

Romans 3:21–31 (ESV)

May 18, 2025

²¹ But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it— ²² the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction: ²³ for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, ²⁴ and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, ²⁵ whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God's righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins.

²⁶ It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.

²⁷ Then what becomes of our boasting? It is excluded. By what kind of law? By a law of works? No, but by the law of faith. ²⁸ For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law. ²⁹ Or is God the God of Jews only? Is he not the God of Gentiles also? Yes, of Gentiles also, ³⁰ since God is one—who will justify the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through faith. ³¹ Do we then overthrow the law by this faith? By no means! On the contrary, we uphold the law.

I. Introduction

After exposing the universal guilt of both Jews and Gentiles, Paul turns to declare the good news: God's righteousness has been revealed apart from the law. This righteousness is available through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. No one can be justified by works of the law, for all have sinned and fall short of God's glory. Justification is a gift of grace, accomplished by the redemptive work of Christ. In this turning point of the letter, Paul proclaims the heart of the gospel—God is both just and the justifier.

II. Exposition and Reflection

1. The Revelation of Righteousness Apart from the Law (vv. 21–22)

- God's righteousness was attested by the Law and the Prophets.
- It is now known apart from the law and is received through faith in Jesus.
- Why is it significant that righteousness is available “apart from the law”?

2. Universal Need, Universal Grace (vv. 23–24)

- All have sinned—no exceptions—and fall short of the glory of God.
- All who believe are justified freely by the grace offered in Jesus.

- What does it mean to be justified "freely by his grace"?
- How does understanding your guilt deepen your gratitude for the gospel?

3. The Cross as the Place of Justice and Justification (vv. 25–26)

- God offered Jesus as a sacrifice to demonstrate His righteousness.
- God remains just even as He justifies sinners through faith in Jesus.
- Why is it crucial that God did not ignore sin but dealt with it through Jesus?
- What does God's "divine forbearance" reveal about his nature?

4. No Boasting, Only Faith (vv. 27–31)

- Justification excludes boasting—faith, not works, is the means.
- God is the God of both Jews and Gentiles, justifying all by faith.
- The law is not nullified by faith but upheld through it.
- How does faith eliminate boasting? How does faith uphold the law?
- Why did the Protestant Reformation claim that Justification by faith alone "is the article by which the church stands or falls"?

Martin Luther, Lectures on Romans 3:22–24

The righteousness—that righteousness, I say, of God, from God, through faith in Jesus Christ (v. 22)—that is, the faith by which we believe in Jesus Christ Himself—is for all, both Jews and Gentiles. That is, to all, meaning it is manifested and offered to all.

Since all have sinned (v. 23)—have been made and declared to be sinners before God—and fall short of (that is, lack or are empty of) the glory of God, something they could boast about by and in God, as Paul says later in Romans 4:2: "He has something to boast about, but not before God."

They are justified as a gift (v. 24)—that is, all who are justified are justified freely, by His (God's) grace, without merit or works. This grace is given only through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.

Andrew Naselli, *Romans: A Concise Guide to the Greatest Letter Ever Written*

The righteous God presented Jesus as a propitiation. In Romans 3:21–22, "the righteousness of God" is what God gives—God's gift of a righteous status to sinful

people. In Romans 3:25–26, it refers to what God is—God’s *attribute* of being righteous or just.

According to Romans 3:25–26, the most significant problem of evil is the cross. We typically think of “the problem of evil” as the logical tension in the following three statements: (1) God is all-powerful and all-wise; (2) God is all-good; and (3) evil exists. Some skeptics claim that all three cannot be true at the same time. Theologians must grapple with that challenging problem. But when we focus on the problem of evil from our limited human-centered perspective, we do not think about the greatest problem of evil from God’s perspective. The most outrageous evil in human history is the murder of Jesus. Do we feel a doctrinal tension in these three statements? (1) God is holy and just; (2) humans are sinners who offend God’s holiness and deserve his just wrath; and (3) God forgives and justifies sinners. How can that be? Yet most people do not feel any tension with those statements. They flippantly think, *Of course that’s the way it is. God forgives people because that’s his job.* Paul explains in Romans 3:25–26 how Jesus solves the ultimate problem of evil.

“Propitiation” (Rom. 3:25) accurately translates the meaning of *hilastērion*, which refers to the *place* of atonement, “the mercy seat” (NET). The mercy seat for the old covenant is the gold plate that covered Israel’s ark of the covenant. It is where the high priest sprinkled blood each year on the Day of Atonement (cf. Heb. 9:5). Jesus is the mercy seat for the new covenant in the sense that he is the place where God accomplished the ultimate propitiation.

In the Greco-Roman world of Paul’s day, pagans would offer sacrifices to their gods to make the gods propitious or favorable. Their sacrifices were propitiations. But that parallel breaks down when we apply it to Jesus’s propitiation that made God the Father propitious, because God the Father himself sends Jesus, God the Son, to make the propitiation. Propitiation is the only biblical term related to God’s saving us for which God is both the subject and object. That is, God is the one who propitiates (i.e., he is the subject doing the propitiation), and God is the one who is propitiated (i.e., he is the object receiving the propitiation). God the Son is the propitiation, and God the Father is the propitiated. Jesus’s sacrificial death is the means (“by his blood,” Rom. 3:25) that propitiates the Father—that is, Jesus turns God’s wrath against us into favor. *Hilastērion* does not mean merely *expiation* (i.e., removing or wiping away sin) but *propitiation*, which includes expiation plus satisfying or appeasing God’s righteous wrath and turning it into favor.

Propitiation is “accessible through faith” alone (Rom. 3:25 NET).

God presented Jesus as a propitiation for two purposes:

Purpose 1: to demonstrate that God was righteous for leaving the sins committed before the cross unpunished (Rom. 3:25). How does God's forbearance in passing over former sins show his righteousness? Old Testament sacrifices were valid in God's mind based on Christ's future sacrifice. It is like how you buy an item on credit. When my vehicle needs more gas, I stop at a gas station and refuel. Rather than walking into the store to pay, I conveniently enter my credit card in a machine at the pump and fill up my gas tank. I do not pay any cash, but I still get the gas. How? I get the gas on credit. Within a month of filling up my tank, I receive a bill with the account payable to the credit card company. That is when I pay for what I borrowed *on credit*. That illustrates how God saved Old Testament believers on credit. Just like I enter my credit card in a machine, they offered sacrifices to God in faith. Just like I get the gas, they received genuine forgiveness of sin. Just like I receive a bill for the gas and pay it, Christ received their bill and paid their sin debt in full at the cross. Christ died publicly to demonstrate God's righteousness in saving Old Testament believers on credit.

Purpose 2: to demonstrate that God is righteous to declare that believing sinners are righteous (Rom. 3:26). Several years ago, I was talking to a relative who had just informed me that he no longer professed to be a Christian. One reason he gave for not embracing Christianity is that he thinks the doctrine of justification is immoral. I asked him if this illustration is what he means: *The gospel is like a judge who has a guilty person before him at the bar, and the judge pronounces the sentence. Then the judge steps back from the bench, takes off his robes, and goes down and takes the guilty person's place in prison or pays the fine.* My relative said yes—that is the concept he finds immoral. Then I surprised him by explaining why I agree the illustration is faulty. That illustration is not entirely wrong because it illustrates that Jesus substitutes for sinners. But it is misleading because in Western judicial systems, the judge must neutrally administer the law. The guilty person's offense is not against the judge. If the guilty person is guilty for harming the judge, then the judge must recuse himself from the case. Judges excuse themselves from a case because a possible conflict of interest calls into question their ability to judge impartially. The judge is not supposed to be the offended party. Criminals offend the state or the law or the republic or the crown—not the neutral judge. But not so with God. God is both the judge and the most offended party when people sin. He never recuses himself, and he is always just. The reason he can justly pronounce believing sinners to be innocent is that Jesus propitiates his righteous wrath. Justice is served.

Romans 4:1–25 (ESV)

May 25, 2025

4 What then shall we say was gained by Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh? ² For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. ³ For what does the Scripture say? “Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness.” ⁴ Now to the one who works, his wages are not counted as a gift but as his due. ⁵ And to the one who does not work but believes in him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness, ⁶ just as David also speaks of the blessing of the one to whom God counts righteousness apart from works:

⁷ “Blessed are those whose lawless deeds are forgiven,
and whose sins are covered;

⁸ blessed is the man against whom the Lord will not count his sin.”

⁹ Is this blessing then only for the circumcised, or also for the uncircumcised? For we say that faith was counted to Abraham as righteousness. ¹⁰ How then was it counted to him? Was it before or after he had been circumcised? It was not after, but before he was circumcised. ¹¹ He received the sign of circumcision as a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised. The purpose was to make him the father of all who believe without being circumcised, so that righteousness would be counted to them as well, ¹² and to make him the father of the circumcised who are not merely circumcised but who also walk in the footsteps of the faith that our father Abraham had before he was circumcised.

¹³ For the promise to Abraham and his offspring that he would be heir of the world did not come through the law but through the righteousness of faith. ¹⁴ For if it is the adherents of the law who are to be the heirs, faith is null and the promise is void. ¹⁵ For the law brings wrath, but where there is no law there is no transgression.

¹⁶ That is why it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his offspring—not only to the adherent of the law but also to the one who shares the faith of Abraham, who is the father of us all, ¹⁷ as it is written, “I have made you the father of many nations”—in the presence of the God in whom he believed, who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist. ¹⁸ In hope he believed against hope, that he should become the father of many nations, as he had been told, “So shall your offspring be.” ¹⁹ He did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body, which was as good as dead (since he was about a hundred years old), or when he considered the barrenness of Sarah’s womb. ²⁰ No unbelief made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, ²¹ fully convinced that God was

able to do what he had promised. ²² That is why his faith was “counted to him as righteousness.” ²³ But the words “it was counted to him” were not written for his sake alone, ²⁴ but for ours also. It will be counted to us who believe in him who raised from the dead Jesus our Lord, ²⁵ who was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification.

I. Introduction

To support his claim that righteousness comes through faith and not by works, Paul points to Abraham, the father of the Jewish people. Abraham was not justified by what he did but by trusting in God's promises. David too rejoiced in this kind of grace—forgiveness apart from works. Paul then shows that Abraham's faith was counted as righteousness before circumcision, proving that faith—not law or ritual—is the basis of justification for all who believe.

II. Exposition and Reflection

1. Abraham Justified by Faith, Not Works (vv. 1–8)

- Abraham had nothing to boast about before God; his righteousness came through faith.
 - David celebrates this blessing: the forgiveness of sins apart from works.
 - Why is Abraham such a fitting example for Paul's argument?
 - How does David's quote support the same truth about justification?
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2. Faith Before Circumcision (vv. 9–12)

- Abraham's righteousness was credited before he was circumcised.
 - He became the father of all who believe—both uncircumcised and circumcised—through faith.
 - Why is the timing of Abraham's justification important?
 - How does this passage challenge the idea that outward rituals secure righteousness?
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3. The Promise Comes by Faith, Not the Law (vv. 13–17)

- The promise to Abraham came not through law but through the righteousness of faith.
- The law brings wrath because no one can keep it perfectly.

- God's promise to Abraham is not limited to a piece of land but extends to inheritance of all creation.
- How does God's promise transcend human ability or effort?
- What does it mean that God "gives life to the dead" in the context of faith?

4. Abraham's Faith and Ours (vv. 18–25)

- Abraham hoped against hope, believing God's promise despite his old age.
- This faith was "counted to him as righteousness" and is the same kind of faith believers are called to have in Jesus.
- What does Abraham's example teach us about persevering faith?
- How is our faith in the risen Christ like Abraham's faith in God's promises?

F. F. Bruce, *Romans, Tyndale New Testament Commentary*

Abraham's acceptance with God was clearly not based on his works, good as they were. Paul's argument is not merely textual and verbal, dependent on a selection of Genesis 15:6 in preference to other texts from the patriarchal narrative which might have pointed in another direction. For Abraham's good works, his obedience to the divine commandments, were the fruit of his unquestioning faith in God; had he not first believed the promises of God he would never have set out for the promised land or conducted his life there in the light of what he knew of God's will. No; when God gave Abraham a promise (in the fulfilment of which, incidentally, the whole gospel was bound up), he simply took God at his word, and acted accordingly.

Now mark the difference, Paul goes on. When a man works for some reward, that reward is his due; when he simply puts his trust in God, it is by pure grace that his faith is reckoned to him for righteousness.

Douglas Moo, *A Theology of Paul and His Letters*

Paul's argument involves a simple logic: (1) a relationship based on "works" involves obligation; (2) God cannot be under obligation to any of his creatures; (3) therefore "works" cannot be the basis of our relationship with God.

The assumption Paul makes that enables this logic to work is that God always acts by grace, never being constrained by forces outside himself. Faith, then, because it is a matter of holding out our hands to receive God's gift (to use the imagery employed by both Luther and Calvin), aligns with grace—whereas works do not.

Matthew Barrett, *Raised for our Justification*

First, Paul believes that the resurrection is the fulfillment of God's covenant promises to Abraham. Paul's attention in Romans 4 to the nature of justifying faith in Abraham is anything but ahistorical. Set within the context of redemptive history—specifically, the covenantal nature of that history—Abraham's trust in God is not just another example of faith but rather the beginning of an age that will reach its fulfillment only with the coming of the Messiah. Paul hints at this future fulfillment with his global emphasis. Seemingly an insignificant detail, that Abraham's faith precedes his circumcision proves critical: "He received the sign of circumcision as a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised" (4:11). That order not only precludes justification by works of the law or by Jewish ritual but also sets the pattern for how all people, Jew and Gentile alike, are reconciled to God.

The promises of Abraham come not by Jewish requirements of the law but by faith alone, for Abraham himself was justified before circumcision had taken place (4:11-12).

Then comes Paul's unashamedly global emphasis: "For the promise to Abraham and his offspring that he would be heir of the world did not come through the law but through the righteousness of faith" (4:13). Abraham's becoming heir of the world, Paul goes on to explain, could find fulfillment in a soteriological structure based on nothing but *sola fide* (faith alone) (4:14, 16).

Notice that not only does Abraham himself depend on a gracious soteriology, but so, too, do his heirs, heirs who will come from all nations. The moment of justifying faith in Abraham's experience is not merely monumental for his own right standing with God; whether he knows it or not, it sets the pattern for anyone and everyone who will claim to be a child of Abraham. If his children must adhere to the law, then the promises to Abraham (and the nations he represents) are emptied of their power. Israel's history demonstrates that the people cannot keep the law, thereby forfeiting the promises. Instead, the covenant promises must stem from a father whose status depends on "the righteousness of faith" (4:13). For if by faith, then anyone, of any nation, can become a child of Abraham simply by trusting in those same covenant promises. Faith, not works of the law, is the only program that can guarantee that the promises of the covenant will one day become a reality; it is the only guarantee that Abraham will be the father of many nations.