

There is a Place to Stand

Romans 3:20-26

In 1510 an enthusiastic young monk named Martin Luther was given the opportunity to travel to Rome, the holy city. For Luther, who had a growing awareness of his sin and corruption this was a dream come true. Rome was overflowing with holy relics which the church promised had the power to confer spiritual benefits to those who observed them. There were also plenty of holy sites in Rome to which Luther made a mad dash hoping to accumulate promised merits. Chief among the spiritual benefits attached to the relics and various sites was the removal of years one would otherwise spend in Purgatory having the rest of one's sins purged away before entry into Heaven was granted.

Martin regretted that he was not able to say mass at St. John's Lateran. That act alone, the church declared, guaranteed the entry of the priest's mother into Heaven. He did climb the *Scala Sancta*, the staircase Jesus supposedly ascended when he appeared before Pilate (the stairs had been brought to Rome from Jerusalem). As Luther climbed the stairs he kissed each step repeating the Lord's Prayer for each one. This, he was assured, would grant him the power to release the soul of his choice from Purgatory. But upon reaching the top the zealous monk was gripped with sudden doubt: "What if it isn't true?" Those doubts were only heightened by his observance of the widespread corruption and scandalous lack of piety among the people and priests of Rome.

The trip to Rome, far from delivering Martin Luther from his heavy conscience, only added to his conviction that he had no place to stand before a Righteous God. The marble steps of the *Scala Sancta* were sinking sand. His superior, seeing in Luther a high aptitude for teaching the Scriptures, transferred him to the Augustinian monastery in a backwater town called Wittenburg. There Luther was allowed the freedom to delve deeply into the text of Scripture as a professor at the newly created University. That one move opened the door for what would become the Protestant Reformation. The professor and preacher of Wittenburg would be buried deep in the soil of Romans and Galatians and sprout forth as the great champion of justification by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. The once guilt-ridden monk would shine a light upon the long forgotten gospel and nothing would ever be the same.

Main Idea: The gospel displays the saving righteousness of God.



Vs. 21 – "But now" is to be understood logically. It is the next building block upon what Paul began in 1:18 and wrapped up in 3:20. The argument up until now has been that all mankind, being sinners, have stood under the just wrath of God with no hope to save himself. The "righteousness of God" here is what Luther referred to as God's "passive righteousness" or the right standing that comes to sinners from God. It is given "apart from the law" because sinners cannot obey their way into right standing before God.

Vs. 22 – Here Paul points to Christ's direct involvement. The righteousness by which the sinner stands justified before God is a gift received by faith in Jesus Christ. And this righteousness is given without distinction; that is to Jew and Gentile alike.

Vs. 23 – The tragedy of human rebellion against God is comprehensive. All have sinned because all are sinners. Because of this humankind has been deprived of the glory of God. The veiling of Moses' face (Ex 34; 2 Cor 3) was judgment upon the people for their sin and rebellion. They would not be allowed the pleasure of the unobscured glory of God.

Vs. 24 – But God turns tragedy into triumph (Morris, 177). The righteousness by which we are justified is an alien righteousness. That is we are counted righteous. It is a gracious declaration based fully upon the satisfaction made by Jesus through his perfect obedience to the Law and his sacrificial death for sinners.

Vv. 25-26 – The Father gave or “put forward” his Son. “Propitiation” is a wrath bearer. The wrath of God was literally born away from us and born by Jesus upon the cross. That the Son was the propitiation for believing sinners means that in saving sinners God did not put away his justice and wrath but gave the full and appropriate expression to them. This is vital in understanding that that when God saves sinners he does so on the basis of justice. It is a just thing when God saves a sinner who repents for his justice has been fully satisfied in Jesus. So God does not save sinners by overlooking their sin but by fully justifying them.

1. The Witnesses (vv. 20-21)

The saving righteousness of God is taught in the Old Testament and even more clearly in the gospel.

- The law of Moses and the prophets bear witness to the righteousness of God that would be clearly revealed in the gospel of Jesus Christ. Moses preached Christ long before the apostles.

2. The Recipients (vv. 22-23)

The saving righteousness of God comes only through faith in Jesus Christ.

- Jesus fulfilled all that God’s law required through his perfect obedience and his sacrificial death. Therefore God’s justice was satisfied. This righteousness comes to all who believe without distinction.
- Sin separated us from God and robbed us of being reflections of the glory of God. Believers all long for that glory to be restored (Rom 8:18). Because of his faithfulness and obedience those who are “in Christ” will one day shine with his glory.

3. The Source (vv. 24-25a)

The saving righteousness of God comes only from the death of Jesus Christ as our propitiation.

- All who believe are made righteous or “justified.” That means believers are put in a right relationship to God. This new standing with God does not come about by a moral change in the believer. Rather it comes by grace alone through faith alone.
- A propitiation is a wrath-bearer. If God had overlooked sin he would not be righteous. If God were not merciful he would not have offered his Son in our place. As our propitiation, Jesus directed the wrath of God away from us by bearing it himself and thus fully satisfying the righteousness of God.

4. The Proof (vv. 25b-26)

This revealed righteousness of God proves that God is right to rescue guilty people.

- The cross made it right and just for God to rescue guilty sinners. The salvation that God gives through faith in Christ is justice precisely because Jesus satisfied the requirements of justice. What a difference this is from every other religion or worldview on the planet! Every other religion gives some sort of prescription for self-salvation – attain the secret knowledge, meet the basic requirements, detach sufficiently, perform the necessary steps, etc. Only the gospel of Jesus Christ promises a fully justifying righteousness based entirely upon the deeds of Another.