

UNDERSTANDING ROMANS 3:21-26

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Jesus ordered his followers to make disciples of all the nations by telling the world the good news of salvation (Matt 28:18-19). The epistle to the Roman church, especially the its central text of Romans 3:21-26,¹ describes the details of that good news. These six verses will be investigated by looking at the authorship, date of writing, and textual context of the passage. Once examined, the evangelistic message is revealed, teaching that man, who is completely sinful, is granted salvation through faith as a gift from God; man's work does nothing to save him.

Authorship, Date of Writing, and Purpose

The author identifies himself in the first verse as Paul (1:1). Scholars have narrowed the date of writing to within one to two years,² believing he wrote the letter between A.D. 57-58.³ There is little agreement regarding the exact purpose of the letter, except that Paul desired to teach the Roman church his theology before his arrival.⁴ In

¹Robert H. Mounce, *Romans*, New American Commentary, vol. 37 (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1995), 37.

²D. A. Carson and Douglas J. Moo, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 394.

³Henry Halley, *Halley's Bible Handbook*, 25th ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 762.

⁴Mounce, *Romans*, 26-27.

total, though, scholars propose eight purposes.⁵ Despite the lack of clarity on the central purpose, Romans is ripe with theological teaching.

Contextual Structure

The precise structure differs with each commentator, though most agree on a basic organization of the text.⁶ The agreed upon structure will be presented here. Paul introduces himself and the letter in 1:1-1:17, with verses 16-17 providing the thesis. Next, Paul discusses the sinfulness of man from 1:18-3:20. The next passage, 3:21-5:21, deals with righteousness and justification through faith. The text under investigation falls within the third section, focusing on how man is deemed righteous and is justified.

Righteousness through Faith: Verses 21-26

Following the passages dealing with the depravity of man—especially 3:9-20, which show the extent and scope of sin—and God’s wrath against sin (Rom 1:18; 2:5), Paul answers the question of how to avoid the wrath of God.

Verse 21. The phrase *νυνὶ δὲ* introduces a new era, or epoch of salvation, moving from the era of the Law, as seen with the phrase *χωρὶς νόμου*, to the epoch of

⁵James D. G. Dunn, *Romans 1-8*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol 38a (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1988), lv-lviii. Carson and Moo, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, 403-07. Halley, *Halley's Bible Handbook*, 762. Dunn mentions three purposes, Carson and Moo state the exact purpose is debated, mentioning at least four, and Halley emphasizes only one. All three agree that teaching theology to the Roman church was one purpose of the letter, though none agree on the primary purpose.

⁶William Sanday and Arthur C. Headlam, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, 5th ed. International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh, England: T&T Clark, 1980), xlvi-l. Mounce, *Romans*, 26-27. Dunn, *Romans 1-8*, 50. Grant R. Osborne, *Romans*, InterVarsity Press New Testament Commentary Series, vol. 6 (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 25. W. E. Best, *A Comprehensive View of Romans* (Houston: W. E. Best Book Missionary Trust, 1992), 5-6. Sanday and Headlam, Mounce, and Dunn agree on the structure used in this report. Osborne uses the structure of 1:18-3:20 and 3:21-5:11. Best sees the structure as 1:18-3:20 and 3:21-8:38, with the second section broken down as 3:21-4:25 and 5:1-8:38.

Christ. Ἐωρίς is Hellenistic for ‘without’⁷ and νόμος likely refers to the Mosaic Law,⁸ though Paul may have the whole Torah in mind.⁹ Robert Mounce discounts the temporal shift, seeing ‘but now’ as introducing the answer to the problem addressed in the preceding verses.¹⁰ Either way, Paul teaches that righteousness cannot be earned, but is a gift from God through Christ.

Paul’s phrase ‘the righteousness of God’ refers to righteousness given to man by God rather than the attribute of righteousness. This is shown by juxtaposing δικαιοσύνη θεοῦ with χωρίς νόμου.¹¹ Such an understanding of the righteousness of God originated with Augustine and gained fuller force with Martin Luther.¹² The Torah, referred to as the ‘Law and the Prophets,’ prepared the way for God to reveal his righteousness through the incarnation, death, and resurrection of Christ.¹³ This verse, put simply, says that God has now made known the way that sinful man obtains righteousness, just as predicted by the Torah.

⁷Dunn, *Romans 1-8*, 164-65.

⁸Akio Ito, “Nomos (Tōn) Ergōn and Nomos Pisteōs: The Pauline Rhetoric and the Theology of Nomos,” *Novum Testamentum* 45 (2003): 256. Dunn, *Romans 1-8*, 164-65. Dunn sees νόμος referring to practices that distinguish Jews from Gentiles, including circumcision and the Mosaic Law.

⁹Heikki Räisänen, *Jesus, Paul and the Torah: Collected Essays*, trans. David E. Orton (Sheffield, England: JSOT Press, 1992), 59. Räisänen mentions eight Hellenistic uses of νόμος by Paul.

¹⁰Mounce, *Romans*, 113.

¹¹Dunn, *Romans 1-8*, 165.

¹²Sinclair B. Ferguson, David F. Wright, and J. I. Packer, eds., *New Dictionary of Theology* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1988), s.v. “Righteousness.”

¹³Osborne, *Romans*, 92-93. The phrase “Law and the Prophets” is idiomatic of the whole Torah. See Matt 11:13, Luke 9:30; 16:16, and Acts 24:14 for similar uses. See Jer 31:31-34 and Heb 8:8-12 for references on the Torah preparing the way for Christ as God’s revelation.

Verse 22a. Although there is little controversy over most of this verse, much disagreement exists over the phrase πίστεως Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ. Literally, this reads ‘faith of Jesus Christ,’ which is the rendering used in the King James Version. Nevertheless, many modern translations render it ‘faith in Jesus Christ,’ reading it as an objective genitive, rather than a subjective genitive. The primary arguments for the subjective reading are that (1) it eliminates redundancy with εἰς πάντας τοὺς πιστεύοντας, (2) eliminates grammatical problems, (3) God is revealing the way he makes man righteous, and (4) it creates a formal balance between this phrase and the thesis of 1:17.¹⁴ However, this view stems from the Catholic doctrine that God makes man righteous rather than declaring man righteous, as seen in the third argument mentioned above.

The arguments for the objective reading are (1) God declares man righteous,¹⁵ a doctrine that is intimately related to justification;¹⁶ (2) it fits the context of 3:21-5:21; (3) from 3:21-4:25, faith is spoken of seventeen times as belief in Christ;¹⁷ (4) Abraham’s faith in God, not Christ’s, is the example given to believers in chapter 4; and (5) the repetition with ‘all those who believe’ gives emphasis to the necessity of faith.¹⁸ Therefore, one sees that this verse teaches realized eschatology. God declares righteous all those who believe in Christ, who is the revelation of God’s gift of righteousness.

¹⁴Luke Timothy Johnson, “Rom 3:21-26 and the Faith of Jesus,” *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 44 (January 1982): 78-79.

¹⁵Ferguson, Wright, and Packer, *New Dictionary of Theology*, s.v. “Righteousness.”

¹⁶*Ibid.*, s.v. “Justification.”

¹⁷Osborne, *Romans*, 93-94.

¹⁸Dunn, *Romans 1-8*, 166.

Verses 22b-23. The last phrase of verse 22 and all of verse 23 are best taken as a single unit. Together, they answer the question as to why all who believers are declared righteous.¹⁹ Righteousness is given universally to all believers, whether Jew or Gentile, because all have sinned and have lost the majestic, visible splendor that is the glory of God.²⁰ This passage teaches that all humanity is equally sinful and that salvation is equally available to all who believe in Christ.

Verse 24. The understanding of three words in this passage, δικαιοῦμενοι, δωρεάν, and ἀπολυτρώσεως, affect how one understands Paul's teaching on the atonement. The first, δικαιοῦμενοι, denotes a legal declaration of being just or "to render a favorable verdict."²¹ This means that God does not make the person righteous or just, but declares them just despite their guilt; they are free from punishment. The second, δωρεάν, means a gift freely given without cause or warrant.²² In other words, man's justification is given undeservedly by God rather than earned. The third, ἀπολυτρώσεως, means to release from captivity, often after paying a ransom.²³ This means that God paid a price to release man from sin and that price was Jesus Christ's death on the cross. This verse emphasizes that

¹⁹Mounce, *Romans*, 115.

²⁰Sanday and Headlam, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, 84-85. Τῆς δόξης possess two uses: one of opinion or reputation and the other of the visible brightness or splendor of God. Paul has the second in mind here, which comes from the Septuagint translation of the Hebrew דְּבָרָה. God is restoring that glory, with some of it experienced now (realized eschatology) and the full glory to be restored in the future (consummated eschatology).

²¹Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, ed. and trans. William F. Arndt, F. Wilber Gingrich, and Frederick W. Danker [BAGD], 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), s.v. "δικαιόω."

²²BAGD, s.v. "δωρεάν."

²³BAGD, s.v. "ἀπολύτρωσις."

man's salvation is a free gift from God that, although cost man nothing, cost God his own son. As a result, we belong to God (cf. 1 Cor 6:19-20).

Verse 25.²⁴ Debate regarding this verse surrounds the word ἱλαστήριον. This word is translated by some as 'propitiation' and others as 'expiation.' One's understanding of the nature of the atonement and the translation of this verse are directly related. It is difficult to determine when the text influences theology or vice versa, especially since the word includes both aspects.²⁵ In Hellenistic literature, ἱλαστήριον was "that which serves as an instrument for regaining the goodwill of a deity."²⁶ Since both are viable translations, one must look at context to determine which sense, if either, is emphasized.

On the one hand, James Dunn argues that the idea of 'propitiation' evokes the idea of appeasing an angry God. Further, he notes that in Hebrew usage, God is never appeased and that, as Paul uses it, God is the one who is providing the ἱλαστήριον, not man. Therefore, atoning is the removal of sin and, therefore, the term should be translated 'expiation.'²⁷ On the other hand, Thomas Schreiner points to Romans 1:18 and 2:5, which mention the wrath of God. He also notes that 1:18-3:20 discusses how man is

²⁴Räsänen, *Jesus, Paul and the Torah: Collected Essays*, 184-85. Verses 24-25 are seen as a Hellenistic formula originating in the Antiochian church. The idea of a salvific sacrifice stems from blending Jewish teachings from 4 Macc regarding Jewish martyrs and Greek philosophy.

²⁵Thomas R. Schreiner, "Penal Substitution View," in *The Nature of the Atonement*, eds. James Beilby and Paul R. Eddy (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 87.

²⁶BAGD, s.v. "ἱλαστήριον." Sanday and Headlam, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, 87-88. It is often mentioned that this term references the "mercy seat" being sprinkled with blood on the Day of Atonement. However, Sanday and Headlam point out that this practice was never done in public view while Christ's sacrifice was put on public display. Therefore, while there are allusions to the mercy seat, the connection is secondary at best.

²⁷James D. G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1998), 214-15.

under the wrath of God, raising the question of how one avoids God's wrath. This verse answers that question by revealing that Jesus' death satisfies God's wrath.²⁸ Along those lines, Wayne Grudem defines propitiation as the changing of wrath toward us into favor.²⁹

More evidence for propitiation is also found in the phrases following ἰλαστήριον. The verb πάρεσιν means to 'let go unpunished' rather than 'overlook' or 'disregard.'³⁰ God's justice may have come under question because much sin went unpunished (cf. Eccl 7:15; 8:14). Therefore, God offered Christ's death as a public display of his justice by sending Christ as a propitiation. God chose not to express his wrath against all sins in the past, but stored up his anger and wrath against those sins until the cross. At the cross, God's fury was unleashed.³¹ This verse emphasizes that righteousness and freedom from wrath are available to those who believe in Christ because Jesus' death satisfies God's eternal justice.³²

Verse 26. The first half of this verse continues the thought from the second half of the preceding verse, adding an eschatological tone to the atonement with the phrase τῷ νῦν καιρῷ. God provides righteousness now, but that righteousness is not

²⁸Schreiner, "Penal Substitution View," 87.

²⁹Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 575.

³⁰Dunn, *Romans 1-8*, 173.

³¹Grudem, 575.

³²George Eldon Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*, Rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1993), 466. Ladd notes that in order to redeem, God's wrath must first be appeased, making expiation and justice available to those who believe in Christ.

fully experienced until the resurrection, emphasizing realized and consummated eschatology respectively.³³

The phrase δίκαιον καὶ δικαιοῦντα τὸν ἐκ πίστεως Ἰησοῦ emphasizes that God is righteous and, therefore, declares believers righteous. In other words, Paul offers a summation of this passage by showing that God’s declaration of righteousness flows from his righteousness.³⁴ The conjunction καὶ serves intensively, which can be rendered ‘even when.’ Put simply, it shows that God’s righteousness is both “essential” in that he is just and “relational” in that he justifies.³⁵ The teaching of this verse, then, is a summary that those who believe in Christ can have assurance that they are declared righteous before God, despite their sin, because the righteous God satisfied his wrath against sin and saves those who believe.

Conclusion

Paul provides a description of the message of evangelism: God provides the way for whoever believes in Christ to be saved. After spending most of three chapters elaborating on God’s wrath and man’s total depravity, Paul offers these six verses of hope. From the beginning of time, God’s plan was for Christ to die to pay the price man owes, but cannot pay. As a result, God is able to declare man righteous and justified, despite his wretchedness. However, this salvation is available only through faith. Neither works nor lineage will save. Rather, it is through faith in Jesus that one is saved.

³³Dunn, *Romans 1-8*, 175.

³⁴Sanday and Headlam, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, 90-91.

³⁵Osborne, *Romans*, 99-100.

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