

465 years ago today, March 21<sup>st</sup> 1556 Archbishop Thomas Cranmer was burnt at the stake. By order of the English monarchy. His crime: defending the biblical teaching of justification by faith alone through the grace of Christ. From passages such as **Romans 3:21-26**. A humbling privilege on the anniversary of Thomas Cranmer's death to preach on this majestic passage of Scripture. A passage on God's response to the darkness of universal sinfulness. Declaring how the saving righteousness of God revealed at the Cross. Where wrath and mercy meet. In the context of Paul's revelation of the gospel in Romans, two further questions arise. From **3:20**, *'Therefore no one will be declared righteous in God's sight by the works of the law...'* Is there any hope for sinful humanity? From **3:25**, *'because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished...'* Is God truly righteous if he pardons the sinner without dealing with sin? Today's passage, the theological heart of Paul's letter to the Romans. The above questions answered as Paul expands his readers' understanding of God's gospel. The dark valley section of Romans left us in no doubt about universal human culpability. We are all cactus. Affirmed again in **v23**, *'for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God'* The law of God makes humanity conscious of sin. The law of God cannot save. *'But'* the opening word of today's reading. Usually a negative, defensive word. Here a word of hope. Pointing beyond the seemingly hopeless conclusion: nothing can save us from the deserved judgement of God. *'But now apart from the law the righteousness of God has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify.'*

**v21** Dawning of a new era. The righteousness of God, no longer revealed to Israel through the law. Revealed in the good news of the gospel. Depending on the context *'righteousness'* means an attribute of God, an expression of his character, or an activity of God, or a status given by God. Sometimes a combination of these on display. Consistently in this passage righteousness is God's justifying, vindicating activity. Is there any hope for sinful humanity? Yes: the powerful gospel of God revealing the saving work of Jesus Christ. Brothers and sisters, an appropriate point to pause and pray. The solid food that follows is lifegiving. Only by the work of the Holy Spirit will we understand it. *Father your word is a living and enduring word, that does not return to you empty. We ask for your Spirit to illuminate our hearts and minds to the saving truth of the gospel. Please reveal to us the wonder of the cross, where your wrath and your mercy meet in the death of Jesus our Saviour.* Listen to the liberating words of

**v24-25a** in a more literal translation, *'and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith.'* The free gift of God's grace: justification made possible by the divine act of redemption through the shedding of Jesus' blood as a propitiation, an atoning sacrifice. Three important terms in their biblical usage: justification, redemption, propitiation. Justification: law court language. To be justified is to be declared not guilty and free from impending punishment. Redemption: language of the slave markets. Slaves redeemed, set free, upon the payment of the demanded price. Propitiation: the turning away of wrath by an offering. The Greek word, translated atoning sacrifice or propitiation, used extensively in the Old Testament. Referring to the golden cover over the ark. Where sacrificial blood sprinkled on the day of atonement. Paul's use of this word in **v 25**, *'God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement'* makes a clear assertion. The death of Jesus the propitiation. The means by which the wrath of God averted. Because the wrath of God fully satisfied in the substitutionary death of Jesus. The innocent dying in place of the guilty. Bearing the punishment for sin. Where wrath and mercy meet. In the 1662 Lord's Supper. Thomas Cranmer speaks of the tender mercy of God in the death of Jesus. As *'a full, perfect, and sufficient sacrifice, oblation, and satisfaction, for the sins of the whole world'* Tender mercy because God offers the sacrifice that pays the price for sin. Then accepts the sacrifice as full satisfaction for the sins of the whole world. He offers his one and only Son, God in human flesh. In effect he offers himself. Jesus no unwilling victim. Fully participating in this tender mercy. From Jesus' lips, *'For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.'* **Mark 10:45** *Now my soul is troubled, and what shall I say? 'Father, save me from this hour'? No, it was for this very reason I came to this hour.* **John 12:27** Sisters and brothers, how alive is your heart to the wonder of what the Bible is teaching us? Of the depths of God's love, the breadth of his mercy. *'Amazing love! How can it be that Thou, my God, shouldst die for me!'* May those or similar words well up in your heart, spring forth in wondrous praise. What is your understanding of the benefits of Jesus' death? Firstly, the confident assurance of salvation. Knowing God declares you innocent despite the reality of your sin. My heart aches when confronted with deep lack of assurance in those who profess to be Christian. For the spiritual uncertainty about the future beyond death. For failure to grasp the price God paid for our assurance. Secondly, the gift of deliverance from condemnation through the redemption that came by

Christ. Deliverance from anything that binds your life, fills you with fear, self-condemnation. Thirdly, the joy of forgiveness through Christ's atoning sacrifice. Freedom from the guilt of personal sin. Brothers and sisters, how evident are these benefits in your life? The passage concludes by answering the second question. Is God truly righteous if he pardons the sinner without dealing with the sin? *He did this to demonstrate his righteousness, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished—* <sup>26</sup> *he did it to demonstrate his righteousness at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus.* **v25b-26** Yes God is truly righteous, just and merciful. Dealing with sin while remaining faithful to his promises to save those who trust in him. God able to declare the ungodly righteous and remain righteous himself because of his penal and substitutionary provision in the sacrificial death of his Son. Thomas Cranmer died defending biblical Christianity. The gospel of justification by faith alone; penal substitutionary atonement. As we have heard about again in **Romans 3:21-26**. Cranmer stood against those who rob the gospel of its power to save by denying the biblical teaching of the Cross. In his day, by religious practices that contradict the gospel. In our day by preaching and teaching Jesus' death has nothing to do with our sin. Wherever the gospel is proclaimed and believed there is deliverance from the penalty and power of sin, new life in Christ. Proclaiming the gospel is costly. We are compelled to do so because we know its truth in our lives. Because God has committed this message of reconciliation to us. This message, good news. But only to those who respond by faith. *'This righteousness is given through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe.'* **v22** Have you been declared innocent despite the guilt of your sin? Redeemed from slavery to sin. Reconciled to your Creator. In 1829 George Wilson sentenced to death in the USA. President Andrew Jackson pardoned him. Wilson refused to accept the pardon. The Supreme Court ruled on whether George Wilson was effectively pardoned or still faced the death penalty. Their ruling: *"A pardon is a parchment whose only value must be determined by the receiver of the pardon. It has no value apart from what the receiver gives it."* George Wilson refusing the pardon was hung for his crimes. Sisters and brothers, don't be like George Wilson. Receive God's pardon. Turn to the living God in repentance, trust in the Lord Jesus alone.