CHAPTER V

ROMANS 3:21-31 - THE RIGHTEOUSNESS OF GOD,
THE GOOD NEWS

THAT which 1:17 introduced, 3:21-26 now fulfills, and especially with regard to the key term, “the righteousness of God.” Concerning what exactly is the Christian gospel, here is the locus classicus [most authoritative] passage in all of the Bible. Other passages such as John 3:14-16; 1 Corinthians 15:1-5; Ephesians 2:1-10 are highly significant, but Romans 3:21-26 is both the most compact and comprehensive portion of Scripture revealing the one and only gospel in the canonical Scriptures. In the margin of the Luther Bible at Roman 3:23, the Reformer comments that this passage is “the chief point, and the very central place of the Epistle, and of the whole Bible.”¹ Robert Mounce rightly declares,

There is more theology compressed into these six verses than into any other comparable segment of Paul’s writing. Here we encounter the central thrust of the apostolic message. In these verses he lays the foundation of his theology. To understand what Paul is teaching in this section is to have a firm grasp on the essence of the Christian faith. Everything else flows from this theological center.²

Consider that the root of “righteousness,” δικαιοσύνη, dikaiosune, occurs seven times in these verses via four nouns as “righteousness,” two verbs as “to justify,” and one adjective as “just.” Then we have the subjects of “law (2), faith (4), sin (2), the glory of God, grace, redemption, propitiation by blood.” Now to some this may appear as weighty truth that is more the domain of scholars and theologians. To this, Lloyd-Jones rightly responds:

‘Ah but,’ you say, ‘that will not appeal to people today, they are not interested in theology.’ The answer is that they must become interested in theology if they are to become Christians; they must hear the truth and must believe it. Men have never been interested in theology, and never will be, until the Holy Spirit deals with them. So our business is to preach the truth to them, trusting to the Holy Spirit to open their eyes and their understanding, and to apply it to them with power. Here then, I say, is one of these crucial passages which indeed governs the whole of our preaching. It must always be within the bounds of this tremendous statement which we have here.³

In terms of contemporary evangelism, and present definitions of the gospel, it is here that we find the standard for the message proclaimed. Unfortunately, what we are about to study is not that gospel commonly proclaimed since substance has given way to sentiment, truth has yielded to methodology, doctrine has been supplanted by cultural relevance, and true saving faith has been replaced by decisionism. One has only to read gospel messages proclaimed by Luther, Calvin, Bunyan, Whitefield, Wesley, Edwards, Spurgeon, and Lloyd-Jones, to readily discern in general today not simply a different style that suits this twentieth century, but a divergence from that distinctive Pauline gospel which Romans so epitomizes.

¹ Douglas J. Moo, The Epistle to the Romans, p. 218.
² Robert H. Mounce, Themes From Romans, pp. 36-37. Leon Morris writes that this passage, “is possibly the most important single paragraph ever written, The Epistle to the Romans, p. 173. C. E. B. Cranfield likewise comments, “This short section . . . is the center and heart of the whole of Romans 1:16b-15:13,” A Critical And Exegetical Commentary On The Epistle To The Romans, I, p. 199.
³ Martyn Lloyd-Jones, Romans, 3:20-4:25, pp. 31-32.
Neil Postman, certainly not a confessing conservative evangelical, has yet provided a most revealing analysis of twentieth century communication as it contrasts with past generations. He concludes:

No clearer example of the difference between earlier forms of public discourse can be found than in the contrast between the theological arguments of Jonathan Edwards and those of, say, Jerry Falwell, or Billy Graham, or Oral Roberts. The formidable content of Edwards’ theology must inevitably engage the intellect; if there is such a content to the theology of the television evangelists, they have not yet made it known.4

Perhaps the response might be made that while Edwards’ had a brilliant mind, yet his writings are too ponderous and hardly represent the sort of ministry that would be effective at a practical evangelistic level today.

The simple answer to this misunderstanding is to quote from Edwards himself concerning the commencement of revival in Northampton, Massachusetts, with regard to the effects of his preaching on *Justification By Faith Alone* based upon the text, Romans 4:5. He writes:

The following discourse of justification, that was preached (though not so fully as it is here printed) at two public lectures, seemed to be remarkably blessed, not only to establish the judgment of many in this truth, but to engage their hearts in a more earnest pursuit of justification, in that way that had been explained and defended; and at that time, while I was greatly reproached for defending this doctrine in the pulpit, and just upon my suffering a very open abuse for it, God’s work wonderfully brake forth amongst us, and souls began to flock to Christ, as the Savior in whose righteousness alone they hoped to be justified. So that this was the doctrine on which this work in its beginning was founded, as it evidently was in the whole progress of it.5

A. THIS RIGHTEOUSNESS IS APART FROM THE LAW, 3:21-24

As others have acknowledged, there seems to be a division of expressed thought between vs. 21-24 and vs. 25-26.6 In vs. 21-24 there is reference to the fact of righteousness through faith alone in Christ alone, that is the fact and availability of free grace. However, in vs. 25-26 there is described how this free grace has been divinely made available.

1. It is righteousness through faith, vs. 21-22b.

It would help if the notes on 1:17a concerning “GOD’S GOSPEL IS RIGHTEOUS” on pages 27-30 were reviewed.

a. It is “now” as opposed to the past, v. 21a.

(1) “But now,” introduces a gloriously contrasting revelation of hope in the face of near despair. Here we are transported from death to life, darkness to light, condemnation to justification, works righteousness to faith righteousness, hell to heaven. We move from the Old Testament administration of shadows, types and promise to the New Testament administration of substance, antitypes, and fulfillment.

6 Refer to Boice and Lloyd-Jones.
Here “But now,” Nvr de, Nuni de, is a great transitionary expression. Nvr, Nuni, is an adverb of time that introduces what God has “now,” in “the now time,” v. 26, done in contrast with what has transpired in the past, v. 25. Nvr, Nuni, is also emphatic, so that Lloyd-Jones’ exuberant whole sermon based on this expression is quite justified. He writes,

‘But now.’ There are no more wonderful words in the whole of the Scripture than just these two words. . . . We are all of us under condemnation, we are all under the wrath of God. We can never produce a righteousness that can stand up to God’s searching glance and examination and investigation. We are altogether hopeless. Are you clear about that? If you are, you are ready to rejoice in these two words, ‘But now.’

Note how “But now,” Nvr de, Nuni de, is similarly used in Ephesians 2:12-13; Colossians 1:21-22; 3:6-8 with regard to the glorious contrast of the gospel. So William Matson has suitably penned:

Lord, I was blind, I could not see
In Thy marred visage any grace;
But now the beauty of Thy face
In radiant vision dawns on me.

Lord, I was deaf, I could not hear
The thrilling music of Thy voice;
But now I hear Thee and rejoice,
And mighty are Thy words, and dear.

Lord, I was dumb, I could not speak
The grace and glory of Thy name;
But now, as touched with living flame,
My lips Thine eager praises wake.

Lord, I was dead, I could not stir
My lifeless soul to come to Thee;
But now, since Thou hast quickened me,
I rise from sin’s dark sepulcher.

For Thou has made the blind to see,
The deaf to hear, the dumb to speak,
The dead to live; and lo, I break
The chains of my captivity.

b. It is “apart from [the] law,” v. 21b.

The emphatic position of this phrase, in relation to the prior teaching on “law” and the prospective emphasis on “[the] righteousness of God” cannot be over emphasized.

(1) More accurately the translation should read, “apart from law,” with no definite article, the inference being that “law” of whatever category is

eliminated. In the past economy of the Jew and Gentile, there was a “law” manifestation of “the righteousness” of God,” even “wrath,” 1:18. But “now” has come a manifestation of “the righteousness of God” which, via Jesus Christ, is “the righteousness of faith,” cf. vs. 22; 4:11; 10:6.

(2) However, in view of v. 20 where the purpose of the law is closely defined, so here this “righteousness of God” excludes that wrong use of the law where it is supposed to be a stimulus to righteousness. Any attempt on man’s part to be justified by law righteousness requires the keeping of the law totally, perfectly, and eternally (Gal. 5:3).

c. It is “[the] righteousness of God,” v. 21c.

This is Paul’s key term in Romans, and while it has been introduced in 1:17 as a synonym for the gospel, and in 3:5 it is differently used to describe God’s essential moral being and its demands upon mankind, here the full gospel force is expounded.

(1) The gospel is fundamentally a moral issue.

In our contemporary evangelical climate, it might be asked as to why Paul writes of “righteousness” here rather than “love.” The answer is that while “love” speaks today of a relationship of acceptance and congeniality that is morally unanchored, the Bible declares man’s fundamental problem to be moral; that is man is unrighteous before a wholly righteous God. The alienation of man from God is a result of sin (Isa. 59:2), so that the moral conflict must be dealt with for love to be expressed. As Warfield states, “The love of God is in its exercise necessarily under the control of his righteousness.” Indeed, the great problem for God, as man might perceive it, is how He can justly deal with sin and at the same time justify the sinner. We have already seen with regard to 1:17 that Isaiah, in many passages such as 46:12-13; 61:10, speaks of God saving in righteousness that is at the same time pardoning and gracious. So the same thought is now expressed.

(2) The gospel is “[the] righteousness of God.”

(a) This phrase can be understood from four perspectives. (1) God is essentially righteous. (2) God demands righteousness. (3) God saves in a righteous manner. (4) God provides an imputed/declarative gift of righteousness. Clearly, points 1 and 2 cannot apply here since God’s essential and demanding righteousness can only condemn unrighteous humankind and result in guilt and despair whereas the context here is of good news. Rather, the thought is akin to that which Isaiah writes about, as mentioned earlier. While point 3 is described in v. 26, yet the

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9 Moo, Romans, pp. 222-3.
11 As Moo, having considered several alternative views, The Epistle to the Romans, pp. 189-90.
immediately following prominence of faith in vs. 22, 26 must call for the prime meaning being “reckoned righteousness,” 4:5, “the gift of righteousness,” 5:17, that is, “not . . . a righteousness of my own derived from the Law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which comes from God on the basis of faith” (Phil. 3:9). Therefore this is an alien, perfect, objective righteousness that is sourced in the wholly righteous Jesus Christ.

(b) John Bunyan comments: “Now, this righteousness of God, whatever it is, to be sure it is not a righteousness that flows from men; for that, as I said, is rejected, and the righteousness of God opposed unto it, being called a righteousness that is without the law, without our personal obedience to it. The righteousness of God, or a righteousness of God’s completing, a righteousness of God’s bestowing, a righteousness that God also gives unto, and puts upon all them that believe (Rom. 3:22), a righteousness that stands in the works of Christ, and that is imputed only by the grace and justice of God (Rom. 3:24-26).”

(3) The gospel is soul liberating, gratis righteousness from God.

Herein lies the glory of the saving grace of God, the emancipating news that transforms Martin Luther and a great and growing host of sinners. Imagine the sheer ecstasy that would erupt from the tax-gatherer of Luke 18:9-14 if he, having through faith declared, “God, be merciful to me, the sinner,” then heard the Judge of all the earth declare, “this man went down to his house justified.”

d. It is manifested, v. 21d.

The perfect tense in the translation “has been manifested [clearly revealed]” rightly calls attention to a prior “law” manifestation of God’s righteousness that “now” comes in a far more glorious manner (II Cor. 3:7-11). God has, according to His determined timing (Gal. 4:4), actively made known the gospel in its glorious unclouded fulness, for promise has given way to fulfilment (Heb. 1:1-3).

e. It is witnessed, v. 21e.

This testimony “is being witnessed [present tense] by the law and the prophets.” Hence, the emphasis here is upon the “now” witness in the Word of God concerning this new revelation of God’s justifying righteousness. This term, “the Law and the Prophets” refers to the united testimony of the whole of the Old Testament, including “the writings” which Paul has already freely quoted (Matt. 5:17; 22:40; Luke 24:27, 44).

(1) In the Old Testament the gospel continues to be witnessed to, specifically in Habakkuk 2:4; cf. Romans 1:17; Galatians 3:11; Hebrews 10:38, and also

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(2) Thus Paul is teaching us the importance of the Old Testament since it contains the one and only gospel of the grace of God. Hence the gospel that Paul proclaimed was not new, but rather that which had been abiding since the Fall. Paul has no thought of a new grace salvation revealed in his epistles that has superseded a law salvation revealed in the Old Testament.

f. It is “through faith in Jesus Christ,” v. 22a.

Paul repeats his gospel phrase “[the] righteousness of God,” and it gives clear proof for believing that “the righteousness of God” mentioned in v. 21 is “the gift of righteousness,” 5:17, that is an objective righteousness.

(1) What is the right translation? The grammar here allows two legitimate variants. The objective genitive, as in the KJV, NKJV, NIV, ESV, translates “faith in Jesus Christ,” and for many reasons is to be preferred, with parallel support from Galatians 2:16. The subjective genitive translates “faith[fulness] of Jesus Christ.”

(2) What is the role of faith? The gospel comes “through faith” and not “by faith.” That is, faith is a mediate channel of salvation, not an instrumental cause of salvation; faith is linkage, a coupling; faith is works and self renouncing trust.

(a) J. Gresham Machen writes: “Faith is not a meritorious work; the New Testament never says that a man is saved on account of his faith. Faith is the means which the Holy Spirit uses to apply to the individual soul the benefits of Christ’s death. And faith is a very simple thing; it simply means the receiving of a gift.”

(b) True saving faith involves a sinner, using intellect, will, and emotions, who first encounters gospel truth, then acknowledges this gospel truth to be true in general and in particular regarding himself, and then personally embraces this gospel truth, as is described in 6:17.

(c) By way of illustration, imagine that you have a problem slipping over in the bath. A friend suggests that you need a handle to hang on to, so you go to a hardware store and buy one. But consider how stupid it would be for you to then sit in the bath holding on to the new handle even though it was not attached to anything! Faith is not to be objectified; it

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14 Murray, Romans, I, pp. 110-11, 363-372; Moo, Romans, pp. 224-26, especially his comment: “Most damaging to the hypothesis in either form [faithfulness of Christ, or faith exercised by Jesus Christ], is the consistent use of πίστις, pistis throughout 3:21-4:25 to designate the faith exercised by people in God, or Christ, as the sole means of justification,” p. 225.

15 J. Gresham Machen, God Transcendent, p. 91.
is not therapeutic in itself; faith must have an object, and it is the character of that object that makes salvation viable or non-viable.

(3) What is objective justification? It contrasts with a subjective or internal, infused and progressive righteousness, produced in cooperation with the grace of the Holy Spirit, that is the ground of justification at the judgment day; it is essential Roman Catholic doctrine. Rather, objective justification is the guilty sinner, aware of his thorough corruption, looking away from and outside of himself toward the completed, atoning work of Jesus (Heb. 1:3; 10:11-14). This look is faith in the invitation and promise of the Savior Himself, that “he who hears My word, and believes Him who sent me, has eternal life, and does not come into judgment, but has passed out of death into life” (John 5:24). It is immediate justification. As Paul repeats in 3:26, and 4:5, “But to the one who does not work, but believes in Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is reckoned as righteousness.”

g. It is “for all those who believe,” v. 22b.

This is not a tautology concerning “faith in Jesus Christ” just mentioned. There the emphasis is about saving union with Jesus Christ, that is through faith; here the emphasis concerns who may enter into this saving union, which is “all.” The “all” encompasses all Jews and Gentiles in a most inclusive and absolute and non-distinguishing sense. But the “all” must be “those believing” (present tense), whose justification will continue to be solely mediated through faith. The implicit invitation here is universal, notwithstanding the doctrine of particular election.

2. It is righteousness for the unrighteous, vs. 22c-23.

Logical connection is strong here. Why is the gospel offered to “all” who believe, without distinction? It is because “all” of mankind are sinful without distinction.

a. Sinners in sinful symphony, v. 22c.

(1) “For there is no difference” means that there is no distinction between men as sinners. From God’s perspective, we are all related to Adam, hence we are sinners by nature and consequent choice. Our sins are a result of our sin nature just as a skin eruption will often be caused by a blood infection.

(2) Illustration. Jews and Gentiles are sinners, as are street bums and statesmen, paupers and presidents, murderers and mothers, prostitutes and ‘nice people.’ “But the Scripture declares that the whole world is a prisoner of son’ (Gal. 3:22 NIV), cf. 3:9.

(3) The word “distinction” or “difference” here, διαστολή, diastole, is used in I Corinthians 14:7 of a musical instrument normally producing “distinction in . . . tones,” while yet being a singular instrument. This well illustrates that while sin may have variety, yet it remains a singular, universal kind. We are all of the same moral kind, even if there is variety in our sinning. In other words, the world of mankind is like the variety of instrumentalists within a
symphony orchestra. They play different sounds, yet there is no ultimate
distinction since they are playing the same music under one conductor. So
mankind sins with variety while yet playing Satan’s music under his
conductorship. Some sin like the base drum, loud and strong; some sin like
the flute, discreetly with culture, some prefer sin in chorus like the violins,
some sin in a bold and brassy manner like the trumpets, some sin under the
guise of religion like the harp, some sin and make a performance like a
celebrity pianist. But remember, all are sinners in sinful symphony, ‘for there
is no distinction.’

(4) Application. Some people sin with sophistication, charm, finesse, which is so
often the case with learned, wealthy and religious people. Other people sin
cruelly, without polish, in an ugly manner; often they make headlines in the
media. Some people sin overtly, with great display and exhibition, using the
body. Others sin covertly, with most subtle disguise and secrecy using the
confines of the mind. Nevertheless, ‘the whole world is lying (present tense)
in wickedness’ (I John 5:19). As a race, we are common sinners, even if in
our sinning we are uncommon in the way we sin.

b. Sinners in sinful shortfall, v. 23.

Thus here he have God’s perspective of the human race, being unlike that of man
who loves to make distinctions and excuses! Romans 3:23 is one of the most
commonly used texts in modern day evangelism insofar as bringing men to a
knowledge of their sinfulness is concerned. On most occasions it is only vaguely
used in context because it is so isolated and deprived of its intended content.
Several years ago I responded to a telephone number in a newspaper
advertisement that offered to declare the “good news.” In two minutes and fifteen
seconds the “gospel” was presented, including the quotation of this verse, as well
as a concluding invitation to “receive” Jesus Christ. Such is the banal
communication of God’s truth today. However, this passage presupposes some
knowledge of the Old Testament, especially the fall of Genesis 3 as well as some
recall of what Paul has taught thus far concerning sin in its breadth and depth.

(1) The root of man’s sinfulness is his corporate identification with Adam’s sin,
for “all have sinned,” v. 23a.

(a) A more precise translation here reads, “For all sinned,” emphasizing the
aorist tense, which lumps together all of mankind into a single class.
Furthermore, in contrast with the present tense of, “and are falling
short of the glory of God,” there is strong inference here that man as a
corporate race is perceived as having sinned from the beginning with
Adam (cf. 5:12 where “sin” is used in the same aoristic manner).¹⁶

(b) What is sin? Here ἁμαρτάνω, hamartanō, means to miss the mark,
coming short of reaching a defined goal, which up to this point has been

¹⁶ Lloyd-Jones and Shedd emphasize Adam here, while Moo and Murray, though not denying this aspect, yet
stress man’s corporate identification with sin.
attaining to the righteousness of God, and now is described as “the glory of God.” Of course such “missing” here is not slight, as if an archer just missed a bull’s-eye, but by a vast degree that is way off the mark. Man is not slightly in debt, but totally bankrupt.

(c) By way of application, what does this mean for us in this twentieth century? When I travel the world or my neighborhood and observe man, and am confronted with his futile and pagan ways, though often accompanied with a civil secularity, I am not surprised or confounded for I understand man’s basic problem, his universal disease. Therefore I repudiate evolutionary thought because it does not answer to the problem of continuing evil on a universal scale, though Scripture emphatically does. I repudiate materialism and relativism which in such a shallow way sees man as merely environmentally and socially in need of adjustment. I understand that man’s problem is my problem, because of what I know about myself in the depths. Hence, the problem is radical and only thorough a radical solution of redemption in the heart by means of the Son of God will a man be saved (II Cor. 5:17).

(2) The result of man’s sinfulness is continuous shortfall, for all “come short,” v. 23b.

(a) The verb ὀστερέω, hustereō, means “to lack, to come short,” and it is used in Luke 15:14 to describe the Prodigal Son who “began to be in need.” In Philippians 4:12 it describes Paul “suffering need” in contrast with “having abundance.”

(b) The continuous present tense here indicates that man sins on a day by day basis and not merely occasionally. His sinning is an inevitable result of sin as a principle. Because he is a child of Adam, he will sin, though he does so agreeably. Man can only walk along a straight line in a crooked manner; he staggers on and on as if intoxicated, and that being under the influence of sin.

(3) The reflection of man’s sinfulness is “the glory of God,” v. 23c.

While it is possible to consider this “glory” to be God’s essential holy magnificence and outshining, before which man stands condemned, yet the more likely meaning is that this “glory” is that which God designed for man, man repudiated, and Jesus Christ regains. Of course the original plan was for man to reflect God’s essential glory. Again, man is like the Prodigal Son who, in departing from his Father’s home, also degenerates in terms of the glory he originally possessed. The imago Dei has been severely marred, the original portrait has been grossly disfigured.

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17 Robert Haldane, writes of “coming short of obeying the law,” Commentary on Romans, p. 151.
18 Murray lists four possibilities and cautiously opts for, “to come short of reflecting the glory of God, that is, of conformity to his image.” The Epistle To The Romans, I, pp. 112-3.
(a) Clearly, what Paul describes that man has lost, Jesus Christ restores, first in an initial sense as a result of conversion (II Cor. 3:18; 4:6; cf. John 17:22), but then consummately at the end of this age when Jesus Christ returns (Rom. 5:2; 8:18, 29-30; Phil. 3:21). This emphasis upon what redeemed man gains surely suggests what sinful man here is described as having lost.

(b) Martyn Lloyd-Jones eloquently states: “Never has the Apostle exposed the ravages of sin and the Fall in a more wonderful manner than in this twenty-third verse of the third chapter of the Epistle to the Romans. Sin not only makes a man unrighteous, it robs him of the glory of God. And if you understand that, you will realize how futile it is ever to think that you, by your works or activities, can ever be fit to stand in the presence of God. Before we can truly know Him, and have communion with Him, let alone stand before the glory of His presence, we must have something of His glory. . . . But without it we can never see God and never stand in His presence. But the Christian, as the Apostle Peter reminds us in the first chapter of his Second Epistle, is ‘made a partaker of the Divine nature’. Is that true of me as a Christian? It is! . . . There is a new man in me, as a Christian, that is glorious, and he will go on ‘being changed from glory to glory’.”

(4) By way of illustration, this whole verse may be likened to a rocket programmed to head toward a certain planet that, having just been launched, suddenly has a computer malfunction and veers off course in the opposite direction. It might be said that the rocket initially had “a program freeze” or “blew a fuse” (sinned) and as a consequence “it continued to come short of its design” (destiny, glory). So man, having been created malfunctions and veers off course away from his appointed destination. Like the rocket continuously plummeting into alien outer space, so man is continuously plunging away from his intended course; his every step takes him away from the intended “glory of God.”

3. It is righteousness that is gratis, v. 24.

While Romans 3:21-26 presents the most concise and yet comprehensive declaration of the gospel in all of Scripture, yet in v. 24 we come to the most important verse in this passage, indeed one of the most important passages in the whole Bible in which we are told how God saves sinners. The overall thrust here is an expansion of the thought that, according to vs. 22-23, reconciliation with God for thorough sinners is wholly, exclusively, gratuitously, a work of God through Christ, appropriated through faith alone.

a. By way of illustration, imagine a man, having been justly imprisoned for a serious crime, the penalty for which he cannot pay, being confronted by a lawyer who hands to the prisoner a signed release from the state governor to which is attached a receipt for payment of the penalty by the lawyer. Furthermore, the lawyer tells

the pardoned man to go and live at his residence, which the son learns is in fact the residence of the governor, for the lawyer is his son! Does this seem incredible, unheard of? Yes, it may seem so. But read Romans 5:6-8, and consider three aspects of v. 24 here.

(1) As a sinner with that pardon kept close to his bosom while living in the governor’s residence, that man knows that he is declared to be fully pardoned while at the same time being a privileged, honored person, living with the rank of a son - he is **justified**.

(2) As he ponders his new standing, he asks himself *why* the governor was so motivated to do such a thing. After all, he was certainly guilty, the penalty was great. Yet such kindness was overwhelming at immense personal cost. This he concludes is pure **grace**.

(3) Then he wonders how his new standing came about. The governor could not declare him pardoned for no reason at all, according to mere whim. That would be irresponsibility. Instead he sent his son to pay the price for his release - that is **redemption**.

b. Free justification.

Paul has already used this verb, δικαιοω, dikaióō, in 2:13; 3:4, 20 where in all instances a judicial declaration is intended, and this same basic meaning is at the root of the subsequent usage in 3:26, 28, 30; 4:2, 5; 5:1, 9; 6:7; 8:30, 33.

(1) **Justification defined.**

The fundamental meaning of Paul here is that of a legal, forensic proclamation, to “be acquitted, be pronounced and treated as righteous.”

We might liken it to the declaration of a judge who brings down his gavel with the verdict, “I find the defendant to be not guilty!” Such a statement is bound to stimulate a response of joy in the prisoner in the dock.

(2) **Biblical illustrations.**

(a) Luke 7:28-29. The people “justified God,” that is they declared God to be vindicated through the ministry of John the Baptist.

(b) Luke 10:25-29. The lawyer “justified himself,” that is he attempted to declare himself or appear righteous, although this was not the case.

(c) Luke 16:14-15. The Pharisees have a self-declared righteousness, but it is quite remote from actual personal righteousness.

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(e) Luke 18:9-14. While the Pharisee boasted in a phoney personal righteousness, the repentant tax-gatherer received the declarative justification of Christ.

(3) Justification that is free.

(e) It is free by definition.

Salvation is “free,” δωρεάν, dōrean, unmerited, unprompted, unsought. Compare John 15:25 where this same word is used; they hated Christ “without a cause,” that is “freely,” that is without any reason found in Christ himself. Likewise, there was no reason within the sinner why God should justify him. Such a reason resides alone within God’s gracious heart. Salvation is an individual Divine donation and grant.

The thought here is not to be likened to a free sample, which in commercial terms often includes subtle tones of obligation. Rather the meaning is free blessing to those deserving of cursing, a full and free payment that cancels a crushing debt, liberty without price to the incarcerated, free entry for the disqualified entrant.

(f) It is free to man, but costly to God.

Many children have, later in life, freely received a rich inheritance from their parents, without cost to themselves. However, this same inheritance cost their parents much sacrifice and effort. So the believing sinner’s justification, although free, has yet been at great cost to the God who gratuitously justifies, even the death of His Son, 8:32.

(g) It is free in God.

John Murray makes the point well: “No element in Paul’s doctrine of justification is more central than this - God’s justifying act is not constrained to any extent or degree by anything that we are or do which could be esteemed as predisposing God to this act. And not only is it the case that nothing in us or by us constrains to this act but all that is ours compels the opposite judgment - the whole world is brought in guilty before God (cf. vs. 9, 19). This action on God’s part derives its whole motivation, explanation, and determination from what God himself is and does in the exercise of free and sovereign grace. Merit of any kind on the part of man, when brought into relation to justification, contradicts the first article of the Pauline doctrine and therefore of his gospel. It is the glory of the gospel of Christ that it is one of free grace.”

21 Murray, Romans, I, p. 115.
(4) Roman Catholic justification.

The necessity to contrast biblical justification with that which the Roman Catholic Church teaches is bound up with several vital matters. First, is the fact that we are not considering a slight difference of opinion, but rather an issue that takes us to the heart of the biblical gospel. Second is the historic significance of this matter since the Protestant Reformation was grounded upon the substance of the gospel, and the two divergent views have not changed in the slightest. Third is the matter of the Roman Catholic system of doctrine. The Roman view of justification is integral to a false gospel system.

(e) The Roman Catholic gospel.

To become a Christian, after instruction, belief, and agreement, the candidate is baptized by means of water. In this act, *ex opere operato*, the rite ensuring the result, the person is instrumentally regenerated and becomes born again, freed from all stain of sin, and saved. A person may lose this salvation by committing a mortal as opposed to a venial sin, even a free-will repudiation of the faith. Maintenance of this salvation is through means of grace dispensed by the church, such as the mass, whereby the grace of Christ is substantially ingested, digested, and infused into the person. That person cooperates with this grace, progressively produces good works, is progressively justified, and hopes, though unsure, for final justification at the day of God’s final verdict.

(f) Roman Catholic definitions of justification.

1) Thus Roman Catholic justification is really a sanctifying process, in which a person is infused with grace. However, this church vehemently denies the biblical and Pauline gospel wherein justification occurs at the point of initial saving faith, and such faith is in Christ’s objective atonement whereby all sin is forgiven and his perfect righteousness imputed.

2) So the Council of Trent stated in 1547, Chapter 16, Canons 11-12: “If anyone saith, that men are justified, either by the sole imputation of the justice of Christ, or by the sole remission of sins, to the exclusion of the grace and the charity which is poured forth in their hearts by the Holy Ghost, and is inherent in them; or even that the grace, whereby we are justified, is only the favor of God: let him be anathema [accursed, excommunicated]. If any one saith, that justifying faith is nothing else but confidence in the divine mercy which remits sins for Christ’s sake; or, that this confidence alone is that whereby we are justified: let him be anathema.”

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22 Murray significantly comments, “It is symptomatic of the total discrepancy between Rome’s position and the teaching of Scripture that baptism should be conceived of as the instrumental cause. The efficiency that Scripture accords to faith Rome accords to baptism,” *Romans*, I, p. 361.

3) So a recent, highly authoritative Roman Catholic commentary declares concerning Romans 3:24: “As always within the symbolic universe presupposed by Paul . . . , the justification in question is God’s verdict of acquittal to be pronounced [sic] at the judgment. Moreover, the contrast with the preceding statement about sin (v. 23) suggests that ‘being justified’ (δικαιοφυς, dikaioumenoi) contains a significant ethical element: believers are being ‘made righteous,’ not simply ‘declared righteous’ and this is being achieved, not by a legal fiction - which would in effect be immoral (cf. Isa. 5:23; Prov. 17:15; Exod. 23:7) - but through a distinctive act of God’s grace effective in the redemptive work of Christ.”

4) Concerning the charge of “legal fiction,” commonly made by Roman Catholicism, Moo responds, “As Paul uses it in these contexts, the verb ‘justify’ means not ‘to make righteous’ (in an ethical sense) nor simply ‘to treat as righteous’ (though is really not righteous), but ‘to declare righteous.’ No ‘legal fiction,’ but a legal reality of the utmost significance, ‘to be justified’ means to be acquitted by God from all ‘charges’ that could be brought against a person because of his or her sins. This judicial verdict, for which one had to wait until the last judgment according to Jewish theology [and Roman Catholic theology in a perfect sense], is according to Paul rendered the moment a person believes.”

   Also note that he who God justifies is at the same time regenerated (Tit. 3:5-7), and such life from the Spirit produces holiness in the acquitted.

c. His grace.

Here we move from the righteous character of the gospel into the realm of God’s motivation and attitude toward the sinners He deems to justify. Why does God freely pardon and declare to be righteous? Why does He stoop from heavens holy glory and condescend to save thoroughly polluted individuals from their earthly pigsty? The answer is the “grace” of God, which is that distinctive characteristic of His goodness and love whereby he determines to rescue sinners.

(1) Grace adored.

For this reason, and especially for man who, in the depths of his heart finds himself despairingly engulfed in this pigsty, this term “grace” becomes the sweetest expression he has ever heard when it is personally applied. Lloyd-Jones rightly enquires: “What is your reaction to this word? In many ways this is what it means to be a Christian.” It is no wonder then that Christian hymn writers have reached their sublimest heights when attempting to

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commend this wondrous doctrine, the acid test of any profession of the Christian faith. . . . Do you feel that this word ‘grace’ opens the very gates of heaven to you? That is really

(e) Philip Doddridge, 1702-51, writes:

Grace ‘tis a charming sound,
Harmonious to the ear:
Heav’n with the echo shall resound,
And all the earth shall hear.

(f) Samuel Davies, 1723-61, successor to Jonathan Edwards as the president of Princeton College, writes:

Great God of wonders, all Thy ways are
Matchless, God-like, and divine:
But the fair glories of Thy grace, more
God-like and unrivaled shine.

(g) John Newton, 1725-1807, the converted, blaspheming and debauched slave-trader, writes:

Amazing grace! How sweet the sound,
That saved a wretch like me!
I once was lost, but now am found;
Was blind, but now I see.
‘Twas grace that taught my heart to fear,
And grace my fears relieved;
How precious did that grace appear
The hour I first believed!
Through many dangers, toils and snares
I have already come;
‘Tis grace has brought me safe thus far,
And grace will lead me home.

(2) Grace defined.

Some rather loose definitions are commonly heard such as “unmerited favor,” which is true as far as it goes, but it does not go far enough. Then there is the acronym, “God’s Riches At Christ’s Expense,” which is quite inadequate since it gives no hint of man’s condition.

(e) The word here is χάρις, charis, which can have a variety of meanings including graciousness, gratitude, favor, goodwill, etc. However, it is Paul’s usage that, in cases such as here, takes on a specific meaning that is related to the character of God and man concerning the gospel.

1) Concerning God, “grace” is that kindness within Himself by which He is moved, “according to the kind intention of His will, . . . according to the riches of His grace, . . . according to His kind
intention which He purposed in Him [Christ]” (Eph. 1:5, 7, 9), to pardon and redeem thoroughly polluted and guilty sinners, the “ungodly” (4:5), those “dead in trespasses and transgressions” (Eph. 2:1-10).

2) Concerning man, “grace” is that kindness from God which may be defined as both “unmerited favor” and “demerited favor.” John Murray writes, “We cannot think of sinners as merely undeserving; they are also ill deserving. The grace of God to sinners is, therefore, not simply unmerited favor; it is also favor shown to the ill-deserving, indeed to the hell-deserving. When Paul says, ‘justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus’ (Rom. 3:24), the grace in view must be understood on the background of the judgment of God referred to in v. 19.”

   a) “Unmerited favor” means that, in the sinner, he has nothing to offer, even a grain of moral virtue, that will gain God’s acceptance.

   b) “Demerited favor” means that man has positively offered cause for his condemnation, that is purposed rebellion, active hostility, and a catalog of iniquity.

(3) The God of grace.

   “His” grace, in context, must refer to God the Father, the source of grace that is mediated through His Son. Here then we are considering the grace of the triune God, so that the grace of the Father is essentially identical with the grace of the Son.

(4) The grace of God.

   “Grace” means that God is actively for prodigal man even though prodigal man is actively against God. However, it is the particularity of the grace of God that results in wonder, astonishment, and adoring worship. For biblical grace is not universal, but grounded upon God’s individual choice of certain sinners and His abandonment of others.

(e) The example of Paul.

   The saving of the Apostle Paul perfectly pictures God’s eclectic grace. God laid hold of him while he was a militant rebel, so that having been converted he declares, “But by the grace of God I am what I am” (I Cor. 15:10). From his mother’s womb, God “called [him] . . . through His grace” (Gal. 1:15), and on later reflection he considered this “grace of our Lord was more than abundant” (I Tim. 1:14).

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27 John Murray, Collected Writings of John Murray, I, p. 119.
(f) The example of John Bunyan.

As a young believer, weighed down with the recollection of his sin, we read in *Grace Abounding To The Chief Of Sinners*: “[N]ow was I sick in my inward man, my soul was clogged with guilt; now also was my former experience of God’s goodness to me quite taken out of my mind, and hid as if it never been, nor seen. . . . [N]ow I sunk and fell in my spirit, and was giving up all for lost; but as I was walking up and down in the house, as a man in a lost woful state, that word of God took hold of my heart, Ye are ‘justified freely by his grace, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus’ (Rom. 3:24). But oh what a turn it made upon me. Now was I as one awakened out of some troublesome sleep and dream, and listening to this heavenly sentence. I was as if I had heard it thus expounded to me: Sinner, thou thinkest that because of thy sins and infirmities I cannot save thy soul, but behold my Son is by me, and upon him I look, and not on thee, and will deal with thee according as I am pleased with him.”

a. Redemption through Christ.

From the truth of “free grace” we move to the “costliness” of this free grace, which is “the redemption which is in Christ Jesus.” From the “why” of the gospel we now move to the “how” of the gospel, with the resultant explanation taking us through to v. 26. While God may have a gracious desire to save guilty sinners, yet His character will not allow a fickle or morally indifferent response. If He as God is morally unchanging, then His holy character demands that all sin be punished. And this being so, then the sin of all mankind must be satisfactorily punished. Therefore, the problem for the manifestation of the grace of God is revealed in the psalmist’s declaration, “If Thou, LORD, shouldst mark iniquities, O LORD, who could stand?” (Ps. 130:3). The answer then given is encouraging, for in the next verse we read, “But there is forgiveness with Thee, that Thou mayest be feared” (Ps. 130:4). But it is in v. 7 that we learn of the “how” concerning this act of pardon, for there we are told, “For with the LORD there is lovingkindness, and with Him is abundant redemption” (Ps. 130:3-4).

(1) Redemption defined.

The word ἀπολύτρωσις, apolutrosis, is a strengthened form of a word which, in its classical form, meant “to loose,” hence to loosen clothing, armor, animals, etc. Then it became distinctively associated with loosening by means of a payment or price, and this ransoming aspect is its essential characteristic. Often it refers to the ransoming of a prisoner of war or slave. A master might, out of kindness, pay for a slave’s freedom; sometimes the slave was purchased for a heathen god, though he was regarded as free but subject to that god.

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An outlined commentary on Romans

(a) In the Old Testament.

The most impressive definition here concerns the redemption of Israel from captivity in Egypt. From this representation is clearly seen three distinct elements that comprise the meaning of redemption.

1) An assumed captivity. Here is a nation in bondage (Ex. 2:23; Deut. 15:15). Of course it is assumed that the captive nation is incapable of freeing itself.

2) The necessity of payment of a ransom price. Here is a nation redeemed with a price (Ex. 12:13, 25-27). Of course inherent here is the gracious attitude of the Redeemer who is willing and able to redeem.

3) A resultant freedom, liberation. Here is a nation with consequent freedom (Deut. 8:7-10). Of course the possibility of returning to former captivity is thought to be absurd.

(b) In the New Testament.

More liberal scholarship, in parallel with its rejection of a substitutionary atonement, also rejects the payment principle of the word “redemption” and simply speaks of an “act of freedom.” In response to this, refer to the thorough defense of “the payment of a ransom price” by Leon Morris. Of course, the offering of Christ as a sacrificial, redemption payment does not mean payment to Satan. Rather it is the offering of God Himself, even satisfying Himself by paying the price to Himself.

(2) Redemption in Christ.

(a) A presupposed bondage.

This is indicated in 3:9 where both Jew and Gentile are described as being “under sin,” that is captive to sin, cf. Galatians 3:22-23. Likewise in John 8:31-33 Jesus Christ implicitly describes man as enslaved to sin. Even in 8:23, the believer in a corrupt body awaits for the redemption of this body.

(b) A price to set free.

Paul will take up this point in more detail when he speaks of Christ as a “propitiatory sacrifice” in v. 25. It is sufficient to point out here the moral, righteous necessity for the payment of a satisfactory price for the

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29 Leon Morris, *The Apostolic Preaching of the Cross*, pp. 11-64.
indebtedness of sinful, guilty men, so that God “might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus,” v. 26.

1) This price is also the believing sinners substitute (Mark 10:45; it is of infinite value (I Pet. 1:18-19); it has everlasting efficacy (Heb. 7:25; Rev. 5:9-10).

2) This price is the Father’s beloved Son (Matt. 3:17); the Father’s delight (Prov. 8:29b-30); the Father’s sole heir (Ps. 2:7-8; John 3:35); the Father’s glorious image (John 17:5; Col. 2:9).

(c) A resultant freedom.

1) We are free by Christ (John 8:34-36; Gal. 2:4; 5:1).

2) We are free under Christ (John 8:31-32; 15:14; Gal. 5:13).

3) We shall be free with Christ (Rom. 8:21; I John 3:2).

b. By way of application, what a glorious gospel is this. Free justification, delivered from guilt and condemnation, declared as righteous as Jesus Christ. Sovereign grace, for the sinful rebel, through God’s tender mercy. Redemption through the payment of Christ’s shed blood, delivered from despairing bondage, established in liberty. Paul describes all three elements in Ephesians 1:7 (cf. Heb. 2:3): “In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of His grace.”

B. THIS RIGHTEOUSNESS IS CHRIST’S ATONEMENT, 3:25-26

1. Introduction.

a. At the commencement of vs. 25-26, the personal pronoun “whom” indicates the connection between “the redemption which is in Christ Jesus” of v. 24 and the precise exposition of this matter which is to follow.

b. In vs. 25-26 we are told, more concisely and comprehensively than anywhere in the Bible, why there was the necessity for Jesus Christ to be delivered up to death by the Father (Luke 24:25-26; Acts 2:23; Rom. 8:32), why a divine ransom payment should be made.

(1) We do not merely suggest there are several theories of the atonement from which believers may select at random one view which suits their fancy. We desire the essential biblical reason why Jesus Christ died. Consider the evasive translation of the Good News Bible concerning Romans 3:24; I John 2:2; 4:10 where “propitiation” is simply, “the means by which our sins are forgiven.” But such a translation purposely leaves open, for varying opinion, the purpose of the atonement, and ignores the precise details of Romans 2:25-26.
(2) There are four essential reasons given in vs. 25-26 why a redemptive payment was decreed by the Father.

(a) So that God might be *propitious* through the substitutionary death of Christ, v. 25a.

(b) So that God might be *vindicated* through the substitutionary death of Christ, vs. 25b

(c) So that God might be *just* through the substitutionary death of Christ, v. 26a

(d) So that God might be *the justifier* through the substitutionary death of Christ, v. 26b.

2. Through Jesus Christ, God is *propitious* toward mankind, v. 25a.

   a. The display of Jesus Christ.

      The phrase, “whom God hath set forth” KJV, is better translated “whom God displayed publicly” NASB. Again we see that the gospel is essentially what God has done in spite of man, yet for man.

      (1) By way of illustration, when a man inaugurates a great plan or scheme, he publishes it abroad with television, radio, and press publicity, so as to gain national and international exposure. Likewise God, having designed salvation also displays it, He exhibits it, He advertises it.

      (2) In Galatians 3:1 we are told that “Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified;” then in Galatians 4:4, “when the fulness of the time came, God sent forth His Son; then in I Peter 1:20, “He was foreknown before the foundation of the world, but has appeared in these last times for the sake of you.”

   b. The death of Jesus Christ.

      (1) As propitiation.

         (a) The Greek word here is ἵλαστήριον, hilastérion, and in a broad sense it is defined by the following word “blood,” that is the sacrificial blood of Jesus Christ. However, ἵλαστήριον, hilastérion is an exceedingly important word that needs to be exactly defined since the character of God is at stake. In this regard refer to the detailed study of this word by Leon Morris.\(^ {31} \)

         1) In classical ἵλαστήριον, hilastérion was used by pagan idolaters to signify the appeasing of a god and the averting of his anger by

means of an acceptable, propitiatory offering. However, such gods were capricious, moody, vindictive, arbitrary, open to bribes, inconsistent, or simply very human. Yet even up to the time of Christ, it is unquestioned that “to placate” was the primary and predominant meaning in everyday living.

2) In the Old Testament, the family of words, of which this is one, all continue to have this primary meaning of “to placate, turn away from wrath.”

a) However, here God is morally consistent and demanding, while there are over 580 references to His wrath, which is placated by the shedding of blood (Lev. 16:15-16; 17:11).

b) The equivalent Hebrew word, for the Greek ἱλαστήριον, hilastērion, is often used in the Old Testament regarding the “mercy seat” in the tabernacle. So some have translated it as “mercy seat” in Hebrews 9:5, where ἱλαστήριον, hilastērion is used, such as the NASB, NKJV, ESV, cf. “atonement cover” NIV. In other words, the place of sprinkling was “the place of propitiation.”

i) The “mercy seat” was a solid gold lid that was placed over the ark (box) of the covenant, made with acacia wood covered with gold, 3’9” long by 2’3” square. Inside the ark was the word of the covenant, the Law (Ex. 25:21). At either end of the mercy seat (lid) were two golden cherubs, between which and above the mercy seat, God dwelt.

ii) On the annual Day of Atonement, Yom Kippur, the High Priest sprinkled the blood of a goat upon the mercy seat as an atonement for all the sins of the children of Israel (Lev. 16:15-16). Thus the mercy seat with the blood intercepted between the Law’s demands (Heb. 9:24-28) and God’s consequent anger with law-breakers.

3) In the New Testament, “propitiation” or ἱλαστήριον, hilastērion, means likewise “to turn God away from His wrath,” or “the cooling of the heat of His anger” when confronted with sin, based upon an acceptable sacrifice.

a) Contemporary liberal scholars have repudiated this idea, notably C. H. Dodd who writes concerning the New Testament that, “anger as an attitude of God to men disappears, and His love and mercy become all-embracing.” William Barclay takes a similar stand.

32 Ibid., p. 179.
b) But what of the doctrine of the wrath of God in Romans 1:17-18; 2:5-8; 5:9, as well as John 3:36; Ephesians 5:5-6; II Thessalonians 1:7-9; Revelation 6:15-16? If God is not angry with sinners, then why the violence of the cross, or even its necessity?

c) Hence, certain translations, such as the NEB and RSV, substitute “expiation” for “propitiation” since this former term excludes the idea of appeasing wrath, though it retains the idea of sins forgiven, dealt with, pardoned.

(b) Hence “propitiation” in Romans 3:25 means the turning away of the wrath of God by means of the atoning sacrifice of Jesus Christ.

1) “Propitiation” involves an attitude in God and not a change in man. It means that Jesus Christ did not come to preach the gospel, but that he as the gospel might be preached.

2) “Propitiation” in Romans 3:25 involves four major elements.

   a) Satisfaction of God’s justice due to His violated holiness and penal requirements.

   b) Pacification of God’s wrath due to His being moved within Himself to the hatred of sin.

   c) Expiation of the believer’s guilt due to the Father’s satisfaction with His Son’s righteous, atoning payment.

   d) Substitution of the believer’s punishment through Jesus Christ as the acceptable substitute.

(2) As the shedding of “His blood.”

It is the shed blood of Christ that is propitiatory. However, “blood” here does not simply mean “life” (Lev. 17:11), but rather “life laid down in death,” hence a sacrificial death as pictured by the Levitical offerings (Lev. 17:11). The blood of Christ was as of a “slain” lamb (I Pet. 1:19; cf. I Cor. 11:25-26). We often sing hymns about the “blood of Christ,” and rightly so. But sometimes we lose sight of the deep significance of this terminology and move more into the realm of religious sentimentality and abstraction. We can sing, “there is power in the blood,” but what really do we mean? Here the “blood of Christ” is the righteous God’s instrumental means of saving unrighteous sinners; it is His blessed Son’s satisfactory offering of himself unto a most vile death, the “just for the unjust, in order that He might bring us to God” (I Pet. 3:18).
(3) As the object of faith.

The display of Christ crucified may be universal, but the appropriation of His atoning righteousness is particular through faith, as John 3:16, 36 make clear. Further, it is faith alone that links the sinner to the wonder of the propitiated God. “Therefore having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ” (Rom. 5:1), that is “peace from God.” God has made peace with rebellious and guilty man! As Charles Wesley writes:

And can it be that I should gain
An interest in the Savior’s blood?
Died He for me, who caused His pain?
For me, who Him to death pursued?
Amazing love! How can it be
That Thou, my God, shouldst die for me!

3. Through Jesus Christ, God is vindicated before mankind, v. 25b.

The atoning work of Jesus Christ accomplishes many things, and most prominent of all is the display of God’s glory (Phil. 1:11; 2:9-11). From sinful man’s perspective, the gracious forgiveness of his sin is of overwhelming concern; but from God’s point of view there is something much more important, and that is the maintenance of his holy reputation in an unholy universe, that is His vindication, His justification when charges are brought against Him, especially concerning ongoing wickedness.

a. Why is Paul concerned about the vindication of God?

One of the most common criticisms that is brought against Christianity and the God of the Bible is the charge, “Where is there any justice in this situation? Why does God not intervene? If He is omnipotent and merciful, then why does He seem remote, unconcerned?” Usually this comment is designed to charge God with negligence in bad situations, while these same critics tend to take credit for the good situations.

However, the genuine Christian will desire to see that God is vindicated before such challenges, and indeed, if the God of the Bible be God, then He also will be careful to uphold his reputation. You may be interested in God, but more importantly, are you concerned for God? Are you desirous that God be glorified, vindicated, justified, that His name be hallowed, His kingdom come, His will be done, that His righteousness prevail (Matt. 6:9-10)?

(1) God’s reputation in general.

The Bible frequently defends God in the face of evil, especially when punishment and calamity seem inappropriate, and sin seems to go unpunished; such vindication is called a theodicy. When Job feels unjustly accused of sin, he implies that God is to blame (Job 40:8), so that God responds to vindicate His ways (Job 38:1-40:1). When Habakkuk accuses God of indifference when sin is rampant amongst His people (Hab. 1:2-4),
God responds with a vindication that astounds the prophet (Hab. 1:5-11). However, the supreme vindication of God is the atoning work of Jesus Christ. Here Paul introduces this aspect which emphasizes the “God-centeredness” of his ministry, not mere utilitarianism.

(2) God’s reputation in the face of sin.

(a) It is “the redemption that is in Christ Jesus” that “demonstrates [shows forth] His [the Father’s] righteousness,” that is God’s just and righteous character. John MacArthur makes this point by titling his chapter on vs. 25-26 here as, “How Christ died for God.”

(b) Ask the average Christian today what the atonement of Christ declares, and the predictable answer will be “the love of God.” This is not untrue, but it is a righteous love, a holy love, a satisfactory love, a love that in no way diminishes the demands of God’s moral perfection.

(c) In other words, the atonement of Christ tells me something wonderful about God, something that the sinners of this world ought to rejoice in. Why? Because while the gods of this world lack integrity, the God of the Bible has perfect integrity, and as a sinner that is the only judge I want to confront.

(3) By way of illustration, Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones explains this glorious truth about God as follows: “How can God forgive and still remain God? - that is the question. The cross is the vindication of God. The cross is the vindication of the character of God. The cross not only shows the love of God more gloriously than anything else, it shows His righteousness, His justice, His holiness, and all the glory of His eternal attributes. They are all to be seen shining together there. If you do not see them all you have not seen the Cross.”

b. What necessitates the vindication of God?

The KJV unfortunately translates here, “the remission of sins that are past,” whereas the NASB, similar to the NKJV, is more accurate, “He passed over the sins previously committed.”

(1) In that the Old Testament sacrifices did not actually take away the believer’s sin, true satisfaction for sin was obtained by Christ for transgressions which God temporarily set aside, overlooked.

(a) The Old Testament sacrifices were promissory notes, but the value they represented was that which Christ provided for on the cross.

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(b) While, according to Acts 17:29-31, God “winked at” KJV, or disregarded past sin, yet God’s justice required that it be ultimately dealt with.

(c) In Hebrews 9:11-15, the Levitical offerings were not efficacious, but they were indicative of that which was to come.

(2) Hence, Jesus Christ is the only ground for any man’s sin being forgiven, whether he live in the Old Testament or New Testament dispensations. Further, the Cross is the proof that God never overlooks sin in a final sense. Further, the Cross is the great proof that God requires from men a penalty for their sins, except they be paid for by Jesus Christ.

c. Why did God “temporarily disregard” man’s sins?

It was “because in the forbearance of God” He set aside the sins previously committed. “Forbearance,” ἀνοχὴ anochē, means “a holding back, endurance,” or more technically “pretermission,” and in context here, temporary suspension of wrath.

(1) In justice, God could have rightly and immediately judged the world as guilty and implemented the penalty, even with Adam and Eve; but He exercised self-restraint, tolerance towards man (Acts 14:16; 17:30; He proposed a plan that would manifest both his justice and grace (Gen. 3:15).

(2) Some might be tempted to interpret this restraint as indifference, but such an interpretation of history is utter folly as was the case during the time of Noah (Gen. 6:3; I Pet. 3:20), even as it is today. We have only to consider the sudden intervention of the Cross to prove this. Sin has not ultimately been overlooked.

(3) We may take God’s mercy freely, but never lightly. Hence, in 2:4-5 is the warning: “Or do you think lightly of the riches of His kindness and forbearance and patience, not knowing that the kindness of God leads you to repentance? But because of your stubbornness and unrepentant heart you are storing up wrath for yourself in the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God.”

d. By way of application, Lloyd-Jones sums up this astonishing gospel exposition by Paul. “Test your view of the Cross. Where does this statement about ‘declaring’ His righteousness and so on, come into your thinking? Is it something that you just skip over and say: ‘Well, I don’t know what that means. All I know is, that God is love and that He forgives.’ But you should know the meaning of this. This is an essential part of the glorious Gospel. On Calvary God was making a way of salvation so that you and I might be forgiven. But He had to do so in a way that will leave His character inviolate, that will leave His eternal consistency still absolute and unbroken. Once you begin to look at it like that, you see that this is the most tremendous, the most glorious, the most staggering thing in the universe and in the whole of history. . . . ‘When I survey the wondrous cross . . .’ , says
Isaac Watts, but you do not see the wonder of it until you really do survey it in the light of this great statement of the Apostle. God was declaring publicly once and for ever His eternal justice and His eternal love. Never separate them, for they belong together in the character of God.”

4. Through Jesus Christ, God is just toward mankind, v. 26a.

Here Paul is even more assertive concerning the vindication of the holy character of God as it relates to the saving of unholy man. For the Apostle, this is a moral universe because the moral God reigns, and in spite of the presence of widespread immorality on earth, this same God deigns, at great personal sacrifice, to save man while maintaining His integrity.

a. For emphasis, Paul restates the latter half of v. 25.

It again concerns why Jesus Christ, “the Son of God . . . our Lord” 1:4, was a necessary “propitiatory sacrifice” for sinners to be justified, redeemed.

(1) “To declare [emphatically]” means, as in v. 25, to “show forth,” or “manifest, clearly reveal, exhibit” the justice of God.

(2) “at this time,” means “in the now time,” cf. “but now” v. 21. God’s temporary disregard of sin is past; His perfect righteousness or justice, His settlement concerning man’s condition, has now been manifest. Thus the coming of Christ when he did was truly momentous.

(3) “His righteousness,” means “His justice” in dealing with a sinful world, that is His just condemnation of sinners and His just salvation of sinners.

b. Why does Paul declare that God is just?

Because the God of Israel has revealed Himself as being perfectly just, and in the face of sin in the world, this revelation may be in question. Further, as a sinner man’s understanding of God’s justice is limited and needs explanation; in his guilty condition he sees only the condemnation that is his due. But there is another aspect of God’s justice that the sinner ought to wonder at/

c. What does it mean that God is just through Jesus Christ?

(1) It means that all the sins of God’s children must be dealt with completely; there is no lesser standard for them. It also means that all the sins of unbelievers will be finally dealt with (Heb. 9:27; Rom. 1:18; 2:1-3). Hence all and every sin will be dealt with; God’s character demands it.

(2) It means that all seeming injustice in the world will be finally sorted out by God (Ps. 73:3, 17-19), that purity and righteousness shall prevail, that the King of righteousness shall reign (I Cor. 15:25).

Ibid., pp. 107-8.
(3) It means that my sin and unrighteousness must be dealt with. Justice for others demands justice for myself. Either my sin will be judged by God in myself or in an acceptable substitute (I Pet. 3:18). But I cannot escape the justice of God.

5. Through Jesus Christ, God is the justifier of mankind, v. 26b.

The order here is not insignificant. While God is unfailingly just, the astonishing good news is that He, at the same time, is a justifier, a pardoner, a Magistrate in the heavens who, in impeccably upholding the law, yet bountifully shows mercy to the guilty prisoner at the bar.

a. The God of the Bible is fully just and fully gracious.

While a God of justice without grace leads the guilty sinner to despair, so a God of grace without justice leads the guilty sinner to lack confidence. Further, a God who is partially just and partially gracious is not God at all. Rather, the guilty sinner needs a God who is both fully just and fully gracious, and this is the God of the Bible. There is no other God like this.

(1) God is both merciful and righteous (Ps. 85:9-13).

(2) God is both righteous and a Savior (Isa. 45:21).

(3) God is both righteous and a justifier (Isa. 53:11).

(4) God is both just and a Savior (Zech. 9:9).

(5) God is both righteous and forgiving (I John 1:9).

b. But how can it be known that God is fully just and fully gracious?

By looking at the atonement of the Lord Jesus Christ, this historic display, especially as described here in vs. 25-26.

(1) Look again at Zechariah 9:9. Who is it that manifests both justice and salvation? It is, “your king is coming to you; He is just and endowed with salvation, humble, and mounted on a donkey.”

(2) When does this King come so riding? On the Sunday commencing Passion Week (Matt. 21:1-11). The following Friday he shall be made an offering for sin, suffering justice yet manifesting abundant grace.

(3) Here is the most amazing of transactions, the most emancipating of all terrestrial events, the most glorious of all truths, that God Himself meted out the full fury of His justice upon His only beloved Son, that the believing sinner might be justified by a just God (I John 4:10). So Lloyd-Jones comments: “Somebody has described this [vs. 25-26] as the ‘acropolis of the Christian faith’. We can be certain that there is nothing that the human mind
can ever consider which is in any way as important as these two verses. The history of the Church shows very clearly that they have been the means that God the Holy Spirit has used to bring many a soul from darkness to light, and to give many a poor sinner his first knowledge of salvation and his first assurance of salvation.”

Isaac Watts describes this gospel truth as follows in his paraphrase of Psalm 85:10.

Mercy and truth on earth are met,  
Since Christ the Lord came down from Heaven;  
By His obedience so complete,  
Justice is pleased and peace is given.

c. But for this truth to be savingly known, it must be personally embraced.

It is not enough to know that God is both righteous and gracious, just and a justifier toward sinners. As sinners, even Satan and his angels know this. Rather, this truth must be personally appropriated. It must be known and experienced, according to God’s specific and individual purpose, that He is both just and a justifier toward me (Gal. 2:20).

(1) That God will finally be just with me, few men will doubt even though they consider such a confrontation with dread. But how can I know that He will also be gracious and merciful toward me (Hab. 3:2)? The answer comes at the end of v. 26 where God is, “just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.”

(2) To believe in Jesus is to put to your account his righteousness, while he took to his account your unrighteousness. It is this transaction that is alone acceptable to the only true and living God. To not believe in Jesus is to suffer personally God’s justice for your sins, and supremely that of your unbelief.

C. THIS RIGHTEOUSNESS OF FAITH EXCLUDES BOASTING, 3:27-31

Man is a natural and extravagant “boaster,” proud to the core, that is his fallen nature leads him to boast in himself rather than God. Notable instances take us back to the tower of Babel (Gen. 11:4) and on to Nebuchadnezzar (Dan. 4:30). However, man’s universal claim to autonomy wedded to his penchant for religion leads him to audaciously boast before God whether he be an aristocrat or commoner. That is, in his religion he attempts to impress with performance; he does not deny the need of God’s help, but like the boasting Pharisee he deceitfully declares, “God, I thank Thee [emphasis added] that I am not like other people” (Luke 18:11). In the name and cover of religion, this man boasts in his own righteousness. This attitude is precisely that which Paul has been addressing in Romans, and now denounces in terms of the gospel he has just expounded in precise detail. Such denunciation then asserts the antithesis of boasting in human righteousness which is justification by faith in Christ’s righteousness.

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35 Ibid., p. 95.
1. It excludes boasting in law works, vs. 27-28.

The transition of emphasis here is well described by Moo. “In 3:27-4:25, Paul expounds the great theological thesis of 3:21-26. Or to be more accurate, he expounds one key element in that thesis. For we hear no more in 3:27-4:25 about atonement, or the demonstration of God’s righteousness, or the provision for sins under the Old Covenant. Rather, Paul concentrates on the vital theme stated in v. 22: ‘the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe.’ Faith is the topic in every paragraph of this section of the letter.”

a. Through the law of faith, v. 27.

In typical rhetorical style Paul asks, “Therefore, where is the boasting?” that is, what place has the self-congratulatory fulfillment of “the works of the law” according to 3:20? It has been “shut out” or “excluded.” In fact the whole concept has been annihilated!

(1) The principle of law.

(a) Here again we see Paul’s flexible use of νόμος nomos, since on both occasions in this verse it is better translated “principle,” “basis,” or “rule.” Hence, in strongly affirming that “boasting” in law-works has been eliminated through “faith in Jesus” v. 26, he then raises the question as to the “principle” upon which this elimination of boasting is based. Do law-works exclude boasting?

(b) The answer is an emphatic “No!” since “law-works” inherently stimulate boasting; they are offered for personal praise and reward. Further, at the root of man’s sinful nature is his delight in boasting. In fact to boast in law-works is to increase transgression, not eliminate it; such conceit is a denial of man’s dependence and the necessity of God saving power.

(2) The principle of faith.

(a) However, the “principle of faith,” by its very nature, does eliminate the human tendency to boast in human righteousness since faith is dependent; it looks away from human ability to divine ability; it denies human righteousness and rests upon divine righteousness.

(b) John Murray well describes the works/faith antipathy as follows: “We are required to ask how the principle of faith is so rigidly exclusive of and antithetical to works of law in the matter of justification. The only answer is the specific quality of faith as opposed to that of works. Justification by works always finds its ground in that which the person is and does; it is always oriented to that consideration of virtue.

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36 Moo, Romans, p. 243.
37 Leon Morris, The Epistle to the Romans, p. 185; William G. T. Shedd, Commentary on Romans, p. 85.
attaching to the person justified. The specific quality of faith is trust and commitment to another; it is essentially extraspective and in that respect is the diametric opposite of works. Faith is self-renouncing; works are self-congratulatory. Faith looks to what God does; works have respect to what we are. It is this antithesis of principle that enables the apostle to base the complete exclusion of works upon the principle of faith. Only faith has relevance within that gospel delineated in verses 21-26. And, if faith, then it is ‘without works of law’”.38

b. Through justification by faith, v. 28.

Here, more definitively, the “principle of faith” described in v. 27 is set forth. This is Paul’s summary statement concerning the essence of the gospel with the word “faith [alone]” being the key term.

(1) The assertion of the gospel, “we.”

“We reckon,” may allude to Paul’s identification of this fundamental gospel truth with that which the whole of Scripture has maintained since the Fall, including the proof soon to be offered in 4:1-9 concerning Abraham and David. This inclusive identification may also involve apostolic agreement.

(2) The object of the gospel, “man.”

As has already been asserted in 1:16; 2:9-10; 3:9, 22, and immediately following in 3:29-30, that God does not discriminate within a universe of sinners on the basis of race, whether Jew or Gentile, or sex, age, education, etc. The human race is defiled and the gospel is for the defiled human race.

(3) The righteous kernel of the gospel, “justification.”

In this key gospel verse, δικαιοσύνη, dikaiōσynē, refers to the necessity of a man or woman having a righteous or holy relationship with God. This is man’s supreme problem on a vertical level, and God’s gracious remedy is to provide a gratis righteousness, to declare a believing sinner to be righteous for the sake of Jesus Christ’s righteous atonement.

(4) The hinge of the gospel, “faith.”

(a) “Faith” attaches the sinner to his atoning Savior; it is linkage. Faith in itself does not save, only faith’s saving object. Shedd illustrates: “Faith justifies in the same sense that eating nourishes. It is not the act of mastication, but the food, that sustains life; and it is not the act of believing, but Christ’s death, which delivers from the condemnation of the law.”39

38 Murray, Romans, I, p. 123.
39 Shedd, Romans, p. 86.
(b) Luther translated here, “faith alone,” and while he added a word not mentioned in the original, he added nothing to the sense. Thus the meaning of his translation was entirely correct. Roman Catholic objection at this point overlooks the fact that Origen, Theodoret, Hilary, Basil, Ambrosiaster, Chrysostom, Cyril of Alexandria, Bernard, and Theophylact, also added the word “alone” here.

(5) The antithesis of the gospel, “works of the law.”

The “works of the law,” while most clearly illustrated within Judaism, yet refers more inclusively to any human endeavor that is intended to impress God, as a basis for bargaining with God. But man’s epidemic pride is totally repudiated here, for it in fact concerns what are only putrid and corrupt offerings, filthy rags (Is. 64:6). So the Christian responds as Isaac Watts has written.

When I survey the wondrous Cross
On which the prince of glory died,
My richest gain I count but loss,
And pour contempt on all my pride.

However, while the gospel utterly excludes “the works of the law” as a basis of justification, yet it demands fruit that authenticates “faith alone” or “sola fide” (Eph. 2:8-10; Jas. 2:24).

2. It excludes racial boasting, vs. 29-30.

Paul as a Jew, anticipates the thinking of alarmed Jews concerning v. 28, namely that if justification with the one and only God comes solely through faith alone, then racial distinctives including circumcision are eliminated, and the door for salvation is wide open. Their conclusion is correct; their alarm is unwarranted. Man in general over the ages has tended to maintain belief in national and localized gods, that is the gods of the Romans, Greeks, Assyrians, Egyptians (Ex. 12:12), even the God of the Hebrews (Ex. 9:1, 13; 10:3), which tend to have localized features, such as a temple, etc. Thus God is marginalized. But Paul recognizes the incongruity of this tendency, especially amongst the Hebrews who jealously claim that there is only one God, the God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Jerusalem.

a. One God owns all races, v. 29.

(1) More literally we read, “Jews only is He the God of?” “Jews” here is in an emphatic position. The obvious answer is “No,” and the Jewish Scriptures indicate this (I Kings 8:41-43; Ps. 96:1-13; 98:2-3, 7-9).

(2) “Is he not the God of the Gentiles also? Yes of the Gentiles.” The principle of faith has already established this truth. Though as Murray adds, “this

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40 Moo, Romans, p. 250n., quoting the Catholic scholar, Fitzmyer.
b. One God justifies all races, v. 30.

(1) Paul’s argument here takes the boasted, exclusive monotheism of Judaism and turns it upon itself in a way that surely left the Jew scratching his head concerning a significant truth he had not given the attention it demands.

(2) Thus, “God is one,” writes Paul. Biblically and logically this is an essential characteristic of God, as the Jews jealously appreciated. He explains in I Corinthians 8:4-6, “We know that there is no such thing as an idol in the world, and that there is no God but one [Deut. 6:4]. For even if there are so-called gods whether in heaven or on earth, as indeed there are many gods and many Lords, yet for us there is but one God, the Father, from whom are all things, and we existed through Him.” Further, if there is a plurality of Gods, then none can be God.

(3) Therefore, all of creation and the human races in particular are under this one God’s dominion and care. Hence this one God justifies the “circumcised” (Jew) and the “uncircumcised” (Gentile) without regard to racial distinction. For, “there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; for the same Lord is Lord of all, abounding in riches for all who call upon Him; for ‘Whoever will call upon the name of the Lord will be saved’ (Joel 2:32)” (Rom. 10:12-13).

(4) By way of application, here then is a revelation of the large-heartedness of God which Isaac Watts has well described.

People and realms of every tongue  
Dwell on His love with sweetest song;  
And infant voices shall proclaim  
Their young hosannas to His name.

Where He displays His healing power,  
Death and the curse are known no more;  
In Him the tribes of Adam boast  
More blessings than their father lost.

3. It establishes the law, v. 31.

So Paul anticipates the objection of the exclusive Jew who enquires as to the remaining role of the law in the light of this teaching; it seems to have been eliminated.

a. The law is not nullified, v. 31a.

(1) “Therefore do we nullify law through the faith?” But what does Paul mean here by the term “law” in its emphatic position? While it can mean Scripture

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41 Murray, Romans, I, p. 124.
broadly speaking as in 3:19, yet in 4:3 Paul asks, “What does the Scripture [not law] say?” Rather it is the demand of the Mosaic law that is inherent in the expression “works of the law” in 3:28. It is the ethical imperative of the decalogue and pentateuch.

(2) So Paul vigorously denies that the ethical essence of the law of Moses has been “nullified,” cf. 3:3 where the same καταργέω, katargeō, is used. If the moral heart of the law has been “disqualified, voided,” then God’s character has been “disqualified, voided” as well. His μὴ γένοιτο, mē genoiō, could be paraphrased, “perish the thought!”

b. Faith establishes the law, v. 31b.

There are two aspects of this “establishment of the law,” and both have convincing aspects.

(1) In terms of immediate context, the gospel of justification by faith, which is about to be supported in the following chapter from the examples of Abraham and David, is the fulfilment of the law by means of Christ’s satisfactory obedience to it, both active and passive. Thus in Matthew 5:17 the Savior declares: “I did not come to abolish, but to fulfill [the law].” Lloyd-Jones gives seven reasons in support of this point of view, declaring, “I am asserting that this way of salvation and redemption, above everything else, honors the Law in all ways.”

(2) On the other hand, while the law is not nullified by means of “the faith,” that same “the faith” being the body of saving gospel truth, it in fact brings about the true fulfillment of the law, it draws forth, through the Holy Spirit, the righteousness of the law in authentic Christian embodiment. The critical passage in this respect is 8:3-4, where “the righteousness of the law is fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit.” Lloyd-Jones makes no reference to this passage, though in his subsequent sermon on these verses he does maintain, contrary to Hodge, that Paul here is emphasizing “righteousness imparted” and not simply “righteousness imputed.”

(3) To sum up, Paul indicates in Romans that the power and dynamic of the gospel fulfill the essence of the law by Christ and in the believer. Both are

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42 Lloyd-Jones, Romans 3:20-4:25, p. 141; Moo, Romans, pp. 252-5; Morris, Romans, p. 189; Murray, Romans, I, p. 126; Shedd, Romans, p. 88
43 Ibid., pp. 142-9.
44 Moo, Romans, pp. 254-5.
45 Martyn Lloyd-Jones, Romans 7:1-8:4, p. 304. “In other words, the righteousness of the Law is fulfilled in us in two ways. The righteousness of Christ is ‘imputed’ to us; but, thank God, the righteousness of God is also ‘imparted’ to us. The second is the process of sanctification which the Apostle begins to deal with in v. 5 . . . . There is the imparted as well as the imputed righteousness. We have to insist upon this exposition, as against Dr. Hodge, because of the immediate context.”
certainly true, though the question remains as to whether both are involved in the meaning of v. 31 here. In the simple terms of 1:16, the Lord Jesus Christ “is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.”

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46 Morris, Romans, p. 189.