household.*** How willing are we to welcome in people who are different to us, but who want to follow Jesus? In the 1960s and 70s there were influential voices promoting the Church Growth Movement. The gist of the message was that churches grow fastest by focussing on attracting people like existing members. People of similar ages of the same ethnic background and the same social class; how is that different from the golf club, the working men's club or the health club? The Church of Jesus Christ is intended by her Lord to be an inclusive church that welcomes people of all ages, races and social classes, united by a common desire to glorify God and to enable other people to come to faith in Jesus as they witness disciples of Jesus supporting one another as they grow in their faith. This requires much grace and patience with one another, but unless people can see that the Lord can enable congregations to overcome the challenges of diversity they may not want to come to share our faith.

3. The Gospel is really good news

What does this mean in practice at a personal level for me if I trust Jesus as Lord and Saviour today?

(a) **I can be saved today** Too often as people who were converted years ago we forget the amazing wonder of what it means to know our sins forgiven and to have the gift of eternal life. There are many people who hope to go to heaven when they die, but are not sure whether they qualify or not? There are people who hope their good works will outweigh their wrong thoughts, words and actions –so that God will let them in, yet have no assurance that this will be the case. What a tragedy to go through life like this. It could not be further from the experience of the words Jesus spoke in John 10:10: *I have come that they may have life; and have it to the full.* Paul in these amazing words in the later part of Romans 3 wants to lift his readers' horizons to grasp the simplicity of the gospel and its reception even by a child. Paul wrote here in Romans 3:22 *This righteousness is given through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference between Jew and Gentile.* It is a gift from God. On the cross when Jesus shouted out: *It is finished* (John 19:30) the work of atonement was complete. God had accepted His sacrifice as sufficient to cover not only your sins and mine, but as a sacrifice of infinite worth to cover the sins of every person who reaches out to God for pardon. Have you done that? This gift of God's righteousness, or the gift of salvation, can be yours or mine the moment we turn from our sins, believe Jesus died as our substitute on the cross and receive Him into our lives as Lord and Saviour. It can happen today. Is this the message you need to grasp today? Paul in II Corinthians 6:2 wrote: *I tell you **now** is the time of God's favour, **now** is the day of salvation.*

(b) **I can be certain of my salvation** If my salvation in the final analysis depends on me then I could both gain it and lose it. 'Saved today and lost tomorrow'; In my early 20s I twice spent the summer working as a Camp Counsellor at a Salvation Army camp in the USA.

There were many good things that happened and precious memories of people met at that time. However, one thing that puzzled me after the morning service we held each week. There were a number of individuals who came forward to be saved several times during the summer. In conversation with one or two of them there was a clear but mistaken belief that if they had sinned during the week that their salvation was lost and that they needed to be saved again on Sunday. How sad that conception of God's love and grace. Which human parent would say to their child –because you shouted at me today or used some bad language or [insert some other offence] you are no longer my child? We don't behave like that, but neither does God! If God has accepted Jesus' sacrifice in my place or yours, then we are saved for ever –once the gift has been received by faith. Romans 11:29 states: *for God's gifts and His call are irrevocable*. Praise the Lord! Do you need to receive this assurance today? This is why Paul can tell the Christians in Philippi: *being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus* (Philippians 1:6).

(c) **I must give all the glory to God** *Where, then, is boasting? It is excluded* (Romans 1:27a)

If my salvation is all of God's grace then I cannot claim my share of 'credit'. I must never see myself as better than other people both in the church and outside it. The blessings I have in life really are gifts from God. Our heavenly Father has given us so many good things – supremely our salvation, but much more besides. ⁸*For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—* ⁹***not by works, so that no one can boast.*** ¹⁰*For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do* (Ephesians 2:8-10). This is such a big issue to grasp. When we get it, it will enable us to overlook the petty irritations and mistakes of other recipients of God's grace in our church family. It will enable us the more readily to accept other imperfect people into our church whom God has yet to send into our midst. It is truly amazing grace that God saved me- with all my faults and imperfections. How could this perfectly holy God allow me into His heaven? When I look in my own heart and see my shortcomings there are times when I wonder at His patience with me –so slow to learn so many spiritual lessons; going back to Him for the innumerable time to confess the same shortcomings in my walk with the Lord? I suspect that all of us are in that place –but to grasp it is to catch a glimpse of the wonder of the Gospel. May each of be able to rejoice and give God the glory for the wonders of His love and grace to us, Amen.