

1-4

ROMANS

GOD'S GOOD NEWS

STUDY #7

3:21-31



OVERVIEW - ROMANS 3:21-31

In 1:18-3:20, Paul shows that the gospel of righteousness (1:16-17) is necessary for *all* humanity because both Jew and Gentile are under God's wrath. Paul thus concludes that *no one* is righteous before God (3:20). Yet 3:21 marks a significant turning point in the letter as we shift our attention from the bleak backdrop of God's wrath, to the dazzling treasure that is the gospel. This gospel reveals a way for sinners to be made *right* before God.

The Righteousness of God (3:21-26)

21 As above, the word 'but' signals a glorious transition in Paul's letter to the Romans. Though all are under God's wrath, the gospel reveals (cf. 1:17) a righteousness from God. This righteousness is something long anticipated by the Law and the Prophets (aka the Old Testament)

22-24 God's righteousness is available to *all* who believe. This is a free gift (v 24), meaning that God has given it to us with *without reason* – we have done nothing, or possess nothing, that has merited it. God has freely given out of his love.¹ The result is that we have been justified (v 24). Which literally means to be made righteous.² This is a legal declaration of *right standing* before God - we are no longer under God's wrath!

This is especially good news because as we've already learned, *all* are under God's wrath. Or as it is stated here, '*all* have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.' As those made in God's image, we reflected his glory. But because we have suppressed the truth of God for a lie, and exchanged his glory for the worship of idols (1:18-25), this glory of being made in God's image has now been thoroughly degraded. Instead of reflecting God's glory, we reflect the degraded glory of the things we worship – *those who make idols will become like them* (Psalm 115:8). Our capacity to reflect and enjoy God's glory had thus been severed. We have fallen short. Yet just as Israel were *redeemed* from under Egyptian oppression (Ex 15:13), so too has Christ *redeemed* (v 24) us from being under sin.

25-26 Yet how can God forgive sinners and be just? How can he turn away his wrath and be righteous? If we cannot tolerate the injustice of a criminal going unpunished, how much less so our holy God? These verses show how the cross demonstrates God's righteousness (v 26), i.e., how he can both be just *and* a justifier of sinners.

In verses 21-22 the *righteousness of God* describes the righteousness *from* God (the right legal standing) given to all who believe (cf. Phil 3:9). But in verses 25-26, *God's righteousness* refers to his own upright character, he is consistent in his faithful love and justice. In Jesus, God's righteous love and righteous justice are fully satisfied and most clearly displayed. His justice demands punishment, so in love, God acts to take the punishment upon himself in Christ who is presented as a *sacrifice of atonement*. This phrase takes us back to the Old Testament, in particular, the Day of Atonement (Lev 16, cf. Heb 9), whereby God's wrath would be turned away from sinful Israel, as the blood from animal sacrifice cleansed the sanctuary, and as the nation's sin was symbolically transferred to a scapegoat by the High Priest. Yet this never ultimately dealt with the sin of God's people, but only pointed to the coming righteousness secured by Christ. Indeed, Christ's *atonement* sacrifice explains why God's people of old (Abraham, David etc) were not cut off by God – they were forgiven not on account of animal sacrifice, but in anticipation of Jesus, the lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world. This *sacrifice of atonement* is elsewhere validly translated as being a *propitiation* – the satisfying of wrath. At the cross, God rescues us from our greatest problem – his enmity towards us personally – by taking our wrath upon himself in Christ.

Boasting Silenced & The Law Upheld (3:27-31)

27-30 Knowing that we are justified by faith, purely as an act of God's free grace, should undercut any sense of personal pride or superiority. How can we look down on another, when we know in reality that we are but sinners saved by grace. How can God's *gift* in Christ not be our greatest joy and boast?

31 The faith of the gospel does not however nullify the Old Testament Law, it upholds it. As we shall see, it upholds the Old Testament teaching that righteousness has always come through faith and not through works of the Law (Rom 4). It upholds the Law's requirement that sin must be punished through Christ's punishment on our behalf. It upholds the Law by creating in people new hearts that are inclined to keep God's Law (1:5; 2:15, 29). It upholds the Law by pointing to the Law's fulfillment in Christ (Matt 5:17-20).

¹ On this point, we must be careful not to view our faith as a 'work' which merits God's forgiveness. Faith is simply a recognition that we are undeserving sinners who need a Saviour. Furthermore, our faith itself is a gift from God (Eph 2:8; Acts 18:27, 2 Tim 2:25 etc)

² It is obscured in the English, but the words translated here as *just* or *justified* are actually from the same word group as *righteous/righteousness*. To be *just* is to be *righteous*, to be *justified* is to be made *righteous*. The passage is *all* about *righteousness of God*.

GETTING STARTED

1. Have you witnessed an injustice recently that riled you up? Why do you think that injustice evokes such a strong response within us?

INTO THE TEXT

Read Romans 3:21-26

2. How would you summarise the flow of argument from 1:18-3:20? In what way is verse 21 such a significant turning point?
3. Compare verses 20 and 21. What does the Old Testament do, and not do, with respect to being declared righteous in God's sight?
4. Who is eligible to receive this gift of righteousness and how is it received?
5. The theme of this passage is 'the righteousness of God.' How is the concept of God's righteousness used differently between verses 21-22 and 25-26? (cf. Phil 3:9)
6. By what means is God's forgiveness of guilty sinners considered *just* (v. 27)?
7. In Christ, God's wrath (1:18-3:20) has been turned away from all who believe. How has our journey over the last couple of weeks helped you appreciate how great God's love is and the gospel actually is?

Read Romans 3:27-31

8. What sort of boasting do you think the gospel undercuts in our own lives? How so?
9. In what way does the gospel 'uphold' the law?

TAKEAWAY

10. *What you boast in is what gives you confidence to go out and face the day. It is the thing of which you say, "I am a somebody because I have that. I can beat what comes against me today because I am this."*³

What steps could we take this week to change the focus of our boasting and help our hearts boast in Christ and all he has done (Gal 6:14; Phil 3:3)?

³ Timothy Keller, *Romans 1-7 For You* (The Good Book Company, 2014), 87.