

Romans | The Gift of Righteousness (part 5 of 5)

Justification: The Purpose behind an Empty Tomb

Romans 4:23-25

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“That is why his faith was “counted to him as righteousness.” But the words “it was counted to him” were not written for his sake alone, but for ours also. It will be counted to us who believe in him who raised from the dead Jesus our Lord, who was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification.” (Romans 4:22–25, ESV)

Etched into the limestone underneath a statue in front of the National Archives in Washington, D.C. is a phrase that caught my eye and grabbed my heart. It reads “the past is prologue.” Do you know what that means? And why would it be in front of the National Archives?

Those were the two questions that I asked my kids while we were waiting for our tour to see the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and the Bill of Rights. Now I am a “word-guy,” which means that I love it when words can be put together such that they convey a powerful and significant statement. So that phrase was really meaningful to me.

The line “the past is prologue” is taken from *The Tempest* by William Shakespeare, and it refers to the way that history informs – even predicts – the future. The idea is that our lives are directly linked to the past, and that history is a great teacher as to who we are and can be our guide as we look to the future. That is why it is fitting to have the quotation “the past is prologue” etched in front of the building that contains our nation’s most important documents.

Our natural human tendency is to assume that our ideas, our lives, and our culture are unique, special, and superior. C.S. Lewis, the author of *The Chronicles of Narnia* warned about “chronological snobbery,” which he defined as “*the uncritical acceptance of the intellectual climate common to our own age and the assumption that whatever has gone out of date is on that account discredited.*”¹ In other words, it is the lack of connecting the past to the present.

Now we are gathered today on the most important day in the church calendar to celebrate the most important moment in the history of Christianity. We are reflecting on history

¹ <http://thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/justintaylor/2012/04/23/chronological-snobbery-and-the-spirit-of-our-age/>

² Thomas R. Schreiner, *Romans, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1998).

today – the biblical history of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. And I want to help you understand that this historical event is prologue for every one of us. What you believe about what happened on the third day just outside of Jerusalem around 30 AD informs your eternal destiny and your life even now.

What I hope to do today is to show you how the Resurrection of Jesus Christ potentially serves as prologue for your life and for eternity. Or you could summarize the purpose of our time in the Scriptures with this question: “What is the purpose of the empty tomb?”

For the last two weeks we have looked at Romans 4 and learned about faith in God’s promise to make people righteous apart from their own works. In other words, this chapter has been showing us how our good works do not work in terms of being granted forgiveness. Paul’s point here is that a relationship with God comes through faith in Jesus.

Our text today is Romans 4:22-25, and it gives us one of the best summaries of what Christianity and the Resurrection are all about.

1) The Problem of Sin Solved by the Cross

Normally we would examine this text in the order of the verses listed, but I think it is more helpful to start with the problem. Starting here helps us know the reason that this day is so important.

The key phrase is found in the first part of verse 25 – “*who was delivered up for our trespasses.*” The word “*trespasses*” is another word for sin, and it simply means any violation of the law and the glory of God. It is the wrong that we do, the wrong that we desire, and the basic brokenness that is in the world. It is sin that causes conflicts, impure desires, mixed motives, and deceitful actions. Sin is the problem in us, in the world, and in the universe.

According to verse 24, the “*who*” is Jesus, and of course the event that is being talked about here is the crucifixion, which we just celebrated on Good Friday. But what does it mean that Jesus was delivered up for our trespasses? Let me explain this to you using the actual verses of the Bible to help you understand what this means:

- The Bible tells us that God is holy: “*Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts . . .*” (Isaiah 6:3)
- Every human being is a sinner: “*for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,*” (Romans 3:23, ESV)
- The penalty for our violation of God’s glory or holiness is death: “*For the wages of sin is death . . .*” (Romans 6:23, ESV)

- God had a plan for the reconciliation of himself with us through the work of Christ: *“that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them . . .”* (2 Corinthians 5:19, ESV)
- God’s plan involved Jesus taking our penalty for sin: *“For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures,”* (1 Corinthians 15:3, ESV)
- The death of Jesus makes forgiveness possible: *“In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace,”* (Ephesians 1:7, ESV)

The crucifixion of Jesus was the ultimate sacrifice for sin, and that is why the cross is such a significant symbol. The cross is where a holy God poured out His wrath upon sin so that there is the possibility of forgiveness. Jesus’ death provided atonement for sin.

The crucifixion of Jesus was no accident. When the text says “he was delivered up,” it means more than to Pilate or the Jewish leaders. It means that God Himself delivered up His own son for the transgressions of sinful human beings. The delivering up of the Son of God was the plan of God to deliver His people from their sins. God was on a mission, and the death of His Son was central to that plan.

So this moment in history was orchestrated and planned by God for the purpose of saving people from their sins. And do you know that God is still at work in that plan? You are not here by accident today. You are not hearing this message today by coincidence. God is behind everything that is happening, and the reason He is at work in all the details is because of the problem of sin. God’s aim is to rescue us from ourselves.

Therefore, the historic moment of the crucifixion was not just an event in history. It was the moment when Jesus paid for our transgressions. Jesus died for your sins. He paid the debt for your transgressions. Something that happened 2,000 years ago can be applied to you personally when you, by faith, believe what is probably the most familiar verse in the entire Bible:

“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.” (John 3:16, ESV)

The crucifixion, however, is not the entire story.

2) The Power of Justification Validated by the Resurrection

Verse 25 continues with the second half of this great summary of Christianity. The text says “who . . . was raised for our justification.” This is another aspect of God’s plan for redemption that is vitally important.

In order to understand God’s plan, we need to know what the word “justification” means. It is a legal term which means to declare someone innocent such that there is no guilt, no blame, and no punishment. But it means more than just being declared “not guilty.” Justification means that God has declared people to be completely righteous. It means that in the courtroom of heaven, God has pronounced over you the status of total obedience. God considers you to have never violated His law. It means that you are what you were not before. You are righteous even though you were not before.

The closest comparison that I can give you is what I have observed with my own eyes in a courtroom during the finalization of an adoption. I have witnessed a number of adoptions in my lifetime, and it is a beautiful thing to behold. It more than a mere formality; it is a significant moment. A child who is not biologically a part of a family is legally declared to be part of this new family. The child and the family are the same people physically when they walk into the courtroom as when they leave. But when the judge declares the adoption to be final by striking the gavel, everything changes. A new relationship is established in that moment. This is why the Bible sometimes uses the term adoption to describe our new relationship with God through the death of Jesus.

“But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons.” (Galatians 4:4–5, ESV)

Justification is what makes the gospel such good news. It means that God gives you the righteousness of Jesus. It means that God has declared you to be something that you would not be on your own: righteous. Justification makes those who trust in Christ righteous.

But what is the connection between justification and resurrection? Why does Paul say “raised for our justification?”

The reason that that justification is connected to resurrection is because of the connection between sin and death. We read a verse earlier in the message that spoke directly to this. Romans 6:23 says “that the wages of sin is death.” The penalty for sin is death. And sin and death are so closely connected that sin could not be declared as defeated if death was ultimate and final.

In regards to Jesus, it means that if He had only died, then it would not signal that sin had been defeated. If death wins, then sin still reigns. If Jesus dies without a resurrection, then there is no hope that He is any different than any other person who lived on earth and claimed to be the Messiah.

But if Jesus conquers death by being raised to life, then everything changes. The resurrection has sweeping implications:

- It means that His death was acceptable to God for the atonement for sins
- It means that Jesus was indeed the Son of God
- It means that the Devil's scheme not only failed, but that it actually worked to fulfill God's plan
- It means that death and sin have been defeated
- It means that Jesus is a model of what God will do for all those who trust in Him
- It means that there is hope when dealing with the death of fellow believers

On Monday I attended the funeral of a member of my former church. He was a father of what was called "The Michigan sextuplets," and he was a passionate follower of Jesus who died at 39 of an unexpected heart attack. He and his wife were actively involved in children's ministry, especially VBS. So the first song that we sang at his funeral was "I'm Counting on God." And I will not ever forget the image of this young widow singing in front of a casket with seven kids seated next to her with a raised hand in worship saying, "I'm counting on . . . I'm counting on . . . I'm counting on God."

Why can she count on God? Because the resurrection of Jesus Christ means that death has ultimately been defeated. The resurrection means that sin has been paid for, death is not the end, and the Devil does not win.

The resurrection of Jesus Christ is a powerful statement. One commentary says this:

To say that Jesus was raised because of our justification is to say that his resurrection authenticates and confirms that our justification has been secured . . . The resurrection of Christ constitutes evidence that his work on our behalf has been completed.²

But there is one more reality regarding resurrection. The empty grave means something for the future, but it also means something now for those who are followers of Jesus. The

² Thomas R. Schreiner, *Romans, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1998). 244.

defeat of sin and death has immediate implications. Paul explains this to us in Romans 6 by linking the victory of Jesus to how Christians are to live every day.

“4 We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life. 5 For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. 6 We know that our old self was crucified with him in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing, so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin. 7 For one who has died has been set free from sin. 8 Now if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. 9 We know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him. 10 For the death he died he died to sin, once for all, but the life he lives he lives to God. 11 So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus. 12 Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal body, to make you obey its passions. 13 Do not present your members to sin as instruments for unrighteousness, but present yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life, and your members to God as instruments for righteousness” (Romans 6:4–13, ESV).

Do you see what Paul is saying here? He is linking the resurrection of Jesus with the fact that followers of Jesus are to “consider themselves to be dead to sin and alive to God.” And he is saying that in light of the resurrection we should “present ourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life.” In this way an historical event that happened 2,000 years ago has a real effect on how I live right now.

It means that the followers of Jesus share in His resurrection both in the future and now. It means that sin does not have to dominate our lives, that we can live in victory now, and that a relationship with Jesus can fundamentally change a person’s life.

The resurrection validated justification by demonstrating that death did not win, and that therefore through Christ, sin can be defeated.

3) The Personal Application Received by Faith

Now that we understand what it means that Jesus was delivered up for our transgressions and raised for our justification, let’s go back and see why Paul said this in the first place.

The argument that Paul is making here is that Abraham was counted righteous by God because of his faith in God’s promises, not because of his works. The message of Romans 4 is basically that faith, not works, is what makes a person righteous or that righteousness comes to us by faith in God, not in ourselves. Now that will help you understand what Paul means in verses 23-24.

*“23 But the words ‘it was counted to him’ were not written for his sake alone, 24 but for ours also. It will be counted to us who believe in him who raised from the dead Jesus our Lord”
(Romans 4:23–24 ESV)*

Paul is trying to show us that how God treated Abraham is how He is still treating people today. That is why he says that these words were not written for his sake alone. God’s dealing with Abraham is prologue for what is to come. And verse 24 tells us very clearly what that message is.

In the same way that God counted Abraham to be righteous, so too God will count people righteous as they put their faith in Him “who raised from the dead Jesus our Lord.” So the event called the resurrection is so much more than just history; it is something that, if believed along with the promise of God, creates salvation.

In this way history becomes very personal. By believing that you are a hopeless sinner, that Jesus died to pay for your sins, and that God raised Jesus from the dead, God counts you as forgiven and righteous, and you are saved from judgment.

In this way that past becomes prologue for you because what Jesus did 2,000 years ago on the cross and what the Father did by raising Him from the dead is prologue for the future. You see, what you believe about Easter Sunday and what you believe about Jesus Christ determines your eternal destiny, whether you will be condemned to Hell or saved from judgment in Heaven. What you believe about Easter Sunday also determines how you view yourself today, how you deal with the brokenness caused by sin, and how you live every single day.

So we are not just celebrating a moment in history. We are celebrating the one moment in the sovereign plan of God that changed everything! To say that He was delivered up for our transgressions and raised for our justification is, in effect, to say that God’s plan to save the human race worked!

And what must you do to be saved? You must believe in Jesus. And believing in Him is the prologue for the rest of your life and for all eternity.

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