

FROM TRASH TO TREASURE

Romans 3:25b-26

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The Italian violin maker Antonio Stradivari was a poor man. And yet his violins are now the most prized violins ever made because of the rich and resonant sound they produce. The unique sound of a Stradivarius cannot be duplicated.

What may surprise you is that these precious instruments were not made from treasured pieces of wood; they were carved from discarded trash lumber. Because Stradivari couldn't afford fine materials, he got most of his wood from the dirty harbors where he lived. He would take those waterlogged pieces of wood to his shop, clean them up, and dry them out. Then, from those trashed pieces of lumber he would create instruments of rare beauty.

It has long since been discovered why his violins are so unique. It happens that while the wood floated in those dirty harbors, microbes infiltrated and ate out the centers of the wood cells. This left a unique fibrous infrastructure that created resonating chambers for the music.

Hence, from the wood that nobody wanted, Stradivari produced violins that now everybody wants. [Raymond McHenry, "You Are God's Stradivarius," *McHenry's Stories for the Soul* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2001), 290]

Just as this poor violin maker transformed trash into treasure, only God can transform you and me into what we were truly meant to be, a treasure of His grace. And that's what the Gospel is all about. The Gospel is much more than getting someone forgiven and saved so that they can spend eternity in heaven with God, rather than in Hell forever separated from God. The Good News about Jesus Christ, at its very base, is about God's transforming our trashy lives right now into eternal treasures that He and we may enjoy forever.

Many Biblical scholars of the past have said that the Magna Carta, the document in all of scripture that lays out for us this truth of the transforming power of the

Gospel, is the book of **Romans**. This morning, we find ourselves returning to our study of this book for the next few weeks.

Because some of you are new to Crossroads and were not here when I began this study a year ago this month, and because some of us can't remember what we heard in church last week, let me begin our return to **Romans** by giving you an outline of the big picture. This will bring us up to speed as to where we find ourselves in our present study of this glorious book.

May I suggest that you don't try to take notes at this point or to copy this chart, but just relax and take in a brief overview of the first major section of the book, which covers chapters one through eight. If you want to get this information in detail, you can find it online, beginning February 5, 2017. Furthermore, if you would like a copy of this chart, I will have them available after the service. I'll let you know when to grab a pen or pencil to start taking notes.

In **1:1-17** the Apostle Paul introduces his letter to the Roman church by giving us, the readers, the major theme of the book, the Gospel. The whole book is about how the Gospel, the Good News of the finished work of Jesus Christ on the cross, is the power and the only hope for the salvation and transformation of an individual.

The rest of this major section lays out humanity's desperate need for the Gospel. This section falls into three parts. The first points to the reality that as humans, we all have a big problem. Because we all have turned our back on God, treated Him less than God, and have in one way or another suppressed the truth of God, we are now all objects of God's wrath. For simplicity's sake, God's wrath can be summed up as His eternal rejection of us.

This is a very harsh indictment by Paul against all of us. Yet, as a prosecuting attorney, he continues in the rest of **chapter 1** through the middle of **chapter 3** to lay out his case against the human race. In this section, Paul proves that there is not one humanist, not one moral person, not one religious person, including the Jew, who does not stand condemned before a perfect and holy

God. Hence, there is no hope or any manner by which any human being, on their own, can earn God's acceptance or approval or forgiveness or escape from His eternal rejection. By the end of **Romans 3:20**, the entire human race has been proved to stand hopelessly condemned by God.

But then we come to the beginning of what I call the "Hallelujah Chorus" of **Romans, 3:21-26**, where we find God's only solution to the problem of human sin. In this brief paragraph, Paul introduces the keys to God's rescue effort for the human race. He lays out the basis for the only solution to the condemnation of every human being. It is the Gospel.

Follow along as I read these six verses.

²¹**But now the *righteousness of God* has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it—**
²²**the *righteousness of God* through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction: ²³for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, ²⁴and are *justified* by his grace as a gift, through the *redemption* that is in Christ Jesus, ²⁵whom God put forward as a *propitiation* by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God's righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins. ²⁶It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.**

The first two words of **verse 21** are the reason that I call this the beginning of the “Hallelujah Chorus” of **Romans**. Up to this point, the human race was a hung bunny! But now our God, who is not obliged to rescue any of us, goes to great measures to save us from ourselves--to give us what we long for, but certainly not what we deserve. Please note the four italicized expressions in these verses: “*the righteousness of God,*” “*justified,*” “*redemption,*” and “*propitiation.*” These terms hold the key to fully grasping the truth of the Gospel, the significance of how you find life and meaning in the very mundane issues of life. In these words, we have hope and assurance, regardless of our past or present circumstances.

The first important expression that gives us hope is “**the righteousness of God,**” which is used several times in this paragraph and throughout **Romans**. This expression has two aspects to it. First, it speaks of God’s character. “**Righteousness**” points to God as being the only one who has it all together. There is nothing missing in God’s character. He is without evil; He is good. He is the very source and origin of righteousness and goodness.

Out of his righteous character flows the second aspect of this expression “**the righteousness of God.**” Out of His character, God initiates His righteous actions toward the human race, dealing mercifully and faithfully with us. He sets up a righteous plan to rescue those who wish to escape the wrath of God and to enjoy His loving friendship. Hence, God’s righteousness refers to God’s perfect character out of which he deals faithfully with us to perfect us.

The term “**justification**” is one example of God’s righteous actions toward us by which He promises to save, forgive, and transform the lives of those who put their trust in the Savior, Jesus Christ.

To justify someone means to declare them righteous and acquitted of all wrong doing. Because Jesus died on the cross, having paid the penalty for our sin and rebellion against God, God declares those who put their confidence in Christ’s work alone to be righteous. And like himself, they are totally forgiven, fully accepted, and forever and completely approved in Christ, never ever to be rejected or abandoned by God.

A side note about this word “**justify**” is that it comes from the same word as “**righteousness.**” Hence, in **verse 26** when it speaks of God being just and the justifier, it means that He is the righteous judge and the one who makes others as righteous as Himself when they put their trust in Christ.

The next key term, “**redemption,**” explains how it is that God could declare sinners and rebels against God acquitted or forgiven and acceptable to God. This term refers to loosing or untying or delivering or freeing something.

In New Testament times, the term “**redemption**” was used in slave markets to describe people being purchased as slaves, who had been in chains and were not free to act as they wanted to. These people were forced to obey their master’s demands. Then someone came along, purchased them for a price, loosed them from their bondage of chains, set them free from their previous master, and delivered them to a new life with a new Master.

In this case, we were the slaves being held captive or in bondage to our sinful behavior. Our sin was the master who controlled our lives. Jesus paid the price for our freedom from the master controller of sin in our lives. Hence, all who put their complete trust in God’s righteous plan of rescue through Jesus’ redemption can declare the following truth about themselves.

- a. We are redeemed from something, namely from the slavery of sin and the power of sin to control our lives.
- b. We are redeemed by something, namely by the payment price of the blood of Christ.
- c. We are redeemed to something, namely to a state of freedom under God to live as He intended us to.

And by the way, we are not free as Christians to do whatever we want. We are free to choose who our master is. As Christians, our real Master is Jesus, because He bought and paid for us with His death on the cross and His resurrected life. As His slaves, we can be foolish to ignore His rightful place as Master of our lives, but to do so could signal that we were never saved in the first place. In such cases, only God knows.

The final key term found in this paragraph, the term we did not finish looking at last time, is “**propitiation**,” and we are returning there this morning. We will finish dealing with this term and then summarize the whole purpose of the paragraph.

The term “**propitiation**” declares the reason why God will never lay His wrath or anger on those who have put their trust in Christ. Propitiation means that Christ’s dying on the cross so satisfies the anger of God, who has been unjustly wronged by us, that his anger is fully appeased, and He is free to fully love and embrace the ones who wronged him.

This morning, whether you are a follower of Jesus or not, there is a very good chance that in the last twenty-four hours you have wronged God. If you have, and you have put your confidence in Jesus’ propitiating work on your behalf on the cross, then the following three results are true of you this morning.

First, you will find it easier to more quickly apply God’s forgiveness and acceptance to yourself when you continue to fail. Why? Because you now know that your acceptance before God does not depend upon how well you perform day to day, but on Christ’s performance on the cross on your behalf.

This leads to a second important application of this truth to life. The more you understand and remember that God holds no anger for you but loves you and accepts you as you are, the more ever increasing your love and devotion will be for Christ. Your love and appreciation for Christ’s propitiating work on your behalf will become more meaningful, and your commitment to serve Him with your whole heart will grow.

As the understanding of the work of God’s righteous love toward you sinks in, it, in turn, produces a third result. It produces more patience, long suffering, and kindness toward others, as well as an increased ability to forgive others.

Your love and appreciation for what God has done for you moves you to reach out to friends, family, and foe alike who do not know Jesus, to share with them the good news of Jesus.

If you are a recent attender to Crossroads, and this is the first time you have heard me preach, I need to admit one thing to you: Up to this point, this has all been review! I don't typically take this much time to review, but due to the distance of time between this message and the last, I didn't know how else to get back into the study. I don't typically try to cover this much in-depth material in one sitting. But I could figure no other way to return to such a deeply complex passage of scripture as this paragraph, which sets the stage for the next four chapters of Romans.

In addition, the last time we looked at these verses in November, I knew I wouldn't be able to fully explain propitiation or finish the significance of the paragraph. In fact, we only got through the first half of **verse 25**, leaving its second half and some other implications of propitiation untouched.

So now, let's reread just **verse 25** so as to finish it, touch on a key point, then move to **verse 26**, and wrap up the major significance of this Hallelujah Chorus paragraph. **“²⁵Whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God's righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins.”**

Now, what does it mean that God **“passed over former sins.”** The expression **“to pass over”** means to be left unpunished. When we see people go unpunished or innocent people killed or hurt, it can cause us to wrongly conclude that God doesn't take all sin and injustice seriously. Or, we mistakenly believe that he overlooks some sin. We can wrongly conclude that if God really did care about justice, He would immediately stop all the evils of today, such as terrorism. But Paul is telling us that the reason that God holds off the immediate punishment for all sin down through the centuries, the reason that God has been so **“forbearing,”** is not because he is unjust, but so that the human race will see how unrighteous and unjust we are in comparison to Him.

Let me try to explain what I just said. When God originally judged the sin of our parents, Adam and Eve, He demonstrated part of His judgment by pronouncing that mankind would die physically. That was to illustrate for all

the human race that God's judgement against all sin is death, a picture of potential ultimate physical and spiritual separation from God.

When was the last time we saw God's justice acted out against all the sin of the human race, so that all mankind died except a few saved individuals? The flood. It was through the flood that God said, "I will punish immediately all those who don't take me or sin seriously." Only those who obeyed God and got on the Ark were saved. Since the flood, there has never been another manifestation of God's pure justice to that degree, which has caused the question to arise in generations of human hearts, "Does God really care about injustice and sin? If so, why does He allow sin and injustice to reign on the earth?"

Paul tells us here that God deliberately passes over or delays final judgment of these injustices only for a time. God, being holy, can never simply overlook sin. In **1 John 1:5**, we read, "**God is light, and in Him there is no darkness at all.**" In other words, God is righteous and holy. There is no darkness or evil in Him at all. He cannot simply overlook or pretend He does not see sin or judge it. He must eventually judge all sin.

Hence, Paul in this passage suggests that God can delay justice for good reasons. Isaiah the prophet signals one good reason that God did not bring another worldwide judgment against the human race like the flood during his day. He reveals why God "**forbears**" with Israel. By holding off immediate judgment against Israel, God made possible the prophesied arrival of a Savior whose actions would make it possible for people to be saved.

Five hundred years before Christ's birth, the Spirit of God had Isaiah prophecy this:

Yet it was our grief he bore, our sorrows that weighed him down.

And we thought his troubles were a punishment from God for his

own sins! But he was wounded and bruised for our sins. He was

chastised that we might have peace; he was lashed--and we were healed! (*Isaiah 53:3-6, Living Paraphrase*)

God delayed judgment so that Jesus as our Savior could rescue us. This prophecy declared God's upcoming work of propitiation, that God would satisfy or appease His own anger by His own personal sacrifice of going to the cross to pay our penalty for sin and to make righteous and acceptable in Christ those who trust in Him.

Elsewhere in **2 Peter 3:9**, we learn more about why God is so forbearing, passes over sin, and delays immediate judgment against all sin and injustice. The Apostle Peter explains:

The Lord is not slow about His promise, [promise about judgment against the sin and injustice that his readers were experiencing] **as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance. But the day of the Lord** [the day of judgment against sin and injustice] **will come like a thief, in which the heavens will pass away with a roar and the elements will be destroyed with intense heat, and the earth and its works will be burned up.**

Peter tells us that God delays immediate judgement by death so that the human race will continue to exist, giving others a chance to be saved by putting their faith in Christ. But one day that will cease, and God will no longer allow human injustice to continue. True justice will finally reign; God will bring final judgment to the human race. But when justice does reign, that will bring the end of our world as we know it and close the possibility of

anyone else getting saved who has not put their trust in God's provision of the one and only Savior of the world, Jesus Christ. Just like when Noah pulled up the boat ramp and closed the door to the Ark, all those who had refused to climb on board were eternally lost. End of story!

So why does Paul tell us all of this at the end of **verse 25**? What is the most important point of this entire paragraph that begins at **verse 21** and ends at **verse 26**? Is it to demonstrate His love toward us? He certainly has done that. But no, that is not Paul's major focus. Paul repeats his reason for this Hallelujah paragraph twice in these two verses, **25** and **26**. In fact, this reason is the very thing that he opened the paragraph with in **verse 21**. Look at these two verses again:

²⁵This was to show God's righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins. ²⁶It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just [the fair and righteous judge] and the justifier [the maker of other righteous people] of the one who has faith in Jesus.

Keep the context of **Romans** and this paragraph in mind. Up until **3:21**, Paul demonstrated that the entire human race was doomed because of our rebellion against God, for suppressing the truth about God. But in **verse 21**, God addresses our helpless state. Contrary to what others may say about God, He does the unthinkable, when He is obligated to do nothing good toward us. He could justly allow the entire human race to spend eternity in hell, and He would still be loving and just.

But it was God's choice to take a righteous action to make salvation possible for us. It was God's righteous action of justification, redemption, and propitiation that appeased His own anger. It was God who appeased his own anger by dying on the cross for our sin, that those who put their trust in Jesus

would be forgiven, saved, accepted, approved and lovingly embraced forever by God.

The summary of this paragraph is that salvation is all about what God has done for helpless, hopeless, condemned sinners. We were helpless and hopeless and doomed. But because of His love, God made a way for us.

Oh, thank you, Father God. Thank you, Jesus, for dying in our place. Thank you, Holy Spirit, for opening our eyes to this truth.

My friends, you who have trusted in Christ, do you understand how hopeless you were and how great a righteousness is God's to save you? When you consider your outcome, without Christ, do you have a word you would like to declare to Jesus? Then say it right now! Right here! Out loud!

Now, what about your neighbor, your relatives, your fellow students and workers?

What about those who annoy and irritate you?

Do they deserve a merciful chance to hear the truth that you have learned, that they might be saved? Do they? Then pray for them. Pray for the opportunity to share your story of God's great work in your life? Introduce them to the loving Savior and transformer of life. Share with them how He is patiently at work transforming you, former trash, into one of His eternal treasures, and they can be saved and transformed as well.