

August 31, 2008 by Steve Brandon



The Greatness of God in our Hearts

Romans 3:9-31

1. Your Heart (verses 9-20)

2. His Salvation (verses 21-31)

In recent weeks, I have preached a series of sermons pointing us to the greatness of God. We started with a message entitled, "The Greatness of God in the Stars." We then moved to a message entitled, "The Greatness of God on the Earth." This morning, my message is entitled, "The Greatness of God in our Hearts." My aim of these sermons that I have preached has been simple. I want for you to see afresh of how great God is, that we might respond in worship to Him with more passion than ever before.

How easy is it for us to look up at the sky at night and see the stars and say, "Wow, that's nice." But, if you knew and understood what you were really looking at, the distance, variety and size of the stars, you would say, "WOW!!!! THAT'S INCREDIBLE!!! I CAN'T BELIEVE THE AWESOME POWER OF GOD!" And that's the sort of response that I tried to produce with my message entitled, "The Greatness of God in the Stars."

How easy is it for us to look at the earth around us and see the plants and the animals and say, "Isn't that a pretty flower!" or "What a cute dog!". But, if you knew and understood what you were really looking at, and all the ways that God has made that flower to grow, and how God has made the animals to function. You would say, "WOW!!!! THERE ARE SOME AMAZING THINGS GOING ON IN THAT FLOWER, I CAN'T BELIEVE HOW INCREDIBLE LIFE IS!!! WHAT A WONDERFUL GOD WE HAVE WHO HAS GIVEN US SUCH BEAUTIFUL ENVIRONMENT IN WHICH TO LIVE WHICH FUNCTIONS SO PERFECTLY!!!" And that's what I tried to work in you with my message entitled, "The Greatness of God on the Earth."

This morning, as we come to look at "The Greatness of God in our Hearts," my aim is to stir your hearts in wonder and praise and love for God for the work that He has done in your hearts to save you from your sin. How easy is it for us to look at what God has given to us in our salvation, and merely say, "I'm saved. Isn't that nice!" But, if you knew and understood what sort of work God did in your heart, you would say, "WOW!!!! WHAT A WONDERFUL SAVIOR WE HAVE! I CAN'T BELIEVE THAT HE CHANGED MY HEART AND SAVED ME! IT'S AMAZING!!!"

I want for you to leave this place of worship this morning singing, ...

Amazing Grace, How sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me.
I once was lost, but now I'm found was blind, but now I see. [\[1\]](#)

This morning, I want for you to come to grips with the sort of wretched sinner that you are. I want for you to marvel at the changing work that God has done in your soul! I want you to leave this place singing ...

And can it be that I should gain an interest in the Savior's blood.
Died He for me, who caused His pain, for me to Him to death pursued.
Amazing love, how can it be, that Thou, my God, should die for me? [\[2\]](#)

My message this morning is really fundamental to all of Christian living. The more that we reflect upon our salvation, seeing our own sin and God's work, the more we reflect upon the cross of Christ, and the more we truly understand and comprehend the greatness of God's work in our hearts, we will live differently.

Now, there are certainly some among us, who know nothing of this experience. You have refused to repent of your sins, have not believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, and have not known of God's saving work in your heart. And so, for you, you will hear this message as an outsider. It's not something that you have experienced, personally.. If this is you this morning, then let me simply say that you may feel a bit on the outside this morning. Though, I call you in. I call you to turn to Jesus, who alone can save your soul. Perhaps this morning, the Lord will work in your hearts through my words, so that you experience the love of God for yourself.

Now, to reach this point where we are absolutely thrilled with God's work in our souls, I believe that I need to address two issues of your heart.

1. Your heart is far more wicked than you think that it is.
2. The salvation that God gives is far better than you think that it is.

Your response to God will be directly proportional to how well you understand these two statements. If you truly grasp the depth of your sin, you will worship Jesus with incredible thankfulness and praise. If you truly grasp the change the God has worked in you, you will overflow in

love for your king. And this is the very thing that will give you strength for living from day to day.

It's a bit like this. Suppose that you find yourself walking along the street with a friend. At one point, you happen to trip and stumble upon a crack in the sidewalk. But, your friend immediately grabs you by the hand and prevents you from falling to the ground. What sort of response will you have? You may say something like, "Thanks for helping me. I'm glad I didn't fall." And it would probably end at that. I don't think that you will come home with any stories that you want to tell your family about how your friend helped you from falling! In fact, in your mind, you might be thinking to yourself, "You know, if my friend didn't help me when I fell, I don't think that I would have hurt myself. I would have rolled out of it and been fine. Oh, I may have looked a bit funny, but I'm sure that I would have been alright."

But, now suppose that you are out mountain climbing with your friend in Colorado someplace at an altitude of some 11,000 feet. At one point, you happen to stumble along the path, and you end up falling down a steep cliff, free-falling 100 feet or so, before you happen to land upon some brush which slows your fall a little bit. But, your fall continued as you continue to tumble down the hill like a rag doll. Finally, you come to rest. After overcoming the initial shock, you take inventory of what happened. You soon realize that you came to rest only because your jeans have caught themselves in a broken branch. This broken branch is leaning out over a drop of some 500 feet straight down to a dried up riverbed. Should you slip from this tree, you will fall to your certain death. As you try to move, you realize that must have a bunch of broken bones in your body. Every little movement hurts somewhere. You can't even take a deep enough breath to yell for help. To make matters worse, you are coughing up blood, so, you know that you have some type of internal damage done to your body as well.

And now, imagine that your friend, who watched you fall, scaled down the mountain and went looking for you. Your fall was so long and the climb down was so difficult, and your location was so precarious, that it took him five hours to get to you. He had a difficult time finding you because you couldn't even yell for help. It was way too dangerous for him to climb out on that broken branch to reach you, as the tree appeared that it would collapse at any moment. So, your friend tried to call 911. But, way up in the mountains, he had no signal. So, he said, "I'll be back with help."

He climbed back up that mountain to the place where you initially stumbled and proceeded to walk down the path through the night to get to a place where his cell phone could finally reach anybody. It wasn't until evening the next day that help finally arrived. By this time, you were barely conscious. It came in the form of a helicopter with a long rope extended down to carry you out, strapped to a life board. After being lifted out of danger, you are taken to a nearby hospital, where you spend the next twelve hours in surgery. After two months in the hospital, six months on physical therapy you finally recover.

And now, let me ask you, "What sort of response will you have to your friend? What sort of response will you have to the rescue personnel, or the doctors who helped you?"

I trust that it would overflow with superfluous praise and thanksgiving. "Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. You went way beyond the call of duty. I'm grateful for what you have done in rescuing me from my danger. How can I ever thank you? What could I ever do for you?" Perhaps you would write some notes of appreciation or send some gifts. Certainly, you would be telling others often about your rock climbing adventures and how you were saved from certain death by your friends and the emergency rescue crew.

Now whatever the particulars it would certainly be a bit different than the way that you respond to your friend who stopped you from stumbling on the pavement, because, you realize how dramatic was your rescue was. In the same way, we ought to be overflowing with praise to our God for being rescued from our danger of hell.

I love the way that John Piper said it in one of his recent sermons. He was preaching on Colossians 3:15, which says, "And be thankful. 'I don't think that [Paul] is throwing words away when he says, 'be thankful.' You just gotta know the gospel. You've got to be blown away. If you aren't in hell tomorrow morning, you should be dancing! We just have started to take it for granted." [\[3\]](#)

Any lack of enthusiasm that we have for God is because we have taken our salvation for granted. My aim in preaching this morning is to help you not take your salvation for granted. I want for you to see the greatness of the work that God has done in your heart, that you might respond in worship to Him.

Let's begin this morning by looking at ...

1. Your Heart (verses 9-20)

This isn't good news. This is bad news. In fact, the news hardly gets to be worse than this. We will see this in Romans 3:9-20. I know of no better place to look at our sinfulness than this passage.

The book of Romans contains a treatise on the greatness of the salvation that God has provided. Here in chapter 3, we reach the culmination of the first part of Paul's argument in the book of Romans. He begins with our sin. Before Paul proceeds to the truth that we are justified before God by faith alone, He first shows us how helpless we were. We are all guilty and condemned before the law of God.

When you see how hopeless it was, it makes you realize exactly how great God was in granting you salvation. Indeed, in order to hear the good news correctly, we need first to know the bad news. Well, here comes the bad news. In chapter 1, Paul described the sin of the Gentiles. They have come to know about God through what has been made and yet, they turned their back on Him and refused to "honor Him as God or give thanks" (Rom. 1:21). As a result, they engaged in all sorts of sinful behavior.

In chapter 2, Paul described the sin of the Jews. They had the law of God and were confident to teach others of the standards of God (Rom. 2:19), and yet, they themselves dishonored God in that they broke that law (Rom. 2:23).

And now, in chapter 3, Paul summarizes the plight of both Jews and Greeks. They are "all under sin" (verse 9). I want to begin reading in verse 9,

Romans 3:9-20

What then? Are we better than they? Not at all; for we have already charged that both Jews and Greeks are all under sin; as it is written, there is none righteous, not even one; there is none that understands, there is none who seeks for God, all have turned aside, together they have become useless; there is none who does good, there is not even one. Their throat is an open grave, with their tongues they keep deceiving, the poison of asps is under their lips; whose mouth is full of cursing and bitterness; their feet are swift to shed blood, destruction and misery are in their paths, and the path of peace they have not known. There is no fear of God before their eyes. Now we know that whatever the Law says, it speaks to those who are under the Law, so that every mouth may be closed and all the world may become accountable to God; because by the works of the Law no flesh will be justified in His sight; for through the Law comes the knowledge of sin.

In these verses, Paul lumps together nine verses from the Old Testament, which come from six different locations to prove his point that "both Jews and Greeks are all under sin" (Ps. 14:1-3; [53:1-3]; 5:9; 140:3; 10:7; Is. 59:7-8; Ps. 36:1).

In Paul's day, the Jews and the Greeks were on the most extremes of the moral compass. The Greeks, on the one hand, were those who knew nothing about God. They were not of the chosen nation. They were without the written revelation of God. As such, They were strangers to the covenants. They were "far off" from God" (Eph. 2:13). They were "without God in the world" (Eph. 2:12).

When you are without God in the world, your behavior demonstrates it. Without God means that you have no accountability for your actions; you do whatever is right in your own eyes (Judges 21:25); you will live only for the here and now, you will seek a life of pleasure, stepping on others to accomplish your own purposes. And in many cases, those without God, become as unreasoning animals [and] creatures of instinct" (2 Peter. 2:12). When you refuse to acknowledge God, He gives you over "to a depraved mind, to do those things which are not proper" (Rom. 1:28). This was the life of the Greeks in Paul's day. This is the life of many Americans today.

When you look at such people, it's easy for anyone to see how they are "under sin." Now, I'm not trying to be judgmental against those people, but, it's easy for all to see. There is no desire for God. They never step into a place of worship. They don't love God. They don't take heed to the Scriptures. They have no heart to glorify the Lord. God isn't even in their thinking. Greeks (i.e. those who aren't Jewish) are under the condemnation of sin.

But, what is most shocking here in Romans 3 is that Paul doesn't merely point the finger to those "out there." He also points the finger to those who were within the scope of the covenant the Jews. "Both Jews and Greeks are all under sin".

The Jews were the ones who were completely dedicated in their lives. They received the law of God. They meticulously studied it and attempted to live righteously before God. They lived a separated life from the world. They wore their clothes exactly in accordance with the law, wearing tassels on the corners of their garments (Num. 15:38), not wearing garments upon which two kinds of material mixed together (Lev. 19:19).

They prepared their body in exact accordance with the law, letting their sideburns and beard grow (Lev. 19:28), not making any cuts in their bodies or tattoos (Lev. 19:28). Eating only Kosher food. They celebrated the Jewish festivals every year, such as Yom Kippur, The Passover, The Feast of Unleavened Bread, The Feast of Booths and Purim. They kept the Sabbath every Saturday, being careful to attend the services in the synagogue. Devoting the day to the reading and study of the Scriptures. Being careful not to do any work.

When God said it, the Jews did it. Never was there a nation more externally righteous than the Jewish people. And yet, all of those externally, righteous things never allowed them to escape the fact that they were "under sin" (as Paul says here in verse 9).

The simple fact is than cleaning the outside doesn't help in cleaning the inside. Do you remember when Jesus encountered the Pharisees? He pronounced His "woes" against them, calling them, "whitewashed tombs which on the outside appear beautiful, but inside they are full of dead men's bones and all uncleanness" (Matt. 23:27). He said, "You clean the outside of the cup and of the dish, but inside they are full of robbery and self-indulgence" (Matt. 23:25). With these words, Jesus was saying, "The outside doesn't tell the whole story. It's the heart that matters."

This was Paul's point in Romans 2, when he said in verse 28, "He is not a Jew who is one outwardly, nor is circumcision that which is outward in the flesh. "But he is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is that which is of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter, and his praise is not from men, but from God."

This applies almost directly to us. It doesn't matter whether you have grown up in church your entire life, attending Sunday school every Sunday of your life, except when you were physically unable to do so, reading your Bible every day, never having tasted alcohol, never having experimented with drugs. All of those things on the outside might look perfect in your life. But, God looks not as man sees, for God sees the heart. And when the data comes in, the verdict isn't good. Again, verse 9, "Both Jews and Greeks are all under sin." In other words we have come to the law of God and failed to abide by it.

Notice how Paul's argument continues on verse 10, "As it is written, There is none righteous, not even one; There is none who understands, There is none who seeks for God; All have turned aside, together they have become useless; There is none who does good, There is not even one" (verses 10-12). These verses are exhaustive regarding the extent of sin in the world. Sin is everywhere. All are under sin. Oh, these may be some kind deeds. There may be some good works. But, deep down in our hearts, all is not so pure. We have selfish desires, sinful desires. We want to view pornography on the internet and see the bad movies. We want others at home to serve us. We want to obtain riches for ourselves. We want to spend our days in selfish pleasure, having our bodies pampered. We want our egos built up and we don't really care for others around us. Any experience you have to the contrary is the grace of God (but, that's my second point).

When God looks out upon the children of men, He doesn't find a single righteous person among us. In fact, this is what He did in the days of Noah. He looked from His mighty throne and heaven and surveyed the landscape of mankind. Genesis 6:5 tells us that "the LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great on the earth, and that every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually." He saw the breadth of the sin of man, "the wickedness of man was great." He saw the depth of the sin of man, "every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually." Every formation of every thought of man was plagued with sin. And you know what God did in the days of Noah, don't you? In His anger, He destroyed the world, flooding it with water.

Please don't think that anything has changed between then and now. Our hearts are just like those who lived in the days of Noah. Our hearts are just as sinful. God's wrath is prepared to boil upon us as well. Peter makes this connection for us in His second epistle. He writes, "By the word of God the heavens existed long ago and the earth was formed out of water and by water, through which the world at that time was destroyed, being flooded with water. But by His word the present heavens and earth are being reserved for fire, kept for the day of judgment and destruction of ungodly men. (2 Peter 3:5-7).

The world was once destroyed by water. It will again be destroyed by fire. Why? Because of the sinfulness of our hearts. Your heart is bad. All you need to do is look at the things that you say.

After giving some blanket statements about the extent of sin upon the earth, Paul heads to the mouth. Verses 13 and 14 are all about sinful speech that comes off our lips. Paul writes, "Their throat is an open grave, with their tongues they keep deceiving. The poison of asps is under their lips" Whose mouth is full of cursing and bitterness."

Do you want to know what someone's heart is like? Just listen to the words they say. Our speech displays what is in our hearts. And which one of you have learned how to control your tongue? Raise your hand if this is you. None of us can raise our hands. How many of us express complaint and grumbling with our mouths? Fundamentally, grumbling expresses displeasure with the will of God.

James said, "We all stumble in many ways. If anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man, able to bridle the whole body as well. "Every species of beasts and birds, of reptiles and creatures of the sea, is tamed and has been tamed by the human race. But no one can tame the tongue; it is a restless evil and full of deadly poison." (James 3:2-8)

Poison! That's the picture that Paul uses in verse 13, "The poison of asps is under their lips." If you have lived as long as I have, you know how venomous your lips can be. You have felt the poison from the lips of others. You have experienced the poison from your own lips. Your ought not to be surprised. Your heart is an ugly place. Oh, it may look clean, but dig a bit and you'll see your sin. Have you looked under your refrigerator recently? Have you looked under your stove recently? It's a mess! Like your heart!

Paul's list of wickedness continues in verses 15-17, "Their feet are swift to shed blood. Destruction and misery are in their paths. And the path of peace they have not known." Watch the news. Read the newspapers. Listen to the radio. You can see these things all around. People are swift to gain an advantage from others. People are willing to destroy to obtain their ends. Conflict and strife are often among people.

You say, "but Steve, that's what is in the world. But the church is different." On the one hand, it's true. God has a restraint upon our hearts, indeed. But, many of these things take place in the church as well.

And why? Verse 18, "There is no fear of God before their eyes." This is the key to understanding why sin takes place. Fundamentally, all sin comes back to a lack of fear of God in your hearts. When God doesn't reign in your thoughts, you will gladly sin.

Now, there may be some of you here today that are thinking to yourself. "C'mon Steve. It's not that bad. I've not shed blood. I pretty much keep to myself, I've not destroyed others. There is nothing more that I want than peace. This is what I've strive for every day! I'm that that bad. In fact, I'm pretty good." If that's your thoughts this morning, please know that it's only because your heart is so wicked that it will justify itself. Jeremiah 17:9 says, "The heart is more deceitful than all else and is desperately sick; Who can understand it?"

When you think yourself to be a pretty good person, the issue is that you have deceived yourself. We aren't righteous people. We all stand as guilty under God's law. That's the point of verses 19 and 20, "Now we know that whatever the Law says, it speaks to those who are under the Law, so that every mouth may be closed and all the world may become accountable to God; because by the works of the Law no flesh will be justified in His sight; for through the Law comes the knowledge of sin."

As you read your Bibles, you will discover the sin of your heart. And, I think that the situation is much worse than you think that it is.

Near the beginning of my message this morning, I gave the scenario of the guy who tripped on the mountain and fell down the ravine hanging by a broken branch. He was in a better situation than you are in. At least he was still breathing. But, your situation is worse. The Bible describes us as being "born in sin" (Ps. 51:5). The Bible describes our hearts as being "dead" (Eph. 2:1). Ephesians 2:1, "And you were dead in your trespasses and sins."

When it came to the truth of God, we all were dead. We were unresponsive (1 Cor. 2:14). We had hearts of stone (Ezekiel 36:26). Our eyes were blinded (2 Cor. 4:4). We considered the gospel to be foolish (1 Cor. 1:18). We walked in darkness (Is. 9:2). We were lost (Luke 1:5). But God, in His grace and in His power brought salvation to us. And it's here where we see the greatness of God! The bigger we see our sin, the greater will be the grace of God in our lives.

Let's look now at my second point. We have looked at (1) Your Heart (verses 9-20). And now, let's turn to ...

2. His Salvation (verses 21-31)

But now apart from the Law the righteousness of God has been manifested, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets, even the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all those who believe; for there is no distinction; for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, being justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus; whom God displayed publicly as a propitiation in His blood through faith. This was to demonstrate His righteousness, because in the forbearance of God He passed over the sins previously committed; for the demonstration, I say, of His righteousness at the present time, so that He would be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus. Where then is boasting? It is excluded. By what kind of law? Of works? No, but by a law of faith. For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from works of the Law. Or is God the God of Jews only? Is He not the God of Gentiles also? Yes, of Gentiles also, since indeed God who will justify the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through faith is one. Do we then nullify the Law through faith? May it never be! On the contrary, we establish the Law.

These verses are of paramount importance in all of the Bible. These verses have been called the acropolis of the Christian faith. Luther called this chief point and the central place of the epistle and of the whole Bible. William Cowper was converted through these words. John Piper wrote, "If I were asked, 'What is the most important paragraph in the Bible?' I think this (Rom. 3:23-26) is the paragraph I would name. It goes to the very root of the Christian gospel and lays bare the heart of God like few other texts." [\[4\]](#)

If you notice, verses 21-31 describe the work of God. The whole point of them is that God has done a work to accomplish our salvation for us. We have done nothing to merit salvation. That's the point of verse 27 and following, "Where then is boasting? It is excluded." There is no boasting that any of us can bring at all to our salvation. It is entirely the work of God.

One of the ways that you can understand these verses is to think about travel. Apart from Christ, we had only one road that led its way to God. It's call the road of law-keeping. Now, unfortunately, this road, although it heads toward God, is ultimately a dead end. God is on the other side of the mountain. And we need to get up and over the mountain to get to him. But, the mountain called Sinai is too steep for us to pass. It merely leads us to a place where we come to know our sin and realize that there's no way that we can get to God on this road.

In our despair, we look behind us, and we see Jesus with his drilling and paving equipment coming up the road. Rather than going straight up the hill, Jesus begins digging right into the base of the mountain. And Jesus digs a tunnel for us to travel through. It leads us to the same place. But, it takes us along a different path. By the path of the "works of the law," we will never be able to go. But, by the tunnel of the "righteousness of God through faith," we can arrive at God.

None of us can boast of building the tunnel. None of us can boast of great ingenuity in planning to build the tunnel. We simply use the tunnel. This is what is explained in verses 21 and following. Look there, "But now apart from the Law the righteousness of God has been manifested, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets, even the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all those who believe; for there is no distinction; for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God."

I trust that you can see in verse 21 that the way to God is now "apart from the Law." It's not up and over the mountain by works. It's through the tunnel by faith. That's the point of verse 22. You go through the tunnel by faith in Jesus Christ. And verse 23 clarifies it for all of us. It's not that we have obtained it on our own. We have all fallen short of the glory of God. But, through faith, we are reconciled to Him.

Verse 24 explains how it is all through Christ. "Being justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus." It is His grace to us that justifies us. Christ Jesus has purchased us. My point this morning from this text is that it's all of God. That's what "grace" means. It means, "All of God! And none of us." Christ Jesus purchased our redemption for us. In other words, Jesus Christ came and purchased our salvation for us. He paid the price for our sins. In so doing, He changed us. Consider the ways in which He changed us.

1. From Death to Life

I spoke earlier of how we were dead in our sins (see Ephesians 2:1) But, it was Christ Jesus who came and "made us alive." I'm sure that you have seen the movie "Pinocchio." Pinocchio was a puppet, carved out of wood by Geppetto. He was just a doll. He had no life in him. ... Until the blue fairy came along, and made him alive. This is what God has done for us who believe. He had made us alive, when once we are dead.

b. From Blind to Seeing

He does this by giving us a new sight to see the gospel clearly. In 2 Corinthians 4:4, we see that "the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelieving so that they might not see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ." When we are born, we are born with blinders over our eyes, unable to see and discern spiritual truth. And so, when the gospel is preached, we can't see the light. We had blinders on our eyes. But God, in saving us, removed the blinders, so that now we can see the truth.

Do you remember the story of the blind man that Jesus healed? He was out at the city gates, begging (John 9:8). After a bit of conversation with His disciples, Jesus "spat on the ground, and made clay of the spittle, and applied the clay to his eyes and said to him, 'Go, wash in the pool of Siloam.' ... So he went away and washed, and came back seeing" (John 9:6-7). What Jesus did to him physically, he has done to us spiritually. He has removed the veil from our eyes, so that we might see the "light of the gospel of the glory of Christ" (2 Cor. 4:4). We can say with the blind man, "one thing I do know, though I was blind, now I see" (John 9:25).

c. From being Unresponsive to being able to Understand

Furthermore, before Christ came and purchased us, we were unresponsive to the gospel. In 1 Corinthians 2:14, we read, "A natural man does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned." In our natural state, we were unable to understand the things of the Spirit of God. And, not understanding them, we did not accept them.

But God, in saving us, changed our mind, so that now we are able to understand the things of the Spirit of God. He has transformed our mind, so that now we understand things that we could never understand before. It's more than God teaching us. It's that He changed our mind, so that now we can understand! It's almost as if God has performed spiritual brain surgery upon us and given us the spiritual brain-cells needed to understand the gospel. God's work in our hearts extends beyond our minds. It also extends to our hearts.

d. From Hard Hearts to Soft Hearts

The prophet Ezekiel prophesied of a time in which God would do something within His people. Ezekiel 36:26, [Thus says the LORD], "I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; and I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh."

Here we see the imagery of God performing spiritual heart surgery upon us. We go into the operating room and are placed upon the table. The LORD cuts our sternum and opens up our rib cage to gain access to our hearts. When we are open and laid bare to His surgeon's eyes, He sees that we have a heart of stone, which is unresponsive to the things of God. He takes out that stone and replaces it with a heart of flesh that beats 70 times a minute and circulates blood throughout our bodies, giving spiritual life to our souls.

e. From an Old Creation to a New Creation

In the next chapter of Ezekiel (chapter 37), he gives the imagery of preaching to dry bones. And, these dry bones come alive. When these bones hear the gospel, the Lord GOD says, "Behold, I will cause breath to enter you that you may come to life. I will put sinews on you, make flesh grow back on you, cover you with skin and put breath in you that you may come alive; and you will know that I am the LORD" (Ezek. 37:6).

In describing the work that God does in the soul, so that a man may believe, it's really quite incredible. He gives life to us who were dead in our sins. He gives us sight when we were blind to spiritual truth. He gives us minds to understand when we were unable to understand before. He gives us a spiritual heart when we used to have a heart of stone. He takes us from being a pile of dry bones to a living body.

It's a complete transformation that God does in our hearts when we believe the gospel. In fact, so radical is this transformation that Paul said, "If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creature; the old things passed away; behold, new things have come" (2 Cor. 5:17). We are different than we used to be. We are "new creatures." Theologians call it "regeneration." Creating in us something new.

Jesus said it this way, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit he cannot enter into the kingdom of God. ... You must be born again" (John 3:5, 7). Nicodemus had difficulty with the imagery. How can you be born again? But, the illustration that Jesus uses is entirely consistent with the pictures of salvation that the Bible provides. It speaks of radical transformation that God works in our hearts, so that we may believe.

And how does it happen? We can't quite understand.

Jesus said, "The wind blows where it wishes and you hear the sound of it, but do not know where it comes from and where it is going; so is everyone who is born of the Spirit" (John 3:8). We know about the wind. We know that it blows. But, we don't quite know how much it's going to blow or where it's going to blow exactly. So it is with the Spirit of God. He blows and moves and transforms people according to His sovereign pleasure.

Such is the greatness of God's working in our hearts to accomplish His salvation in us.

Now, getting back to Romans 3:25-26, we see how He accomplished this work. God can be so kind to us, because of the work of Christ. He turned the wrath of God away from us. Jesus was the propitiation for our sin.

Romans 3:25-26

whom God displayed publicly as a propitiation in His blood through faith This was to demonstrate His righteousness, because in the forbearance of God He passed over the sins previously committed; for the demonstration, I say, of His righteousness at the present time, so that He would be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.

Jesus was placed on the cross publicly for all the world to see, as a "wrath-turning-away" sacrifice in His blood. That's what the word, "propitiation" means. It means that God punished Christ Jesus instead of us. In punishing Him, God was totally satisfied. His wrath no longer is against us who believe, because it was all poured out upon Him.

Verse 26 pulls together the scope of the Old Testament and New Testament. There was a problem when Abraham or David sinned. Though they were God-followers, they still sinned (as we do today). The problem came in the way in which God dealt with these Old Testament saints. He merely passed over their sins. He could do this because He knew of the day in the future when Christ would come and atone for their sins.

It was not just of God to pass over their sins, because all sin needs to be punished. But, as God punished Christ in our place, He has become just, because a punishment has taken place for sins. God is just in that He has punished sin. He is the justifying in that He has justified us who believe in Christ.

Have you experience the work of God in your heart? Do you understand the greatness of God's work in your hearts? Do you have faith in Jesus?

This sermon was delivered to Rock Valley Bible Church on August 31, 2008 by Steve Brandon.
For more information see www.rvbc.cc.

[1] Amazing Grace, by John Newton.

[2] And Can It Be? by Charles Wesley

[3] John Piper, "Teaching and Admonishing One Another in All Wisdom," a sermon from Colossians 3:12-17. Preached July 27, 2008. His quote is at the 31:45 mark. You can find the sermon at <http://www.desiringgod.org/>.

[4] John Piper, The Pleasures of God, p. 165.