

II. GOD'S JUSTIFICATION OF SOME UNRIGHTEOUS HUMAN BEINGS THROUGH CHRIST

This section divides into four segments.

The first segment (3:21-31) is the heart of the gospel -- how God can declare righteous those who are unrighteous, but who nevertheless come to trust in Christ and His redemptive work for salvation from their sins and its consequences. This is the doctrine of justification by faith.

The second segment (4:1-25) provides us with an example (not merely an illustration) of justification by faith -- Abraham, who was declared righteous, not on the basis of a righteousness that came from himself, through the keeping of the Law of God, but on the basis of a righteousness that came from God, through faith in God and His salvation.

The third segment (5:1-11) details a number of the blessings that accompany justification by faith.

The fourth segment (5:12-21) presents a sustained parallel, comparing and contrasting the condemnation which comes to those who are in Adam and the justification which comes to those who are in Christ.

Let us look at each of these segments, some in detail and some briefly, and let us attempt to answer the question, How can unrighteous human beings become righteous before God?

- A. The first segment begins in 3:21 with a sharp contrast to that which has preceded it. In fact, it picks up the key ideas of the theme, found in 1:16-17, and develops them.

Having stated in 3:20 that "no one will be declared righteous in His sight by observing the Law," Paul asserts in 3:21: "But now a righteousness from God, apart from the law, has been made known;" and he begins to explain how this can be.

First, he says that the Old Testament witnesses to this righteousness apart from the law. "The Law and the Prophets" should be understood as a reference to the whole Old Testament (as in the figure synecdoche, in which part is given for the whole). Incidentally, in the next segment (chapter 4) Paul is going to provide us with instances of this witness.

Let us pause here and affirm a very important principle. The Old Testament does not teach salvation by human works, or salvation by a mixture of faith and works. Salvation has always been by grace through faith, and has always rested on the atonement of Christ, whether viewed in prospect or in retrospect. Righteousness from Adam to Christ was always "apart from law". Thus "apart from the law" (verse 21) should be understood to mean apart from our fulfillment of the Law of God.

Paul says that this righteousness of God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe, without distinction between Jews and Gentiles (verse 22). Previously we noted two meanings of the term "the righteousness of God" -- God's attribute or characteristic of righteousness, and God's standard of righteousness addressed to man's obedience, His perfect Law. Neither of these meanings fits here, since