

## Romans 3:21-31

### Introduction

From 1:18-3:20, Paul has made the case for the impartiality of God toward Jew and Gentile. Although having creation as a source for knowledge of God, the Gentile world embraced wrong thinking and instead of honoring God they honored idols. Surprisingly, God did not destroy them but chose to let them go the direction of their own self-destructive way. Their debased thinking led to a break down of society. The Jew who had misguided pride in the possession of Torah and the covenant of circumcision also dishonored God. Instead of responding to the status of being God's elect by living such a way that would encourage Gentiles to honor God, they allowed the gifts of law and circumcision to become walls of exclusion that divided them from the rest of the world. The Jew and the Gentile were both proven to be helplessly under the power of sin. Possessing the law did not help the Jew avoid being in the same boat as the Gentile without the law. Only God has the power to deal with sin.

In this section, Paul begins showing something new and grand has occurred. The words, "But now" draws a contrast between the reality of the past and the new reality that has come through Jesus. Brandon Fredenburg states it in this way, "The ongoing dialogue now takes an important turn. Paul tells the Jewish teacher that in their own day God has fulfilled his Abrahamic promise to all peoples by taking matters into his own hands. Rather than dispensing final wrath, God has embraced all people without distinction as covenant partners by unconditionally and graciously regarding the faithful actions of Jesus as redemptive for all persons. Of course, only those who trust the reality of Paul's claim about what God did in Jesus are able to "see" matters this way and so are able to enjoy God's covenanted blessings."

### God's Solution: 3:21-26

#### *Faith*

Before looking at the flow of the text it might be worthwhile to discuss the word "faith" in the text. In verses 21 through 31, a form of the word "faith" is found nine times, so it is evident that "faith" plays a major role in the discussion. The issue is whether it is speaking of the faithfulness of God or Jesus, or it is speaking of the faith of humanity. The NIV and NRSV translate this section with the understanding that faith here speaks exclusively of the faith of humanity. The NET interprets the text as referring to the faithfulness of Jesus in verses 22a and 26, but referring to the faith of humanity in the rest. See Fredenburg for an alternative reading, which is in line with the comments in this document.

The first phrase in verse 22 where "faith" is found literally reads, "*through* the faithfulness of Jesus." While it is true that it is those who trust God who enjoy the covenant blessings, and while Paul makes this very point in the next phrase; that is not Paul's meaning here. This is about the faithfulness of Jesus that revealed the righteousness of God. Consider also that if this phrase were to be translated "faith *in* Jesus," the following statement "for all who trust (faith)," which does speak of those who put their trust in God's faithfulness, would be redundant. This phrase, "righteousness of

God through the faithfulness of Jesus” carries the same basic meaning as “out of faith into faith” in 1:17.

Verse 25 literally reads, “through the faith/faithfulness.” Having the article in the phrase points it to a particular faith, which in the context would be the faithfulness of God, who is the subject of the sentence. God, through His faithfulness, presented Jesus as the mercy seat by means of His (Jesus’) blood.

Verse 26 literally reads something like, “the-from-the-faithfulness-of-Jesus-person.” As far as the word “faith” is concerned, it refers to Jesus. In the Greek it is faith “*out of*” Jesus not faith “*in*” Jesus. This verse says nothing about the faith of a person. The point here is that God is the justifier and all who are justified by God receive this blessing out of the faithfulness of Jesus.

The words translated “faith” in verses 27-31 are used to contrast two ways of reading Torah. The Jew believed that reading scripture with a focus on what it says to do gave them security in their special status as chosen people and separated them from the Gentile. In contrast, the law of faith places its focus on the faithfulness of God as one’s security, which has been the focus throughout Romans. The faith of a person has no power to overcome sin. Therefore, it is more consistent to the text to see “faith” in these verses as referring to the faithfulness of God or Jesus, which is the answer to all problems humanity faces.

It may be helpful to refer back to this section at times as you go through the text.

### *Back to the text*

Paul has shown that relying on *Mosaic* Law to overcome the power of sin is faulty thinking. God’s faithfulness to provide covenant partner status (righteousness) has been revealed, but it had nothing to do with any favored status that Jews believed they had through the possession of Torah (“apart from law”). Although the law could not deal with sin, it does bear witness to what God has now done through Jesus.

The phrase in verse 21 is again “righteousness *of* God” not “righteousness *from* God.” It is not that we do not receive covenant status *from* God. It is that this is not Paul’s point here. God’s righteousness (covenant faithfulness/saving justice) has now been revealed through faithful Jesus. Jesus put flesh on the faithfulness of God. As proclaimed about God, Jesus did not respond to the horror of the sin of humanity by calling the angels out of vengeful wrath to destroy them all. He took the full brunt of their rejection with the same commitment to making the world covenant partners as had been seen in the Father.

The promise to bless the world was for all (Jew and Gentile) equally and identically. Both are in the same predicament (“all have sinned and fall short”) and both are given the status of covenant partner on the same basis of God’s faithfulness. Those who enjoy the blessings of the covenant are those who trust that God has fulfilled His promise to Abraham.

The phrase, “all fall short of the glory of God” goes back to 1:21, which stated that the Gentiles failed to honor God and to 2:23, which stated that the Jews dishonored God. God has dealt with their predicament with impartiality {“*they* (Jew and Greek) are now justified}. Whether Jews with the law or Gentiles without the law, God has made both covenant partners apart from anything they have done or believed in.

Justification (covenant partnership with God) is purely a free unconditional gift. It

is neither deserved by humanity nor did humanity do anything to make it come about. There is no picture here of a stern, reluctant father having to be begged by his son to do this. God initiated and will complete the whole thing.

There has been and continues to be a great deal of discussion around the meaning of the words “redemption” and “atonement/propitiation/expiation” in verses 24 and 25 (depending on translation). The image of “redemption” takes the reader back to the event of Israel’s freedom from Egyptian bondage. God has again, through a mighty act, rescued his people (the world). A natural question is, “From what or from whom?” Although not spelled out in this verse, Paul has shown that all humanity is under the power of sin. It seems correct to say (although there may be more to it than this) that humanity has certainly been redeemed, set free, from the power of sin.

“Sacrifice of atonement” (v. 25) is a mistranslation. “Sacrifice of atonement” is one word in Greek (*hilasterion*) and is used most often in the LXX for the lid or mercy seat of the Ark of the Covenant (Exodus 25:17-22). It is not the word the LXX translates for atonement. The discussion here most likely comes from Israel’s cultic sacrifices and has in mind the Day of Atonement. This word is not speaking of a sacrifice. It speaks of a place. This same word is translated “mercy seat” in Hebrews 9:5, which is the only other place in the NT that this word is found. The mercy seat was the place where God and humanity meet.

The description of the Day of Atonement in Leviticus 16 says nothing about the sacrifices made on that day being given to appease an angry God. Although God was angry about Israel’s sin, the blood from the sacrifices was used for cleansing the stain of sin rather than pacifying an angry bloodthirsty pagan god. Dunn, agreeing with the mercy seat translation (The Theology of Paul the Apostle, pg. 214-215) says it should be looked at as the “removal of a corrosive stain or the neutralization of a life-threatening virus” rather than the appeasement of an angry God.” Blood removed the contamination of sin on the altar and in the Holy of Holies because of the contamination Israel’s sins brought to them, and it removed the contamination from the priest and the people so that God could meet Israel at the mercy seat through the representation of the High Priest. The problem with the NIV and NRSV translation is that the emphasis is placed on the death of Jesus, while Paul’s emphasis is on Jesus being the place of meeting between God and humanity. Jesus’ bloody death is the means by which that was made possible. The importance of the concept of a place of meeting where humanity, under the power of sin, can meet a holy God can be seen in that the tabernacle is referred to as the “tent of meeting” 135 times in Exodus, Leviticus, and Deuteronomy.

After stating that God presented Jesus as the meeting place, Paul described how that event relates to the discussion of God’s covenant keeping faithfulness. Earlier (3:5) God’s justice was challenged, which was not new among Jews. The writers of the Psalms often questioned God because He did not do something about the wicked as quickly as they thought he should have. The language of verses 25 and 26 is legal courtroom language. The judge (God) is declaring a verdict in response to the charge that God is unjust by not treating the Jew with more favoritism than the Gentile. Pagan gods would have responded to such charges with wrath. But God, because He is faithful to his promises responds in ways that help His creation see His righteousness. In Exodus, both at the burning bush and at Mt. Sinai God declared His name, His

character. One aspect of the name Yahweh is that people would have to watch God's actions in order to understand His name or character. God did declare His character in Exodus 34:5-8 with words, but His character would not be just spoken, it would be demonstrated by the way He dealt with the world.

Verses 25 and 26 point us to two acts of God that demonstrate His righteous character. One, due to His divine forbearance, God withheld final punishment upon both Jew and Gentile ("passed over sins previously committed"). This is the same thing God stated in Exodus 34:6-7 when proclaimed His name, His character.

"The LORD." The LORD passed before him, and proclaimed,  
"The LORD, the LORD,  
a God merciful and gracious,  
slow to anger,  
and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness,  
keeping steadfast love for the thousandth generation,  
forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin,  
yet by no means clearing the guilty,  
but visiting the iniquity of the parents  
upon the children  
and the children's children,  
to the third and the fourth generation."

Some times too much focus is given to the end of this statement that talks about "visiting iniquity." The point is that mercy and love are what dominates God's way of dealing with the world. There is an enormous difference between a thousand generations and three or four generations.

Two, (in line with His promise to Abraham to "bless all the people of the earth") in Paul's present time God is making people covenant partners through Jesus. The last phrase of verse 26 should probably be understood to be saying something like, God's covenant faithfulness is now being seen in that He is making all people (Jew and Gentile) a covenant partner (justifies) and all who are being justified receive this blessing out of the faithfulness of Jesus.

### **Proper Reading of Law: 3:27-31**

Paul's conversation with the imaginary National Jewish teacher continues.

The *Jewish teacher* (v. 27a) said, "What becomes of boasting?" This has reference to Israel's boasting that they had a special relationship with God that no one else could ever have as evidenced by the possessing Torah and the covenant of circumcision.

*Paul's* response (v. 27b) was that boasting in any Jewish national privilege based on the possession of Torah and circumcision was never God's intent (excluded).

The *Jewish teacher* responded (v.27c) with an attempt to hold on to the notion that reading Torah with a focus on understanding and being obedient to the

commandments (“law of works”) was the proper way to read law challenged Paul to find another solution.

*Paul’s* response (v. 27d-28) was no. Torah should be read through the lens of God’s faithfulness to the Abrahamic promise (“law of faith/faithfulness) because no one becomes a covenant partner based on national privilege and keeping commandments (“works prescribed by law”). Is not God the God of both Jew and Gentile?

The *Jewish teacher* responded (v. 29c), possibly with reluctance, “Yes, of Gentiles also”.

*Paul* replied (v. 30), since we are talking about the one God of both Jew and Gentile, God makes covenant partners (“he will justify”) of both the circumcised and uncircumcised on the basis of His faithfulness in fulfilling the promises made to Abraham. There is no impartiality with God.

The *Jewish teacher* responded (v. 31a), “Does this mean the law is of no value?”

*Paul* replied, (v. 31b), “Absolutely, positively no!” When Torah is read with the template of God’s faithfulness overlaid on the top of it, Torah is shown to support the truth that Gentiles were always to receive the covenant blessing on the same basis as the Jew, thus negating any exclusive claim the Jew might make. The gospel Paul preached validates or confirms the law.

## **Conclusion**

Paul indicted the Gentile world for dishonoring God and for not giving God thanks. God gave them up to their chosen path, which darkened their minds and led to self-degradation and the destruction of human relations. Jews not only broke the law, they used the law and circumcision to put up barriers of exclusiveness and separateness against the Gentile world. Sin became a destructive monster that humanity was unable to overcome. Both Jew and Gentile were helplessly under its power.

But something new occurred in Paul’s historical time. God, out of his own righteous character, intervened just as he had promised Abraham, and blessed helpless humanity (Jew and Gentile) with the status of covenant partner. God destroyed the power of sin through the bloody death of Jesus.

The question is, “What role did the death of Jesus have in God’s justification (giving covenant partner status) of humanity?” The death of Jesus was not a sacrifice designed to appease an angry bloodthirsty God. Jesus was not a sacrifice offered up by God to Himself. It was not God who beat Jesus up to work off his anger as psychologists sometimes encourage people to do in order to deal with their uncontrolled anger. God was not acting like a pagan god.

“Lamb of God” is found 36 times in the NT. Notice the kind of things said about this lamb. Jesus is the Passover lamb whose blood takes away the sin of the world (John 1:29). His blood makes the saint’s robes white (Rev. 7:14). This fits with the idea

of cleansing spoken of earlier. Nothing is said of appeasing a vengeful angry God. Jesus is the slaughtered lamb (Rev. 5:6, 12). But it was not God who slaughtered Jesus; it was humanity under the power of sin.

It was humanity, under the control of sin, who crucified Jesus (Acts 2:23, 36; 4:10). God is never spoken of as sacrificing or killing Jesus. God loved the world so much that He did hand Jesus over to humanity, knowing they would reject His Son and pour out the full force of the horror of sin upon Him (Acts 2:23). See the parable of the landowner whose tenants killed the landowner's slaves and eventually the landowner's son (Matt. 21:33ff). As with the Day of Atonement, the blood of Jesus was a cleansing agent. Through it, God cleansed the stains of sins committed by people and forgave all humanity (cf. 2 Cor. 5:18–19). Jesus became the Mercy Seat, the place where holy God and humanity could meet. The power of sin was then destroyed with the resurrection of Jesus (the first fruits) when death will be proven to have no sting (1 Cor. 15:54-56).

**Romans**  
**3:21-31**

1. Based on what you have heard or seen so far in this study, describe what the following terms mean.
  - a. Apart from the law
  
  
  - b. Righteousness of God
  
  
  - c. Justified
  
2. What role did the death of Jesus have in God's justification (giving covenant partner status) of humanity?" To help you formulate your response you might also ask, "What was God doing?" and "What role did humanity play?" Also consider the following texts: Exodus 34:6-7; John 1:29; Rev. 7:14; Acts 2:23; 36; 4:10; Matt. 10:33ff.
  
3. What did God show or prove by the death of Jesus based on verses 25b-26?
  
4. What has Romans and this text said about Jews and Gentiles in God's salvation history?
  
5. Describe how what you have seen in Romans about God has either changed or supported what you have understood before.
  
6. How does your understanding of God impact your life?