

Romans 3:21-26
(Isaiah 53:1-12; John 3:14-17)
“The Redemption That Is in Christ Jesus”

Introduction

“But now!” Paul turns now from the dark backdrop of human rebellion and sin to the glory of the Gospel in which “God’s righteousness is made manifest apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it” (3:21). Most people live their lives without ever really getting the wonder of these little words that mark the passage from spiritual death to spiritual life: But now. We’ve taken things in our own hands and exchanged God’s glory for created images, have exchanged God’s truth for lies, have exchanged what is God’s natural order of things for what is unnatural. So God has given us over to the consequences of our actions, and the final result is death. All humanity is languishing under sentence of death and neither religion nor morality can save us. But now God acts, and the result is life to all who believe and receive the good news of what he has done in the fullness of time in the life and death and victory of Jesus.

Paul is always at pains to remind his fellow Jews that the gospel is neither new nor unforeseen. He is not introducing something at odds with the religion of Israel. It is rather, he will say over and over again, precisely what was promised in the Law and the Prophets. From God’s covering the nakedness of Adam and Eve with the skins of a sacrificial animal in Genesis 3:21, to God’s passing between the pieces of the covenant sacrifice and so taking upon himself the consequences of our sin and rebellion in Genesis 15:17. From the psalmist’s cry, “Truly no man can ransom another, or give to God the price of his life,” and the answer to his own dilemma in these words of assurance, “But God will ransom my soul from the power of Sheol [i.e. the grave]” (Psalm 49:7&15), to the prophet Isaiah’s words, “But he was wounded for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his stripes we are healed” (Isaiah 53:5). It is the promise and hope of the Old Testament from beginning to end.

Several commentators have called the verses before us this morning the most important words ever written, for here we have the essence of the gospel, and the themes which Paul will spend most of this letter explaining. This morning, we will try to understand this passage by simply following Paul’s argument as he describes the two-fold problem that neither religion nor morality can resolve, and then the two-fold solution found only in the Cross of Christ.

These verses contain the answer to the greatest human need: How am I to be made right with God? Every religion seeks to answer that question, but fails, for the reasons that Paul explains in these verses. Only the Gospel can do what religion can never do. If you value your eternal soul, you will seek to hear and understand what God has done for you in Christ.

Body

1. **Our Problem: “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (3:23).**

Paul has shown us that every one of us without exception – immoral people, moral people and religious people – have failed to keep the law of God, and are thus condemned by the law and live, apart from grace, under God’s wrath and curse.

Shakespeare stated this profound biblical truth memorably through Portia’s defense in “The Merchant of Venice,” “If justice be thy plea consider this, that in the course of justice, none of us should see salvation: we do pray for mercy.”

2. **God’s Solution to Our Problem: The Cross – Jesus Died for Us.**

Justification: Christ’s sacrifice declares us righteous before God (3:24a). This is not merely forgiveness or pardon. It is something far more radical: God declares sinners like you and me to be righteous. Justification is the opposite of condemnation. It is a legal term that means far more than pardon. If you have been found guilty of a crime and have received a sentence, but Governor pardons you, you may go free, but you have not been justified, only pardoned. In order for you to be declared justified before the court, you must either be innocent, or your debt must have been paid in full, your punishment completed, and the just demands of the court fully satisfied. This is what God does for us in Christ. The penalty has been paid in full, and there is no longer a record of offence before the court. God now is “just to forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:9).

Redemption: Christ’s sacrifice also frees us from bondage to sin (3:24b). A slave whose freedom was purchased was said to have been redeemed. You and I are born in bondage to sin and death, and Christ has set us free. In his death we have died, and in his victory over death, we have been given new life. Thus, Paul writes later in this letter that we have been set free from both the power of sin (chapter 6) and from the power of the law (chapter 7).

3. **God’s Problem: “So that he may be just and the justifier” of the unjust (3:26, see also 4:5).**

What is it that we enjoy in vengeance movies like “Man on Fire”? Isn’t it that we can hardly bear the thought that people commit crimes against others and get away with it? Don’t we love it when the avenging figure played by Denzel Washington or Clint Eastwood or Charles Bronson finally brings the sword of justice to the wicked? Don’t we feel as though for just a moment the

world has been made a better place? We have a deep and profound sense that justice must be done, and we want it done against every sinner – except ourselves and those we love.

God has promised in his Word that he will not let sin go unpunished. He warned judges appointed in Israel not to justify the guilty and condemn the innocent, or their blood would be on the judges' hands. Humanity asks how a loving God could punish anyone – not meaning the monsters of history, but meaning nice folk like us. The Bible asks a different question: How can God acquit the guilty and still remain just? How can he let the guilty go free without in that very act condoning their sin and rebellion and violating his own just character, not to mention the clear promises of his Word to punish the wicked, not only for our actions but for the thoughts and intents of our hearts? How can God justify sinners and remain God? That is the problem of God.

4. God's Solution to God's Problem: The Cross – Jesus Died for God.

Propitiation: Only Christ's sacrifice propitiates – satisfies and turns aside – God's wrath against sin (3:25a). In the cross, God makes a way to declare the unjust – people like you and me – to be just, without in that action himself becoming unjust. Many Christians struggle with this word and many Bible translations intentionally avoid it, because they cannot bear the idea of God's wrath. But that is precisely what is in view here, from chapter 1 verse 18: "For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men."

God's wrath is our greatest problem, and most of humanity does not understand it, and most Christians suppress it, and most ministers are afraid to say it for fear that people won't feel loved and affirmed. But it is the clear teaching of the Bible, and the chief reason that Jesus had to die. Had God simply forgiven us, he would no longer be just, his character would be open to question, and the moral order of the universe would collapse. There would be no hope for the oppressed of final justice being done. The longing for justice felt by every heart facing wickedness and oppression would go forever unsatisfied. *God's wrath against sin is our only hope of things finally being set right.*

So God provides a way to declare us just who are in Christ Jesus by faith. He unites us to his Son, accepting his sacrifice in our place, putting us to death in Christ's death and raising us to life in his victory over sin and death. His wrath is satisfied, and we are safe within his beloved Son.

Vindication: Christ's sacrifice displays God's righteousness to the entire cosmos (3:25b-26). This act serves as a declaration and demonstration of God's righteousness. Once again, it silences God's critics. He has himself

provided the sacrifice for sin, and in his Son has borne our sins and carried our sorrows. So the cross of Christ is the vindication, not only of God's people, but also of God himself.

Conclusion

So, how do we receive the benefits of Christ's cross? Paul makes clear that we have nothing to contribute except our sin and awful need. We have only to believe and receive what God offers in the Gospel of Christ. It is the end of religion and the beginning of what Luke's gospel calls "good news of great joy for all people" (Luke 2:10).

Three times in these verses, Paul tells us that ours is only to believe and receive what God offers us in Christ: "through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe" (3:22), "to be received by faith" (3:25), and "the one who has faith in Jesus" (3:26). Faith is *not* the one good work that we contribute to our salvation. Rather, it also is a gift of God (as Paul writes elsewhere, in Ephesians 2:8).

And so, our salvation is, from first to last, a work of the Triune God: The Father's grace and mercy puts forth his own Son as a substitute for sinners like you and me, the Son of God freely gives himself in our place and becomes an offering for sin so that in him we might become God's righteousness, and the Spirit of God convicts us of our sin and need of his grace and grants us repentance and faith, enabling us to turn away from sin and place our trust entirely in Jesus.

O the love that drew salvation's plan.
O the grace that brought it down to man.
O the mighty gulf that God did span at Calvary.

Mercy there was great and grace was free.
Pardon there was multiplied to me.
There my burdened soul found liberty at Calvary.

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