

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 God's attribute of righteousness does not come through faith (God is righteous whether we believe it or not), and God's Law does not come through faith (God's standard is binding whether we believe it or not). What then can "the righteousness of God" mean in verse 22?

Before Paul answers this, he again refers to the fact that all human beings are sinners -- they all have sinned (transgressed God's standard of righteousness, His Law), and they all continue to sin (fall short of God's standard of righteousness, His Law, which reflects His attribute of righteousness, which in turn is one aspect of the magnificence of the splendor of His nature -- His glory).

And yet in verse 24 Paul states that these very sinners, these unrighteous human beings are the very ones whom God in His great grace, declares righteous through Christ's redemption (to be justified means to be declared righteous; thus when we read "justified freely by His grace" we should simply read "declared righteous freely by His grace").

Think of it! GOD DECLARES RIGHTEOUS THE UNRIGHTEOUS!

Someone may say, "How can God do that? Isn't that a contradiction, to say that someone is righteous when he isn't?"

And someone else may respond, "What do you mean, 'How can God do that?' God is God. God is sovereign. God can do anything that He pleases!"

At this point we must interject the scriptural truth that God cannot deny Himself (II Timothy 2:13), that one of God's attributes is truth, and that God cannot contradict Himself, i.e., cannot say something is so when He says it isn't so! If God says an unrighteous human being is righteous, there must be some other explanation than simply to say that God can do anything that He pleases!

If God declares an unrighteous human being righteous, there must be some basis for this declaration; and since it does not lie in the righteousness of that human being, it must lie elsewhere.