

Every year in the tropics, the wet season brings a fresh start to the land – the parched brown earth once again becomes green and lush; flowers and incredible wildlife re-appear; the people who live in those places are terrifically excited once again.

But before they enjoy and appreciate the fresh start brought by the wet season, they have to endure the period called the build up. Week by week the clouds get heavier; the humidity builds and becomes so oppressive that people have been known to kill themselves in despair.

In some ways this is a good picture of the development of Paul’s argument in Romans. Look back to 1:16. He introduces us to the gospel of Jesus – the gospel he is obviously excited about and confident in – because it is God’s power for salvation to all who would trust Jesus.

But before we get to the fresh start that comes through Jesus, Paul takes us through a long build-up period, which is oppressive and despair causing. Why? Simply because we will not fully appreciate the gospel unless we fully understand the context into which God’s good news gospel comes.

Two little words in verse 21, “but now”, introduce a new section of the argument in a way that is as wonderful as the first rain after weeks of oppressive build up to the wet season in the tropics.

Let me remind you first of all, of the build-up - **God’s dilemma and that of the sinner.** Look at verse 21. The issue at hand is righteousness or a standard of behaviour that is acceptable to God. The build-up or context lies in Paul’s argument, which begins back in 1:18 – turn to it now.

Paul’s argument is very simple. Sin inevitably attracts God’s wrath. And, therefore, every person is under God’s wrath and judgment because nobody treats God as he deserves.

Nobody lives in the light of what they know about God. Not the uncivilised tribesman (1:21-32), who has only basic knowledge of God in creation; not the highly civilised Romans (2:1-16), who had a God-given conscience of what is right and wrong; and not even the highly religious Jews, who had God’s written word as their guide (2:17-3:8).

Why is it like this? Because everyone is under the power of sin, 3:9-20, which means that every person deliberately rejects what they know about God and instead set up their own idea of God, and do their own thing. In fact, 3:20, the more we know of God’s law or God’s standard, the more we are reduced to guilty silence before God. Left to ourselves we are done for.

And here lies God’s dilemma. From the beginning of the world he had stated his intention to build a great community of people loved by him and intimately related to him. But how can God do that when at the same time he cannot, and will not have anything to do with

sin and rebellion because he is the Holy God? God's dilemma is how to accept sinners as though they were not sinners?

But that's Paul's point of contrast in verse 21. We are not left to ourselves because **God takes the initiative, doing for us what we could never do for ourselves.**

Given that people will never deserve more than God's judgment, God has provided a wonderful alternative - what we call the gospel - the means by which we can be acceptable to God and restored to right relationship with him in spite of our failures.

This is so amazing. Let's stop and let it sink in. Have you ever been responsible for messing up a relationship only to experience the wonder of having the person you hurt, offended and wronged take the initiative to restore the relationship, providing a fresh start in new friendship?

That's precisely what God does. Verse 24 this new relationship with God is achieved through the death of Jesus and, verse 22, is a totally free gift to us as we put our faith or trust in Jesus alone to do for us what we could never do for ourselves - secure God's acceptance.

And the extent of God's commitment is even greater when we consider the detail of HOW the death of Jesus puts us back into right relationship with God? Paul introduces three important words, each of which describes a detailed part of the whole process that we call the gospel.

**1. Jesus' death soaks up all God's wrath** (propitiation - 'sacrifice of atonement' in NIV). Verse 25. God's wrath is his deep anger and offence as a result of his own creatures treating him like dirt.

The sacrifice of atonement or propitiation is an Old Testament picture where the blood of a sacrificial animal was poured out on the altar to symbolise the covering or satisfying of God's wrath.

When we are offended we lash out at others. The amazing thing about the gospel is that God takes his anger out on himself, through the death of his own son rather than the death of those who deserve it. Jesus himself described his death as the cup of God's wrath.

All of God's anger and offence at sin was poured out on Jesus until not a single drop is left towards God's special people. But the wonderful result is that sinners like you and me do not have to, and never will experience it if we are Christians.

**Second. Jesus' death pays the penalty his people's crime deserves (Redemption).** Look at verse 24. The death of Jesus redeems or ransoms or buys back God's people by paying, on their behalf, what they owe to God. God's law says the proper penalty for sin is death. Jesus volunteers to die in the place of God's people, paying the full penalty of their rebellion and disobedience towards God, with the result they are set free from guilt and the demand of the law.

Let me illustrate. When I get an invoice it lists the things for which I owe money. I am indebted to them until such times as the account is paid. They have a legal claim on me while the account is outstanding. The invoice reminds me of all this.

In his death for me, Jesus takes the account I have run up because of sin and stamps it 'paid in full through my death on the cross'. There is no more payment to be made to God, no more liability before God. Never again will those for whom Christ died be accused of an unpaid debt of sin.

**Third, the death of Jesus actually changes the way God views his sinful people (Justification).** What Jesus does in his death clears the way for God to change the way he views his sinful people. Verse 24, the result of Jesus' is that God justifies his people.

What does it mean to be justified by the death of Jesus? The word was a legal term meaning a person was declared to be in the right by another. Because of the death of Jesus, God declares his sinful people to be in right relationship with him again.

It is God's legally binding declaration that I will be treated just-as-if-I'd-never-sinned. How can God treat his sinful people like that? Because Jesus has swapped me. He took all God's wrath and all my sin while giving me his perfect obedience and righteousness.

This is called imputed righteousness. It is something I am given rather than something I deserve. Not only did Jesus clear all the debt I owed God for my sin, he also deposited to my name and my account his righteousness – his perfect obedience to God's law.

Now when God looks at me he sees Christ's attitudes and desires and perfect obedience or righteousness. It's not that I am a different person. I am still a sinful person. But now God sees me in Jesus and thus sees the new attitudes and behaviour in his people that he expects.

But why did God go to such extreme lengths to deal with my crimes, my sin and disobedience? Why didn't he just turn a blind eye to it all and forget about it all or say it doesn't matter? Because he is just. **So, fourth, Jesus death publicly demonstrates God's justice.** Look at verses 25-26.

Forgiveness is not an easy thing for God. He cannot allow any sin to go unpunished because he is completely holy. If even one sin was left unpunished or ignored then he could no longer claim to be just and holy. In the death of Christ God was able to forgive the sins of his people while at the same time doing the right thing and even more importantly being seen to do the right thing.

Justice is totally and publicly satisfied, verse 25. All the sins of God's people, committed over the centuries had, as it were, been piled up in a big stack to be paid for by Jesus, demonstrating his justice. At the same time he rescued us from sin and put us into right relationship with him, thus satisfying the demands of love as well.

If ever there was a truth to boggle the mind, this is it! If ever there was a head-spinning picture of God's commitment to his special people this is it! And in the last few minutes let

me suggest some implications for us. These verses tell us a lot about God, but far better than that, **the gospel shows us our great God in a way that nothing else does.**

**He is a holy God who cannot be 'played with'.** Sin is serious to God. He cannot ignore even one sin because he is holy and just. In this sense the gospel gives us a very clear warning.

**He is a loving and merciful God.** The gospel of Jesus is the greatest love story of all time. God loves the unlovely and the unloveable - those who have nothing to commend themselves to God and who give God every reason simply to sweep them aside in judgment.

**He is a generous or gracious God** in that he has taken the initiative to deliver us from the mess we have made for ourselves.

**He is passionate to save sinners and build his church.** Saving his sinful people and bringing them home to heaven to be with him has been God's one purpose throughout history.

**So, if you are not a Christian** then you really only have one big question to consider: how can I get rid of my sin and be acceptable to God? That is the question of all religions. And the answer is before you this morning. The choice you have is simple and clear.

If you continue to suppress the truth about God, thinking you can live under your own authority and rule, then you are rightly under God's wrath and will be condemned for your rebellion. And just as bad, will be thinking that you can do something about this situation by your own efforts. You, like every other person in this world have fallen short of God's glory or standards for acceptance by him.

God has offered you his alternative in Jesus – a wonderful rescue package in Jesus in which Jesus does for you what you could never do for yourself. It is there for the taking for free. Will you take it or will you reject that as well?

You will never read a more important paragraph of literature. You will never hear of a more amazing rescue. In the Lord Jesus, God has found a way of accepting you into his heaven even as you continue to be a sinner.

**And if you are a Christian:-** are you filled with a sense of amazement, thankfulness and indebtedness? Today, so many Christians are self-centred when thinking about the gospel:- What I need; what I want; what I get. But the true gospel starts and finishes with God's initiative.

And true gospel response, therefore, will show in us being God-centred as Christians. Are you constantly grateful to the Lord for your salvation? Do you constantly try and cultivate a sense of your indebtedness to Jesus for such a wonderful gift of forgiveness and new life and relationship?

Perhaps you have lost any sense of the amazing nature of grace because you have lost touch with how sinful and offensive you are to the Lord; or you have forgotten how serious sin is; or because you think God owes you something.

And again, is the gospel as big for you as it is for God? Does it give you a sense of identity and purpose in every day living? You have been given a fresh start in life at the cost of Jesus' death. Are you determined that Jesus' death will not be wasted on you by

The gospel shows us God's love and God's passion and God's preparedness to use all his resources, no matter what the personal cost for our salvation. In response does God see in you similar love and similar passion and similar preparedness to use your resources of time, money, possessions and even life itself to get this same message of salvation to others in our world who so desperately need it if they are to avoid God's wrath and eternity in hell?

That was what framed Paul's life and led him to say he was not ashamed of the gospel. The world in general, and many of your friends, family and workmates in particular may mock and ridicule God's good news gospel, but we must remain excited and confident because it is the power of God for salvation for all who believe.

So many here this morning can testify personally to this truth. Let's keep pressing on with confidence trusting that the lord will do in the lives of our friends what he has also done in our lives – give us the gift of righteousness or acceptance with himself that can only come through grace and trust in the death and resurrection of Jesus.