

Romans 3 v 21 to 4 v 25: “But now...”

“But now...” the first two words of verse 21... After the ‘total annihilation’ of the previous verses come God’s words of relief – God’s total answer to man’s total failure!

Righteousness through faith (Romans 3 v 21 to 31)

This passage talks about a ‘righteousness from God’, i.e. the gift of righteousness provided for man by God, through Christ. This is *not* the same as ‘God’s righteousness’, which refers to God’s character of holiness and justice (as in Romans 3 v 5). This is a key passage that can be broken down into four sections: (i) v 21 gives God’s answer to man’s failure; (ii) v 22 to 24 tell us how the gift of righteousness is obtained; (iii) v 25 and 26 tell us how and why this works; and (iv) v 27 to 31 explain the results...

- From the last study, what comes through the law (Romans 3 v 20)? What comes apart from the law (v 21)? Who have sinned (v 23)? How is sin described?
- What is the gift of God’s grace (v 24)? How has the price of sin been paid?
- How does a person receive justification? Can anyone boast? Why not? Is anyone excluded?

“All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (v 23) – this universal statement is answered by a universal offer to be “justified by his grace as a gift” (v 24). Paul develops his teaching about salvation around three themes: (i) *justification* is a term from a court of law; (ii) *redemption* is a picture from the slave market; (iii) *propitiation* is an image from religion, appeasing God through sacrifice. Justification solves the problem of man’s guilt before a righteous Judge; redemption solves the problem of man’s slavery to sin, the world, and the devil; propitiation solves the problem of offending our Creator and Lord.

“Justified by his grace as a gift” (v 24) – being in such a sinful state, the only way we can be justified is ‘by his grace as a gift’. We cannot purchase justification with good works. We are justified by his *grace* – his unmerited favour, given to us without regard to what we deserve. The phrase ‘as a gift’ is the Greek word *δωρεάν* (*dorean*), sometimes translated ‘freely’ or ‘undeservedly’ – this word is also used in Matthew 10 v 8 (‘without pay’), in Revelation 22 v 17 (‘without price’), and in John 15 v 25: “They hated me *without a cause*” (*dorean*). Just as there was nothing in Jesus that deserved man’s hatred, so there is nothing in us that deserves justification – it is a gift from God!

“Whom God put forward as a propitiation” (v 25) – Jesus, by his death was a propitiation (= substitute sacrifice) for us. As he was judged in our place, the Father could demonstrate his righteous judgment against sin, while sparing those who deserved the judgment. The Greek word for propitiation *ἱλαστήριον* (*hilasterion*) is also used in the Septuagint for the ‘mercy seat’, the lid covering the Ark of the Covenant, upon which sacrificial blood was sprinkled as an atonement for sin – see Hebrews 9 v 1 to 5.

“Do we then overthrow the law by this faith?” (v 31) – we can see how someone might ask, ‘If the law does not make us righteous, what good is it? Paul, you have just overthrown the law! You are going against the law of God.’ “By no means!” replies Paul, “On the contrary, we uphold the law.” As he will demonstrate in Chapter 4, the law *anticipated* the coming gospel of justification by faith, apart from the deeds of the law; and the gospel *upholds* the law, but fulfils its own predictions in that no one can keep God’s law...

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Abraham justified by faith (Romans 4 v 1 to 12)

In Chapter 4 Paul uses Abraham as an illustration of a man who found this fantastic gift of righteousness – this gift of worth, right standing, acceptance and significance before God. In v 1 to 12 Paul discusses three questions: (i) *How* was Abraham made righteous? (ii) *When* was Abraham made righteous? (iii) *Why* was Abraham made righteous?

- How did Abraham obtain righteousness (v 3 to 5)?
- At what time in Abraham’s life was his faith counted as righteousness (v 10)? What significance does this have for the admission of Gentiles (non-Jews) into the community of believers?
- How is Abraham the father of the ‘uncircumcised’ who have faith (v 11 to 12)?

“What then shall we say was gained by Abraham...?” (v 1) – building on the idea in Romans 3 v 31, Paul asks the question, ‘Does the idea of justification through faith, apart from the works of the law, make the Old Testament irrelevant?’ Paul considers Abraham, the most esteemed man among the Jews of his day. “If Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God” (v 2) – such boasting is nothing before God because even if works *could* justify a man, he would in some way still *fall short of the glory of God* (Romans 3 v 23). “For what does the Scripture say?” (v 3) – the Bible does not say Abraham was declared righteous because of his works; but rather, “Abraham *believed* God and it was *counted to him as righteousness*” (see Genesis 15 v 6). It was a righteousness obtained through *faith*.

King David knew what it was like to be a guilty sinner. He understood the seriousness of sin, and how good it is to be truly forgiven. He knew the blessedness of “the man against whom the Lord will not count his sin” (v 8, see Psalm 32 v 1, 2). If David were judged on works alone, the righteous God must condemn him; but he knew by experience the blessings of forgiveness.

The promise realized through faith (Romans 4 v 13 to 25)

- What did God promise Abraham (v 13)? Based upon what was the promise made?
- There are two things about God that helped Abraham tremendously, as he waited for God’s promise to be fulfilled – what were they (v 17)? How can these truths help us?
- How did Abraham demonstrate his faith (v 19 to 21)?
- “No unbelief made him waver concerning the promise of God” (v 20) – but how do you reconcile this statement with Abraham’s evident lapse of faith when he took Hagar to wife and became the father of Ishmael (Genesis 16)? Perhaps the secret is in v 7 and 8...
- For whose sake was the example of Abraham’s faith written (v 23 to 24)?
- What was the reason for Jesus’ death, and what was the purpose of his resurrection (v 25)?

“The father of us all” (v 16) – the fulfilment of the promise in Genesis 17 v 4, 5 is found not only in Abraham’s descendants through Isaac, but especially in his role as being the father of us all who believe – and those believers come from every nation under heaven. “Who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist” (v 17) – these works of God demonstrate his ability to count things that do not exist (such as our righteousness) as if they did exist (such as in counting us as righteous). If God could call Sarah’s dead womb to life, then he can certainly call those who are *dead in trespasses and sins* (Ephesians 2 v 1, 2) to new life in Jesus!

Prayer – Lord, we thank you that although we have sinned and fall short of your glory, we are justified by your grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Jesus. Thank you that as Abraham’s faith was counted as righteousness, so too through faith we are counted as righteous, as we believe that you raised Jesus from the dead – Jesus who was delivered up for our trespasses, and raised for our justification. We give you humble thanks for these wonderful truths, in Jesus’ name, Amen.