

**II. SALVATION—THE RIGHTEOUSNESS OF GOD REVEALED (3:21–8:39)****How does God save sinners?**

In Romans 1:18–3:20 Paul has proven that all men are guilty before God and are therefore under condemnation. There are only three options open to God. He must either (1) condemn everyone, (2) compromise His own righteousness and accept them as they are, or (3) give them righteousness. Since the second option is an impossibility, only the third option can free men from condemnation.

**A. Justification—declared righteous in Christ (3:21–5:21)****1. The Divine Method (3:21–31)****a. Righteousness provided (3:21–22)**

***3:21 But now apart from the Law the righteousness of God has been manifested, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets,  
3:22 even the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all those who believe; for there is no distinction;***

“But now” signals a change in Paul’s thinking from the old era of the law that was dominated by the power of sin to the new era of salvation; it introduces a new context in which God’s righteousness is disclosed, an era in which men can be declared righteous apart from the law.

In 1:18–3:20 Paul has proven that under the old system men cannot merit righteousness nor can the law grant it (2:12, 13). But now he tells his readers that righteousness from God *is* attainable by another means that the OT (the Law and the Prophets) also testified about (3:21); namely, there is a righteousness that comes through faith (3:22). In chapter 4 Paul will use Abraham and David as two OT examples to prove his point.

“Faith is the condition for our justification, the channel by which righteousness is received and appropriated, not a way that we “earn” righteousness. The object of saving faith is Christ. The act, therefore, which man is required to perform in order to be made a partaker of the righteousness of God is to believe in Christ (cf. Jn. 1:12; 3:15–16; 8:24; Ro. 9:33; 10:10, 14, etc.).

This righteousness is offered to all men and it is needed by all men for there is no distinction between Jew and Gentile, for both Jew and Gentile have sinned (3:23).

**b. Righteousness needed (3:23)**

***3:23 for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,***

All men have sinned (aorist tense viewed as a past action) and as a result of their sin all experience abiding consequences—they continually fall short of God’s glory (present tense verb, McClain, 105).

It is difficult to know what Paul meant by “fall short of the glory of God” since it is so ambiguous. There are three main views:

1<sup>st</sup> view—Because men are sinful they fail to glorify God; they fall short of glorifying God as they should. Romans 1:23 says, “though they knew God, they did not glorify Him as God.” There Paul is specifically speaking of Gentiles, but by extension, both Jews and Gentiles commit the same idolatrous acts.

As Piper puts it, “We have sought our satisfaction in other things, and treated them as more valuable than God, which is the essence of idolatry (Romans 1:21–23). Since sin came into the world we have all been deeply resistant to having God as our all-satisfying treasure (Ephesians 2:3). This is an appalling offense to the greatness of God (Jeremiah 2:12–13).” ([desiringgod.org/articles/quest-for-joy](http://desiringgod.org/articles/quest-for-joy))

2<sup>nd</sup> view—Men fail to receive the glory that God wants to give them. In this case, “glory of God” would mean “glory from God” (Hodge). The idea is similar to John 12:43 when Jesus said, “they loved the approval of men rather than the approval of God.”

This view seems the least likely.

3<sup>rd</sup> view—Men are beings created in the image of God; however, because they are sinful men come short of reflecting the glory of God as they were intended to do. This began from the time that Adam sinned. In other words, because all sin, all fall short of displaying the glory of God which humans are to display.

Views 1 or 3 are most likely.

### c. Righteousness bestowed (3:24)

***3:24 being justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus;***

Justification is part of the process of judgment. When men have a controversy they go before a judge. The process whereby their dispute is resolved is called “judgment.” When the verdict is given in favor of a party, that person is said to be “justified.” It is declared by the judge that he has reached the standard of the law and is acquitted of the accusation. The acquitted person is not punished. The opposite of justify is condemn. To condemn someone is to declare their guilt and assign them to punishment.

We need to note that justification does *not* mean to be *made* righteous. That would involve a change in character. Rather, justification is a legal declaration that states that whatever man has done that made him unacceptable to God has been resolved so that he can be placed in a position to receive God’s favor. Justification means that God has acquitted men of all the charges (Moo, 227).

Therefore, justification is not a change of our nature, but a change of our standing before God. When people are justified by God they are declared to have reached the standard of the law and

are therefore accepted by Him. They are treated as righteous. *Sanctification* changes our character; it is the work of the Holy Spirit who gradually changes us into the image of His Son.

In short, justification is the act of God, once for all declaring us just and righteous in His sight. Typically, the verdict comes at the judgment, but here “being justified” indicates that the person who has faith in Christ is already in a justified state. Thus, the verdict at the judgment is already declared; the believer has been acquitted of all charges brought against him.

How can this happen? How can men be acquitted of their crimes (sins) by faith in Christ?

1) Justification is a gift.

We are justified as an undeserved gift from God. That is, it is “a gift by His grace.” If it was not by grace, none could experience it (Titus 3:7) for all that we do only leads to condemnation.

We can never work for our salvation. If you work for someone you get wages, not grace. Work places the employer under obligation or debt—the employer owes the employee money for their work. God cannot be put in anyone’s debt. Romans 11:35 asks, “Who has ever given to God, that God should repay him?” The answer is “no one”; the reason given is that “from Him and through Him and to Him are all things” (Romans 11:36).

This gift is also a gift of grace. “Grace is the good that you get from someone when he owes you nothing” (Piper). So when Paul says we are justified as a gift by His grace, he means that justification cannot be paid for nor can it be worked for—it can only be received.

2) Justification is through redemption (3:24).

*In Romans 3:24* redemption refers to our deliverance through the payment of a price. In this context, Christ delivered us from the punishment of sin by bearing the punishment of our sins (Ro. 3:25, 26; Eph. 1:7; Col. 1:14; Acts 20:28; Heb. 9:15; I Pet. 1:18; Rev. 5:9–10, etc.). He exchanged His own life for ours.

As Murray says, “Justification is through redemption that is in Christ Jesus; it is not through any price of ours; it is the costly price that Christ paid in order that free grace might flow unto the justification of the ungodly” (Murray, 115). 1 Peter 1:18–19 says, “you were not redeemed with perishable things like silver or gold from your futile way of life inherited from your forefathers, but with precious blood, as of a lamb unblemished and spotless, the blood of Christ.”

“Because Christ has borne the punishment for our sins in His own body, God is able to remit the penalty and to restore us to His favor. In justification, sins are not excused but are punished in the person of Christ, the substitute” (Thiessen, *Lectures in Systematic Theology*, 274). In other words, God can refrain from inflicting the punishment we deserve because the penalty for our sins has already been paid for by Christ. We can be declared to be in a right standing with God (justified) because we *are* in a right standing with God! The demands of the law have been met!

#### d. Righteousness declared (3:25–26)

***3:25 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;***

***3:26 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.***

The believer will be justified through redemption in Christ (3:24). Christ's redemptive act (3:24) was displayed when Christ publicly died on the cross making God propitious toward the sinner (3:25a). "Propitious" means to be favorably disposed toward someone; in this case the death of Christ (the propitiation *in His blood*) made God favorably disposed toward the sinner since the punishment for sin had been meted out in Christ.

Propitiation needs to be understood in the context of wrath in judgment. Paul showed that the judgment of God rests upon the pagan world in Romans 1. In chapter 2 he spoke of the judgment to come (2:2, 3, 5, 8, 12, 16). He concluded his argument in 3:19 by saying that "the whole world may be held accountable to God."

The holiness of God responds to sin with wrath and judgment. "To the men of the OT the wrath of God is both very real and very serious. God is not thought of as capriciously angry (like the deities of the heathen), but, because He is a moral Being, His anger is directed toward wrongdoing in any shape or form. Once aroused, His anger is not easily assuaged, and dire consequences may follow. But it is only fair to add that the OT consistently regards God as a God of mercy. Though men sin and thus draw down upon themselves the consequences of His wrath, yet God does not delight in the death of the sinner. He provides ways in which the consequences of sin may be averted" (Morris, *The Apostolic Preaching of the Cross*, 149; Morris has an excellent discussion about the wrath of God and its effects 149–154).

In the OT when the people of Israel murmured against Moses and Aaron, God was going to consume them on the spot. Aaron avoided God's judgment of the people by offering incense (Num. 16:41–50). "If it be objected that there is no great monetary value in the offering of a small quantity of incense, so that the atonement attained is out of all proportion to the price paid, the answer must be that the atonement obtained is always out of proportion to the price paid. . . There is always an element of grace in atonement" (Morris, *The Apostolic Preaching of the Cross*, 167). Of course, the most conspicuous way that God's wrath could be avoided in the OT was seen in the sacrificial system.

Atonement in the OT was not the soothing of God's anger, but was God's instituted means of receiving His grace. "It was the expression of God's anger on the one hand and the expression and putting in action of God's grace on the other hand. . . The sacrifices were in themselves prime acts of obedience to God's means of grace and His expressed will" (Morris, *The Apostolic Preaching of the Cross*, 178).

Paul now describes how the wrath of God can be averted in Christ. Men can avoid God's wrath because the death of Jesus was accepted by God as a propitiation. In Romans 3:25 propitiation means to turn the wrath of God away by means of an offering. This is clear because Paul says that the propitiation was in Christ's blood; that is, it came about through His death.

Since propitiation is "the acceptance by the wronged party of a compensatory payment, by which his anger against the one who has injured him is soothed" (Morris, *The Apostolic Preaching of the Cross*, 146), Paul is saying that the death of Christ was a sacrificial act that made God propitious (favorable) toward the sinner. When the wrath of God for our sins was

poured out upon Christ at the cross, it was averted from us (see Morris. *The Apostolic Preaching of the Cross*, 184–202 for a detailed discussion). Normally, the offender offers a payment to gain the favor of the one who was offended; in this case God is both the offended party and the One who offers the payment. That is, God Himself sets forth the sacrifice that satisfies His own sense of justice. This is the love of God. This is the gospel.

One may ask, “If the wrath of God could be averted in the OT by something as simple as offering incense, or by an animal, why was the death of Christ necessary? Why not just continue doing what men had always done?”

In this passage Paul says that Jesus died on the cross *publicly* “to demonstrate His [i.e. God’s] righteousness.” But why did God’s righteousness need to be demonstrated? Didn’t people know that He was righteous?

It was necessary for God to demonstrate His righteousness “because in His forbearance He had passed over the sins that were previously committed.” In other words, the sins in the OT were never taken away until the cross of Christ. God had set up a means to avert His wrath at that time, but offering an animal sacrifice or paying money is not equal compensation for the life of the sinner. Hebrews 10:4 clearly states that it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins. Even so, God accepted those offerings as tokens of the full payment for sin yet to come. One could say that the OT saints were only on credit. The actual payment for their sin was the death of Christ. In that sense, “God had passed over the sins that were previously committed” (3:25). Though the payment for sin had not yet been paid, God did not pour out His wrath upon people. He passed over their sins. But the death of Christ declares (demonstrates) God’s righteousness, for it shows that the actual payment for sin was made. This also explains why the death of Christ was necessary and superior to the OT system in averting wrath. The OT system was only a mere shadow of reality.

God did this so that “He might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus” (3:26). Not only did the death of Christ vindicate God by showing His justice, it explains how a holy God can be just in justifying the one who has faith in Christ. A judge is unjust when he pronounces a criminal righteous and allows him to be released. He acts justly when he pronounces the offender guilty and punishes him according to the penalty of the law. What Paul is saying is that there is no such disregard of justice with God when the sinner who believes in Christ is justified. God does not simply act as a sovereign who dispenses with the demands of the law, nor is the sinner justified on account of his own acts and character. The sinner is declared righteous because the penalty of the law has been completely satisfied by a substitute.

Justice and mercy are harmoniously united in the cross. God was not obligated to provide a substitute; however, by doing so grace is magnified. And yet, justice was not compromised for Christ’s sacrifice perfectly met the demands of the law; with the demands of the law met, there is no just reason to condemn the sinner. “The man who believes that Jesus is the propitiation . . . is not fictitiously regarded as right with God; he actually is right with God, and God treats him as such” (Morris, *The Apostolic Preaching of the Cross*, 273).

**e. Advantages of this method of saving people (3:27–31)****There is no room for boasting.**

***3:27 Where then is boasting? It is excluded. By what kind of law? Of works? No, but by a law of faith.***

***3:28 For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from works of the Law.***

The Jews boasted over the many advantages they had over the Gentiles (2:17; 3:1–2, 9). One might now conclude that since the Christian has even more advantages than they, he has even more reason to boast, but such is not the case. Since justification is totally unmerited and is a gracious gift from God, no one has reason to brag about receiving it. Paul says that boasting is “excluded”; it is shut out, not having any place.

“By what law? Of works? No, but by the law of faith.” In this case the word “law” means “principle” (Lenski, 266; Harrison, 46; Murray, 122–123; Moo, 250, TDNT IV, 1071, etc.) In other words, by what means did God shut out boasting? What principle did God use? Did He use the principle of works? Absolutely not! Anything that is tied to works gives room for boasting since human achievement is involved. But God didn’t use a principle that even touched on works. Boasting is shut out through the principle of faith (the law of faith). In this way, all boasting is removed from the very beginning, nor can it enter in along the way. As Paul had said, the gospel is “from faith to faith” (1:17, see notes).

“Therefore we conclude that a man is justified by faith apart from the deeds of the law” (3:28). Paul concludes that if God works from the principle of justification through faith in Christ, then deeds play no part in salvation.

**God is seen to be the God of all men.**

***3:29 Or is God the God of Jews only? Is He not the God of Gentiles also? Yes, of Gentiles also,***

***3:30 since indeed God who will justify the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through faith is one.***

The second question, “Is He the God of the Jews only?” (3:29), introduces the second advantage to God’s method of saving people in Christ. “He [God] deals with both classes [i.e. both Jew and Gentile] on precisely the same principles; He pursues, with regard to both, the same plan, and offers salvation to both on exactly the same terms. There is, therefore, in this doctrine, the foundation laid for a universal religion, which may be preached to every creature under heaven, which need not, as was the case with the Jewish system, be confined to any one sect or nation. This is the only doctrine that suits the character of God, and His relation to all His intelligent creatures on earth” (Hodge, 101).

**It establishes the Law.**

***3:31 Do we then nullify the Law through faith? May it never be! On the contrary, we establish the Law.***

Verse 31 has many different interpretations attesting to its difficulty. The following one seems to me to fit the context the best.

If the principle that God uses to justify men is faith, then shouldn't we draw the conclusion that the law is useless? Perish the thought! Justification by faith does not abolish the law, it supports what the law has already established. The law revealed sin (3:20), our total inability to justify ourselves before God (3:10 ff.), and the need of grace. Justification by grace through faith is the logical conclusion to what the law teaches. Furthermore, even after we come to faith the law continues to reveal our sins and need of daily cleansing.

**Summary/ Review:**

Paul began in 1:16–17 by saying, “For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith; as it is written, ‘but the righteous man shall live by faith.’” In 3:21–31 he has described how the gospel reveals the righteousness of God and how it is received by faith.

**KEY THEOLOGICAL IDEAS IN A NUTSHELL**

- The basic meaning of **righteousness** is to do what is right, to live up to a moral standard, or to be in a right standing with God.
- “**Judgment**” can refer to the condemnation, penalty, or punishment for breaking of the Law, or it can refer to “the action of a judge” without any reference to the verdict.
- To be **justified** means to be declared righteous. It is a legal declaration of one's standing in relation to the law.
- **Redemption** is the act of freeing or delivering someone from bondage or affliction. Whenever it is used, the notion of a cost is involved. In the context of Romans 3:24 redemption speaks of Christ delivering us from the punishment of sin at the cost of His own life (3:25 ff.).
- **Propitiation** is the acceptance of a compensatory payment by a wronged party (Morris, 146). By means of the payment the anger of the person is appeased. The death of Christ was a sacrificial act that made God propitious (favorable) toward the sinner. When the wrath of God was poured out upon Christ at the cross, the penalty of sin was paid, we were placed in a right standing with God, and are free from condemnation.
- **Grace** is an unmerited act, or favor, directed toward those who are undeserving.