

THE ROAD OF THE RIGHTEOUS

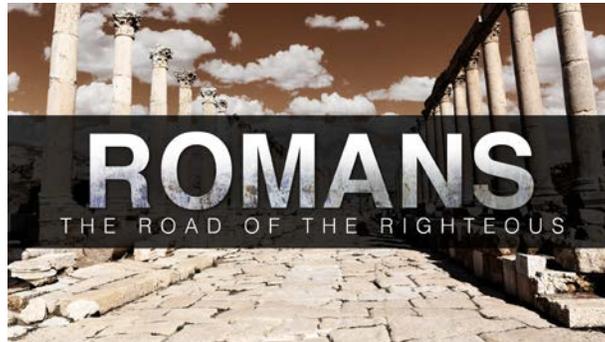
Expositional Study Of Romans

Romans 3:24b-31

Written By

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Recently, twelve soccer players and their coach headed into a massive cave system in Thailand. While hiking inside, torrential rains on the outside caused raging waters to rise dramatically in the cave, leaving the boys and their coach trapped with no way out. With no food or water death stalked the team. Escape was out of the question because, even though they were all in great shape, none of them could swim through the dark, murky water to safety.

Enter highly-trained Thai military divers. These brave men swam and delivered much needed supplies to help sustain the team so authorities could figure out how to rescue them. One diver thirty-eight-year-old Saman Kunan, who is now called the *Hero of Tham Luang Cave*, paid the ultimate price to deliver the boys from the clutches of certain death. After feeling his way through the dense darkness of the water, he delivered much needed air tanks the stronger, older boys could use to escape with the assistance of other divers. On his way back to safety, the former Navy SEAL ran out of air himself and died. But he did not die in vain. No, his sole sacrifice allowed those facing death to have the option to swim to life.

As you relate this story to the book of Romans, we readily see a one to one correspondence. According to Paul's warning in chapters 1:1 through 3:20, another group of hikers in a desperate spiritual condition. Who are they? All Gentiles and Jews who are born trapped in a cave called **Sin**. Try as they may, none can work their way out of their precarious predicament, although some try. None, however, have the capability to escape their death-trap because it is beyond their capabilities, regardless of how they think or feel.

What do they need? They need a diver with super-human abilities. They need a divine diver who loves them enough to swim to them to give them life. They need a divine diver who will sacrifice His life so they, based on their faith in His work, can swim to safety and life. Who is that diver? His name is Jesus. He was, and is, the Holy Father's only escape plan for lost people with no hope because the **Cave of Sin** provides no viable exit routes.

Right now you might, for the first time in your life, have come to realization you, too, are trapped in that cave. Try as you might to escape by means of being religious and moral, you know,

in your heart of hearts, you are not really going anywhere. You bounce from belief to belief but nothing brings freedom. You throw yourself in to your work, but that does not suffice. You try and stay as busy as you can you don't have to think about your situation, but that doesn't bring deliverance either. You live as hedonistically and selfishly as possible, seeking to get all you can out of life in order to find meaning and purpose, but at the end of the day you know the cave still holds you.

What do you need to grasp in your current spiritual condition? You need a divine diver died for your darkness so you can have the prospects of salvation from your no-win situation. How do you avail yourself of the rescue His sacrifice has secured? Paul answers this query by showing all of us the way out by answering another key question.

What Is God's Escape Plan For Sinners?

Paul makes sure in chapter 3, verses 19 through 20, that everyone understands it is utterly impossible to gain freedom from the **Cave of Sin** by human effort. No amount of works, be they religious or moral, will ever provide a way of salvation from the **Cave of Sin** and spiritual death. Some are convinced otherwise and they head into the black, swift-moving water thinking their efforts will bring deliverance. They are, in Paul's mind, on the wrong path to spiritual safety. In the end they will be supremely shocked and disappointed to discover their best efforts did not lead them to life.

What is the path of life? Paul waxes eloquent about it in verses 21 through 31, and I'm glad he did for if it were not for his words, I'd still be in the darkness of that cave.

The Right Path To Freedom (Rom. 3:21-24a)

If you want real, lasting spiritual deliverance, you need to realize God's prescribed way out of your hopeless situation focuses four concepts:

It's All About Faith (Rom. 3:24). We covered this salient point in our last study, but it warrants our review as the rest of the verses in this section will expand on its import.

²⁴ being justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus;

Zero in, once again, on this opening participial phrase. It, of course, leads to a logical question. How does a sinner under God's judgment secure a relationship with God? How does the sinner find freedom? To switch metaphors from a cave to a courtroom, Paul clearly says that a sinner is acquitted of all charges and declared righteous and holy before by receiving, by faith, the gift of God's grace.

"Justified" here is a present passive participle. The present tense can be grammatically classified as a continuous present, ostensibly meaning once a sinner is declared righteous by faith in the work of Jesus, the divine Diver, it is a condition which *never* changes. Further, the passive nature of the verb clearly posits that the subject, i.e., the person, is acted upon by God. In other words, God is the one doing the justifying in His courtroom, *leaving absolutely no room for human effort to secure the same*. Further, this justification, which results in the sinner being declared righteous, is a free gift God presents to who stand guilty before Him. To return to our opening metaphor,

those who wish to trade spiritual death for spiritual life must take this gift, trusting that God will permit it do to what it's designed to accomplish.

Before we move on, I would be remiss as a shepherd and pastor if I did not pose the all-important life question: Have you received, by faith, God's gift of salvation? A second component of God's way out of our deadly spiritual condition is showcased in the last part of verse 24.

It's All About Proper Payment (Rom 3:24b). This point is articulated by Paul in the last half of this profound clause:

²⁴ being justified as a gift by His grace **through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus**;

The preposition *through*, *dia* (διὰ) puts a finer point on the justification. More precisely, it gives us two grammatical options for classification. It points to the *means* by which sinners find acquittal in God's courtroom, or it denotes the *manner* by which a new spiritual condition before God is secured. Either option is theological valid. Justification, or being declared righteous before God, is achieved by means of, or after the manner of, the redemptive work of Jesus, the Messiah. Key here is this word redemption.

Redemption, *apolytrosis* in Greek (ἀπολύτρωσις), is rich and full of historical and theological meaning. Lexically, the word has two emphases. On the one hand, it can simply denote deliverance from a dire situation (Luke 1:68; 2:38; 24:21; Acts 7:35). On the other hand, it can speak of a ransom price paid to secure the deliverance. Several NT texts demonstrate this nuance:

⁷ In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace . . . (Eph. 1).

¹⁸ knowing that you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your forefathers, not with perishable things such as silver or gold, ¹⁹ but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot (1 Pet. 1).

⁴⁵ For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many (Mark 10).

Jesus, therefore, definitively paid the ultimate price to secure our ability to move from death to life, from sin to righteousness. Justification is also intrinsically wedded to this redemptive, ransom motif. Without this price being paid on Calvary justification is non-existent. But since the price has been paid by Jesus's death, justification is a very real hope for all those either lost in the **Cave of Sin** or who stand guilty in God's courtroom. A question, then, logically follows: Is Jesus your Redeemer? And, please, bear in mind that He is the only Redeemer.

A third truth about God's path to freedom is this.

It's All About Proper Coverage (Rom. 3:25-26). Paul's words here are most instructive if you are willing to listen and learn:

²⁵ whom God displayed publicly as a propitiation in His blood through faith.

Key here is the word *propitiation*, which is from the Greek *hilasterion* (ἱλαστήριον). Lexically, as before, this unique word has two meanings. One, it can speak of expiation or the removal of sin. Two, it can connote the covering of sin by an appropriate sacrifice so God's holy anger against sin is removed. Some scholars opt for the first meaning, while others opt for the second. Both are, however, warranted. Christ's death does, in fact, secure the removal of man's sin status. Contextually, however, the second meaning is probably what Paul had in mind. Throughout chapters one through three, Paul has cogently taught that man is sinful and under the wrath of a holy God (Rom. 1:18, 2:5; 3:5-6). In chapter 3, starting with verse 21, Paul underscores how sinful man, even the prideful and pious religious man can secure the removal of God's wrath. It comes by means of faith, a faith which is grounded and founded upon the propitiatory work of Jesus. His sacrificial death alone satisfies the holy anger of God when applied by faith.

Interestingly enough, when *hilasterion* is encountered in the LXX (the Greek version of the Hebrew Old Testament, also called the Septuagint), it references the Mercy Seat (Ex. 25:17-22; 31:7; 35:12; 38:5-8; Lev. 16:2-15; Num. 7:89), that special location in the Holy of Holies where the High Priest applied blood once per year to secure the forgiveness of sins for the people. Jesus, therefore, in His unique role, functioned not only as the High Priest, but He became THE sacrifice whose blood was applied to the Mercy Seats of all Mercy Seats, Himself. As the author of Hebrews argues, His work in this regard trumps and transcends anything priests and sacrifices accomplished, spiritually speaking, throughout the entire OT age (Jesus has a loftier High Priesthood, Hebrews 7:1-28; Jesus is the ultimate sacrifice, Hebrews 10:1-18).

Again, this words leads us to pose another significant life question to those either hopelessly lost in the Cave of Sin, or who stand guilty in God's courtroom: Is your life covered by the blood of Christ which, by itself, removes your sinful status and God's anger toward your sinful standing? What vacuous arguments are keeping you from making the decision to allow Jesus to give your life much needed cleaning and coverage? Believe me, whatever those arguments are, they shall not suffice when you walk into an eternity without Him.

How is this coverage attained? The preposition, *dia* (διὰ) is employed again to denote either the means of manner by which a sinner secures God's propitiation.

²⁵ whom God displayed publicly as a propitiation in His blood **through faith**.

(Greek text) ὃν προέθετο ὁ θεὸς ἱλαστήριον, **διὰ τῆς πίστεως**.

As you can see, the Greek text has three words, or one more than the English. Why? The Greek supplies the article *the* to properly distinguish the Christian faith from all other so-called faiths. It is THE faith, and it is only through this supreme faith that sinners are able to secure God's coverage for their sin by means of the redemptive and sacrificial death of Jesus.

This final clause leads to another question. Why did God do it this way? Paul gives us this answer:

²⁵ *This was* to demonstrate His righteousness, because in the forbearance of God He passed over the sins previously committed; ²⁶ 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.

Had God acted quickly upon His holiness in the OT period, man could have complained God was unjust and unmerciful. Had He taken too long, He, the Judge, could be accused for being unjust

because he did not move to deal with sin and sinners. So, as Paul articulates, God wanted to “demonstrate His righteousness” so He chose, as Paul taught in Romans 2, verse 4, to wait for the right timing. When that time arrived and the Lord, the perfect sacrifice died, God could, then, definitively say He is both merciful and just, and rightfully the only One capable of justifying sinners who place their faith in Jesus. You might need to re-read that last sentence. God is THE justifier of sinners at the moment of faith. Ostensibly, this means there are no other paths out of that cave of sin and death. Sinners trapped in that cave must come through Jesus to acquire propitiation, or divine coverage for their sin.

Once more I must ask you, “Is your sin covered by placing your faith in the person and work of Jesus?” This is the path to Paradise.

A fourth and final truth is showcased in the closing verses of this great, instructive chapter.

It's All About Proper Focus (Rom. 3:27-31). If all of this is true, if salvation from the **Cave of Sin** is gained by means of justification by faith, by redemption or the high price Christ paid to ransom us, and by propitiation applied by faith, it logically leads to questions. These question typically arise from people, like the ancient Jewish unbelievers in the Messiah, who believe their religious/moral works will garner divine approval in the next life. Paul, who used to be one of those mis-guided, well-meaning people, posits some of those perplexing questions in His wrap-up counsel:

²⁷ Where then is boasting? It is excluded. By what kind of law? Of works? No, but by a law of faith.

Like a skilled Socratic scholar, Paul asks a question which would have sent chills down the spine of law-loving Jews: “Where then is boasting?” If God has truly made salvation possible by means of the sacrifice of His Son, who can boast about their love of the Law? Why would one boast for boasting is not even possible for those who understand what God has done, redemptively speaking. Boasting is out because, for one, no Jew could fulfill all of the dictates of the Law because they were sinners, and for another, all the Law did was show man his sin and bring condemnation on him. The Law, as we have said, was incapable of fixing man’s sinful status before a holy God. So, boasting is completely ruled out for those who like to showcase their works as the means of entrance into God’s family. What serves to rule out boasting by means of works? The law of faith. Just in case a Jewish listener/reader did not quite understand his new theological point, Paul rephrases what he has said before:

²⁸ For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from works of the Law.

Did you get that, especially if you are one who takes pride in your religious/moral works to gain favor with God? Sinners in the **Cave of Sin** only find deliverance based on faith in the work of Jesus, period. Their works, your works, mean nothing where redemption and salvation are concerned.

As I have said before, and I’ll say again, countless religions, full of well-meaning people, have deceived those people into thinking their works will bring them to spiritual safety. Consider the “inspired” writings of Mormonism, as a case study in faith plus works:

2 Nephi 9:18 “But, behold, the righteous, the saints of the Holy One of Israel, they who have believed in the Holy One of Israel, they who have endured the crosses of the world, and despised the shame of it, they shall inherit the kingdom of God,

which was prepared for them from the foundation of the world, and their joy shall be full forever.”

Mosiah 4:66 “I say unto you, if ye have come to a knowledge of the goodness of God, and his matchless power, and his wisdom, and his patience, and his long-suffering towards the children of men; and also, the atonement which has been prepared from the foundation of the world, that thereby salvation might come to him that should put his trust in the Lord, and should be diligent in keeping his commandments, and continue in the faith even unto the end of his life, I mean the life of the mortal body—”

Doctrine and Covenants: Section 5:21 And now I command you, my servant Joseph, to repent and walk more uprightly before me, and to yield to the persuasions of men no more; ²² And that you be firm in keeping the commandments wherewith I have commanded you; and if you do this, behold I grant unto you eternal life, even if you should be slain.

Doctrine and Covenants: Section 9:13 Do this thing which I have commanded you, and you shall prosper. Be faithful, and yield to no temptation. ¹⁴ Stand fast in the work wherewith I have called you, and a hair of your head shall not be lost, and you shall be lifted up at the last day. Amen.

Justification, therefore, is solely not by faith, but is wedded to works. Furthermore, it is not an event, but a lifelong process, and the more faithful you are the greater your exaltation from one heavenly level to the next (telestial kingdom, terrestrial kingdom, the celestial kingdom). And everything is intrinsically wedded to this progression based on works, everything from baptism to a marriage which is sealed in the Temple. I think Paul would take issue with this teaching for it counters the true essence and import of Christ’s powerful redemptive work. It is the work and it is only acquired by faith, not works. Anything contrary to this is error, not truth. What belief system are you holding onto?

Others are captivated by the complex redemptive systems embedded in Hinduism. Simply put, in Hinduism man’s greatest issue is not sin, *per se*, but in coming to the realization that he is god, or Brahman. How does a worshipper attain this coveted status? Their scriptures are clear: *The Way of Ritual* offers the false hope that a sinful person can attain immortality by sheer and perpetual ritualistic effort. Many Hindu scriptures underscore this tenuous teaching. The *Taittiriya Upanishad*, Part 1, 9, 1 highlights this particular path to God when it asserts, “Practice right conduct, learning and teaching, be truthful always, learning and teaching; master the passions, learning and teaching; control the senses, learning and teaching; strive for peace always, learning and teaching; Rouse kundalini, learning and teaching; serve humanity, learning and teaching. . . .” At the end of this extended list the inspired writer affirms in section 10, 1, “I have become one with the tree of life.”

Man, of course, is not God, nor does he become God. Such was Satan’s lie from the beginning. Man, as Paul teaches, is sinful (Rom. 3:1-9) and in need of a Savior. And that Savior, Jesus, performed the only work which can enable a sinner to secure justification, redemption, and propitiation in God’s holy sight solely by faith. Man’s religious works secure nothing but the judgment of God. Faith in Christ’s work is the only key to the path of true spiritual deliverance and life. Many, as I have said before, have not received and understood the memo. Is that you? I

pray this would be the day God would give you much needed illumination about how to be truly saved.

In his passionate quest to lead law-loving Jewish brethren to Jesus, the Messiah, Paul comes at them with another probing question:

²⁹ Or is God *the God* of Jews only? Is He not *the God* of Gentiles also? Yes, of Gentiles also,

According to Israel's Shema in Deuteronomy 6, verse 4, God is intrinsically one. This truth pragmatically means He's the true, living, and only God of all mankind, whether they are Jew or Gentile. It's a point all Jews had to agree upon. Since this is truth, what is the logical conclusion? Again, like skilled attorney, Paul gives us the powerful answer:

³⁰ since indeed God who will justify the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through faith is one.

Because God is one there cannot, therefore, exist two separate ways for sinners to approach Him. There is THE way He has provided for Jews and Gentiles by means of justification by faith in the person and work of Jesus, and there is NO OTHER WAY regardless what false religions teach or bumper stickers read.

Those who have an unfortunate love affair with thinking their works will mean something to God are clever in their attempts to hold tenaciously to their vacuous belief-system. We pick this truth with Paul's closing question, one which, I'm sure, he encountered in countless debates and discussions with Jews:

³¹ Do we then nullify the Law through faith?

Can't you just hear the law-loving Jew mocking Paul? "Come on, Paul. You want me to believe that salvation is all about faith. If so, then your position diminishes and destroys the very Law God entrusted to us." This is no different from the religiously minded person who would ask me, "Pastor Marty, you mean to tell me my works for God aren't good for anything, that they don't and won't mean anything to Him?" Well, if you are justified by faith, then those works merely show how much you love the Lord who justified you; however, you are mistaken if you believe those works will in any way, shape, or form save you. They shall not. Only Christ's work accomplishes this.

Justification by faith, therefore, does not besmirch the Law of God. As Paul remarks:

May it never be! On the contrary, we establish the Law (Rom. 3).

Paul employs the strongest way to say "No way" in Greek in this final verse, *may genoito* (μή γένοιτο). For Paul, justification does the opposite of what his opponents think. It "establishes the Law." How so? For one, the law was merely the tool God used to show man His sin and prepare him for the Savior's work. To embrace justification by faith, therefore, is to simply see it as a final fulfillment of everything the limited Law pointed to. For another, those who are justified by faith don't live faithless, amoral lives. On the contrary, they, as you can see from the plethora of NT divine mandates and commands Christians are called to live lives which truly reflect the essence of the OT Law. In these ways the Law is established, leaving Law-lovers with only one option. To

stop thinking they can deliver themselves from the **Cave of Sin** based on their own works, and to come to God based on the work of His Son, the divine Diver, who sacrificed His holy life so that they might have the opportunity to escape that deadly cave by placing their faith in His work in their behalf.

Today, twelve boys from a Thai soccer team and their coach enjoy life. They know why they are alive too. One courageous, selfless diver sacrificed his life bringing them oxygen tanks which would, in turn, give them the possibility of swimming to life. By faith they had to put those tanks on. By faith they had to step into the dark, murky water. By faith they had to swim to safety, and swim they did to life.

Spiritually, if Jesus is not your Savior, then you are one of those twelve boys entombed in a dark, dank, deadly cave. You don't have the ability to work your way out of this predicament either because you have way too many limitations. You do have the ability to make a choice to place your faith in the Divine Diver you died on Calvary's tree for your sin so that you could swim to eternal life and safety.

Time is short. It's time to swim. Who is going first?