

BaptistWay: Justified by faith

September 11, 2015

• *The BaptistWay lesson for Sept. 27 focuses on Romans 3:21-31.*

This passage opens with “But now,” an indication it contrasts with what came before. Romans 1:18-3:20 is a whole unit with a single message, summed up in Romans 3:23: “For all have sinned and fall of the glory of God.” There is no difference between Jews and Gentiles; everyone is overshadowed by the effects and influence of sin. No one is exempt.

More should be said, however, about falling short “of the glory of God.” In contemporary discussions, this usually is taken to mean God is separated from sinners, or that each person’s individual relationship with God has been broken. While certainly true, the Apostle Paul likely is going further, seeing “the glory of God” as the intimate union of God with all creation. Therefore, “falling short” would mean sin prevents our full participation in that union, or using the language of 2 Peter, we cannot “participate in the divine nature” (1:4). In short, the first major section of the letter highlighted humanity’s faithlessness (1:18-3:20), but now we see something different.

Righteousness of God

What now has happened, writes Paul, is that “the righteousness of God has been made known” (v. 21), which echoes the letter’s thesis in 1:17—“the righteousness of God is revealed.” Recalling that righteousness for Paul indicates God’s righteous character and activity, we might better read verse 22 as follows, “This righteousness is given through the faith of Jesus Christ to all who believe.” Technically, there is no preposition in the Greek text between “faith” and “Jesus Christ.” To make sense of the words, though, readers and translations must insert a preposition in that place,

and there are several options. Of course, our immediate thought when we see “faith ___ Jesus Christ” is to insert “in,” highlighting the importance of believing in Jesus. Paul, however, wants to also say that Jesus’ faithfulness reveals God’s own righteousness. As we saw in chapter 1, this righteousness flows from Christ’s faithfulness to our faithfulness. This response to Jesus’ faithfulness is seen at the end of this passage, where Paul writes God will justify “the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through that same faith” (3:30). Both Christ’s faith and our faith become crucial for restoring the “glory of God” to humanity.

Redemption and exodus

Jesus’ faithfulness typically is described in terms of his vicarious suffering. He died for us in our place and for our sins. This is true, but once again, Paul has a fuller point to make. One New Testament commentator points out the language Paul uses to discuss Christ’s redemption also is used to refer to the exodus event, when God brought the former Egyptian slaves through the Reed Sea to the Promised Land. In other words, the salvation and liberation brought about by Jesus is not entirely different from that brought about when God brought the people of Israel out of Egypt. This, in fact, is why Paul states the righteousness of God that has been made known was witnessed by the law and the prophets (v. 21).

Likewise, we can see new aspects of Christ’s work extending from the exodus. The disjointed collection of Israelites who were brought out of Egypt were fashioned and molded into one people. That is, they were transformed, through God’s gracious gift, into the people of God. Of course, we might also consider the Passover link between the exodus and Christ, the “sacrifice of atonement, through the shedding of his blood” (v. 25). Moreover, if the exodus is a display of God’s faithfulness to the people of Israel, we should understand Christ’s crucifixion to be the epitome of God’s faithfulness to the church—and through the church, all creation.

The grace that justifies, then, does not merely label one as cleansed. Instead, it is transformative, incorporating outsiders into the people of God, and relativizing existing boundary markers (see Galatians 3:28). Through Christ's righteousness, we become righteous and live as such. We do not boast, though, because this would invalidate not only faith, but also the law that requires faith (v. 27).

One people of God

As we have seen several times throughout the letter, Paul is clear there is no difference between Jews and Gentiles. Any division threatens the character and community of the people of God. God is one, so the people of God should be one (v. 30). This statement echoes the Mosaic covenant's confession of faith—the Shema: “Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one” (Deuteronomy 6:4). Once again, Paul displays his deep knowledge of the Old Testament as part of his understanding of the nature of Jesus. Paul sees Jesus truly as the Messiah, the one who fulfills the law and the prophets rather than negating them.

For Gentiles, then, this long-standing Jewish affirmation becomes the confession of all God's people—Jew and Gentile, male and female, young and old. This one God has demonstrated faithfulness throughout the ages, making Israel's story and Israel's law, including the tales of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, part of the story of all the redeemed.