

## “The Guts of the Gospel” (Romans 3:21–26)

Imagine it’s Sunday morning and you’re seated in church anticipating the sermon. Suddenly, a man begins frantically canvassing the auditorium offering a life jacket to whoever would take it. Eventually, he approaches you with it. What would you do? You’d probably think he was nuts and turn it down, right? At best, you might politely accept it while yawning internally at your need for it. But, if you were on a sinking ship in the middle of the ocean, you’d lunge forward and grab that same life jacket as if your life depended upon it.

We’ve spent five sermons working through a section titled “Sin” that spanned Rom 1:18–3:20. These sixty-four verses contain nothing but the bad news that we’re utterly unrighteous. Paul has constructed an airtight case that every creature that has ever lived, or will ever live, is leveled under the weight of sin. The inescapable conclusion is that we’re not only guilty; we’re absolutely helpless and hopeless. In other words, we’re born into this world enslaved to sin on a sinking ship. God holds out a life jacket to us, but until we become convinced that our plight is truly desperate we’ll never joyously and tenaciously grab hold of what’s being offered to us. The intent of God in clearly exposing our sinfulness isn’t to make us feel bad—it’s to make us feel desperate! Desperate enough to wrestle with the question of the ages: “How can a person be righteous before God?” (Job 9:2)

Of course, a great chasm lies between Rom 3:20 and 3:21. It’s a deep canyon, a wide gap separating our condition and God’s character. We’re sinful and God is holy. How can we bridge the gap? How can we go from one side to the other? We can’t. But this is where the good news begins: Paul informs us in 3:21–26<sup>1</sup> that *God does what we cannot do*. This is not only the heart of Romans;<sup>2</sup> it’s likely the greatest paragraph in the entire Bible. Therefore, if we fail to understand this passage accurately, we’ll be unable to grasp the central message of the Scriptures. For it’s here that we see who we are, who God is, and what God has done for us.<sup>3</sup> If there’s one passage of Scripture to become an expert on, let it be Rom 3:21–26. Before you spend lots of time looking for principles in the Bible on career success and personal affluence, before scouring the text for ideas on how to change your wife, your husband, your kids, your parents, your pastor, and your church, look at Rom 3:21–26.<sup>4</sup> Meditate on it. Study it. It will change your life! In these six verses, Paul reveals three ways that God’s righteousness bridges the gap between our sin and Himself.<sup>5</sup>

**1. God’s righteousness is revealed in His Word (3:21).** Despite our inability to obey the Law, God’s salvation can be found in the Old Testament Scriptures. In 3:21 Paul writes, **“But now apart from the Law the righteousness of God has been manifested, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets.”** “But now,” two words made up of three letters each, serve as the hinge pin for the fate of humanity.<sup>7</sup> After sixty-four verses of sin, you’re probably in need of some relief, aren’t you? How do you spell relief? Years ago, the answer was: R-O-L-A-I-D-S. But in this context it is “B-U-T N-O-W!” These two words signify that a “righteousness<sup>8</sup> of God” has inaugurated a new age in world history. Unlike the first revelation of the “righteousness of God” that condemns us (cf. 1:17), this revelation frees us!<sup>9</sup> In this context, the “righteousness of God” primarily refers to God’s activity in salvation; He provides righteousness for people who need it. The “righteousness of God” has inaugurated a new age that is “apart from the Law.”<sup>10</sup> This is only fitting because righteousness has never been able to be obtained through obedience to the Law (cf. 3:19–20). We have been so infected by sin that we cannot heal ourselves. No one can purge his or her body of cancer by eating healthy food. Shunning cancer-generating toxins is a good way to avoid contracting the disease, but once someone has it, a cure demands radical action. Unfortunately, we were born with the disease of sin.<sup>11</sup> But there is another way God makes His righteousness known, and it is apart from the Law.<sup>12</sup> Once again we see that *God does what we cannot do*.

The righteousness of God has been “manifested, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets.”<sup>13</sup> This phrase declares that God’s righteousness has been “manifested” through His Word. The root word “manifested” (*phaneroo*) is used back in 1:19 where Paul writes that God has made Himself “evident” to humanity through His creation. Now Paul states that God has revealed Himself through His Word. The phrase “the Law and the Prophets” is a summary term for the entire Old Testament. “The Law” referred to the first five books of Moses and “the Prophets” to everything else.<sup>14</sup> The primary purpose of the entire Old Testament was to point to “the righteousness of God” that would one day be fully manifested in Christ. This very phrase was used in the theological theme of 1:16–17 where Hab 2:4 is quoted. Paul’s point is that the revelation of “the righteousness of God” isn’t some new phenomenon. Only in the death of Christ is there anything new or unique. God’s righteousness has always been revealed in His Word. Therefore, if you want to know who God is and what He’s like, you must know His Word. I cannot emphasize this enough. Many people have developed erroneous views of God based upon faulty thoughts or emotions. Often, I will hear: “Well, I think God is” or “God would never . . .” Whenever I hear someone saying these kinds of things, I cringe. Why? Because God’s ways are *not* our ways and His thoughts are *not* our thoughts.<sup>15</sup> So when it comes to the knowledge of God and how we can be right with Him, the Bible refers us to the witness of the Old Testament Scriptures.

Do you call yourself a “New Testament Christian” and avoid the Old Testament at all costs? If so, you’re missing out on God’s full revelation. Why not balance your diet of Bible reading with healthy portions of the Old Testament? My personal commitment is to alternate between the New Testament and Old Testament. This ensures that I’m always keeping the whole counsel of God’s Word before me. This also helps me to be an accurate Bible interpreter. After all, the only way to truly understand the New Testament is by knowing the Old Testament. May you and I see the promised Messiah and His plan of salvation in the Old Testament.

[Not only is God’s righteousness revealed in His Word, in 3:22–24 we’ll also see that . . .]

**2. God’s righteousness is revealed in His grace (3:22–24).** God’s plan of salvation is by grace through faith in Jesus Christ. Paul writes in 3:22a that “**the righteousness of God**” is revealed “**through faith in Jesus Christ**<sup>16</sup> **for all those who believe.**”<sup>17</sup> He uses the noun “faith” (*pistis*) and the verb “believe” (*pisteuo*) to emphasize the sole condition of “God’s righteousness” (i.e., salvation). There are almost two hundred verses that use the words “believe” or “faith” as the sole condition of salvation. However, we must recognize that we’re saved “through” (*dia*) faith, not “by” faith. Faith is merely the means. What is important is the object of our faith—Jesus Christ! If we have the right object, the amount of our faith is not what is important. This means “all” are welcome who will simply believe in Christ. While Christians are often charged with being narrow and restrictive, it’s really all other religions that are narrow and restrictive. If good works are necessary to heaven, then all of us are excluded. In these systems, everyone is disqualified. Under the Christian faith, “all” can come, regardless of their background and past failures.<sup>18</sup> The only condition is simple belief. Let me be clear: When you come to Christ, you do not come to give, you come to receive. You do not come to try your best, you come to trust. You do not come just to be helped, but to be rescued. You do not come to be made better, you come to be made alive!<sup>19</sup> *God does what we cannot do.*

Robert Chesebrough believed in his product. He’s the man who invented Vaseline. He so believed in his own product that he became his own guinea pig. He burned himself with acid and flame; he cut himself and scratched himself so often and so deeply that he bore the scars from his tests for the rest of his life. But, he proved his product worked. People only had to look at the scars from his healed wounds to see the value of his work and the extent of his belief.<sup>20</sup> The gospel is looking at God’s Son and the price He paid for our sins and believing His work alone can take us to heaven.

It's essential that we believe in Christ because we have a sin problem. Once again, Paul returns to the topic of sin. (Apparently, he didn't feel that sixty-four verses [1:18–3:20] were sufficient. He enjoys waxing eloquent on the doctrine of sin.) He understands that the good news is only good news if we recognize how bad the bad news is.<sup>21</sup> Although a person can be saved without fully comprehending the depth of the bad news, one can never fully appreciate the gift of salvation unless he or she has come to recognize the wickedness of sin. It is worth noting that the last part of 3:22 and all of 3:23 may be read as a parenthesis: (**“for there is no distinction; for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God”**). One can, therefore, read from 3:22b to 3:24 omitting the parenthetical thought (“for all those who believe . . . being justified as a gift . . .”). Paul states in 3:22b that “there is no distinction.” This verse clearly condemns humankind—“there is no distinction”—we're all sinners. In 3:23, the word “for” (*gar*) gives the reason for Paul's insistence that there's no distinction: “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” In other words, we have all committed acts of personal sin.<sup>22</sup> To “fall short” (present tense) speaks of continually lacking the glory of God.<sup>23</sup> The biblical concept of sin is any failure to glorify God. It's missing what God wants in our lives.<sup>24</sup>

Eric Wilson is a seventeen-year-old in our congregation. He is a nearly 6'4" basketball player, or as I prefer, a “basketball acrobat,” who can jump through the gym. This past Sunday after church we were hanging out in the foyer and Eric was showing me his hops. He was able to touch an 11'6" mark. He can sky far above me. He dunks on opposing players in traffic going down the lane! My vertical leap, on the other hand, has shrunk to being able to leap over a credit card. As impressive as Eric's vertical leap may be, if the goal is to touch the sky, Eric and I have both missed the mark and both fall short of where we need to be. Whether you are less of a sinner than someone else is not the issue. The issue is that no matter how well you might have lived, you have fallen short of God's standard of perfection.<sup>25</sup>

Paul is now ready to return to good news. In 3:24 he writes that those who have believed (cf. 3:22) are **“being justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus.”** This is such an important verse that we must tear it apart word by word. First, let's consider the word “justified.” Justification is the doctrine for which Romans is most famous—and rightly so. Paul uses some form of the verb “justify” fifteen times in Romans.<sup>26</sup> Justification is a legal term that means “to declare righteous.”<sup>27</sup> On account of the person and work of Jesus Christ, we are declared as good as God. Justification is both *instantaneous* and *irreversible*. The moment we believe in Jesus Christ, we're on the other side of judgment day. Since God always keeps His Word this declaration is eternal. In television programs such as CSI and NCIS there are people who gather what is called forensic evidence, which is used at trial in criminal cases. Forensics has to do with judicial judgment or declaration. Here, Paul shows us that in the act of justification God makes a judicial declaration about a person's status *before* He makes His judgment.<sup>28</sup> The person who believes in Jesus receives all the benefits of His person and work.

It may help if we further expose what justification is not. (1) *Justification is not forgiveness*. It's more than forgiveness. While forgiveness is part of it, it's not all of it. If a teacher cancels out an “F” you got on an exam, that's forgiveness. However, if your teacher declares your “F” to be an “A+” that is the equivalent of what it means to be justified. (2) *Justification is not a pardon*. It's more than a pardon. A pardon covers sins of the past. No judge has ever issued a pardon for future crimes. Justification deals with the sins of the past, present, and the future. (3) *Justification is not a return to innocence*. It's not “just as if I'd never sinned.” It's a state of righteousness, not innocence. The fact that we've sinned and continue to fall short is the basis for the greatness of what God has done in justification. It's important to know that this takes place as a transaction. It is not a process. I am not gradually being justified in the hopes that some day I will be fully justified. The death of Christ took place at a point in time, and my justification takes place at a point in time (cf. 1 Cor 6:11). *God does what we cannot do*. Secondly, Paul goes on to write that we're justified “as a gift.” This is one of the most astonishing truths in the entire Bible. Justification is a free gift! The word translated “gift” (*dorea*) can also be translated

“freely” (NET; HCSB; NIV; NKJV)<sup>29</sup> or “for nothing.”<sup>30</sup> In John 15:25, this same word is used when it’s said that Jesus was hated “without a cause.” There was nothing in Jesus that deserved hatred, and there’s nothing in us that deserves salvation. The idea of “freely,” reaches back to Paul’s comment in 3:21 about the righteousness of God being revealed apart from the Law. We cannot do, nor are we required to do—in fact, we are forbidden to do—good works in the hope of earning salvation.<sup>31</sup> Justification comes only to those who exercise naked faith (i.e., empty-handed faith).<sup>32</sup>

One ad for the U.S. Marines Corp pictures a sword, and beneath it the words: “Earned, never given.” If you want to become a Marine, be prepared to earn that slogan through sacrifice, hardship, and training. If you get it, you deserve it. But if you want to become a Christian, you must have the exact opposite attitude, for the message of the gospel is: “Given, never earned.” You cannot save your own soul, and God will not save anyone who tries to earn salvation, but only those who will humbly receive it as a free gift through faith in Jesus Christ. If you get it, you absolutely didn’t deserve it.<sup>33</sup>

Thirdly, Paul also states that our salvation is solely “by His grace.”<sup>34</sup> Grace is a giant step beyond mercy. Mercy is not getting what we deserve (i.e., death, hell). Grace is receiving what we don’t deserve (e.g., eternal life, heaven). “Grace” (*charis*) means God’s undeserved favor or that which God gives us which we don’t deserve. It’s a gift that sets aside all human merit. It doesn’t simply give us a hand, it gives us a resurrection. Grace is all one-sided.<sup>35</sup> I like the old acronym: Grace is “God’s Riches At Christ’s Expense.” The reason you and I have salvation is on account of God’s grace. It’s because of Jesus—it’s all about His person and work. *God does what we cannot do.*

Fourthly, Paul continues his thought by further explaining that this gift came “through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus.” The word “redemption” (*apolutrosis*) is a term that was used in the slave trade in Paul’s day. It pictures the release of a slave by the paying of a price.<sup>36</sup> Since all people were “under” sin (cf. 3:9) and condemned by the Law (cf. 3:19–20), God the Father chose to offer a solution to our predicament. He sent Jesus to die on the cross for our sins and pay our ransom. Christ’s person and work paid the price for our sin and the debt was canceled. We have been set free, if we will only believe.<sup>37</sup>

A boy once captured two little birds and put them in a cage. A man saw the boy carrying the cage and asked him what he was going to do with the birds. The boy replied, “Oh, I’m going to play with them for a while and then I’m going to feed them to my cat.” The man looked at the caged birds and took pity on them. He said, “I’d like to buy the cage and the birds from you. How much do you want for them?” The boy thought for a minute and then named his price. The man paid it and the boy handed over the cage. Immediately, the man opened the cage and set the birds free. That’s what Jesus did for us. Satan had us caged up in our sin and was going to feed us into the jaws of eternal death. But Jesus Christ purchased us and set us free.<sup>38</sup>

Rom 3:22–24 are three of the most important verses in the entire Bible. In these verses, we learned that God’s righteousness (i.e., His salvation) is made available to those who will simply believe (3:22a). Salvation is faith alone in Christ alone. Paul further expounds on salvation by explaining that we have been justified (i.e., declared righteous, 3:24). He calls salvation a gift of grace. He even uses the picture of redemption to demonstrate that we were held captive to sin, but Jesus Christ has paid our ransom and released us from our captivity. *God does what we cannot do.* In fact, He has already done the work; it is ours for the taking.

[God’s righteousness has been revealed in His Word and in His grace, but now we’ll see . . .]

**3. God’s righteousness is revealed in His justice (3:25–26).** How can God maintain His justice while forgiving unjust sinners? Paul explains in 3:25: “. . . **God displayed [Jesus] publicly as a propitiation<sup>39</sup> in His blood through faith**” [or better “through faith in His blood,” NIV]. The word “propitiation”

(*hilasterion*) refers to the satisfaction of God's righteous anger, so that He can now deal with us graciously.<sup>40</sup> It's a sacrifice which takes away wrath—a wrath quencher, which satisfies God's anger.<sup>41</sup> Although God is merciful, gracious, and compassionate, He is also righteous, wrathful, and just. He can't lower His righteous standard. He can't just wink His eye with the attitude, "Boys will be boys," or, "Let's let bygones be bygones."<sup>42</sup> God must judge sin. He has done so by nailing every sin (past, present, and future) on His Son. Hence, God's wrath, His holy anger, has been appeased by the death of Jesus Christ on the cross. Salvation is infinitely costly to the Father and the Son, but absolutely free to you and me.

If you still struggle with this concept, consider that God's intolerance toward sin is like the intolerance of a surgeon who insists on sterile instruments for an operation. A surgeon's demand for a pure operating environment is not an angry reaction to the presence of bacteria. Rather, it is an inseparable part of being a surgeon. To expose the surgeon's scalpel to bacteria would result in contamination, and you would not get upset that your surgeon insists on absolute cleanliness in the operating room where even a speck of dirt could lead to infection. You would insist on absolute purity under those conditions. You would demand that your surgeon be completely intolerant of any impurity. If you understand a surgeon's "wrath" against contamination in a hospital operating room, you can understand God's wrath against sin. God is perfect and sinless in every detail, and His character demands that He deal with the slightest contamination of sin. God also knows that sin leads to total corruption and infection, so for these reasons He must judge sin.<sup>43</sup>

In 3:25, Paul indicates that this act of propitiation was **"to demonstrate His righteousness, because in the forbearance<sup>44</sup> of God He passed over the sins previously committed."** Although the death of Christ for the sins of humankind was planned in eternity past and prophesied in the Old Testament, it didn't become an earthly reality until almost 2,000 years ago. Therefore, Old Testament believers were forgiven on account of what was about to happen but hadn't happened yet. God didn't revoke the punishment for sin, He suspended the punishment.<sup>45</sup> We could say, "Old Testament justification was through faith in the promised Savior; NT justification is through faith in the provided Savior."<sup>46</sup> Old Testament believers looked forward to what God would someday do; believers today look back at what Christ has already done.<sup>47</sup> Prior to the cross, Old Testament believers were in paradise "on credit" (i.e., their sins had not yet been paid historically, even though they received some of the benefits from their faith. The same thing happens when we purchase something with a credit card and enjoy possessing the purchased item, even though we have not paid for it yet). God's righteousness was shown at the cross in that God righteously judged and punished every last sin that man has committed or will ever commit. The cross is and always will be the center point and the focal point of all history.

Verse 26 tells us that God provided salvation **"for the demonstration, I say, of His righteousness at the present time, so that He would be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus."** God the Father demonstrated His righteous character through the cross of Jesus Christ. The words "just" (*dikaios*) and "justifier" (*dikaioo*) are both renderings of the root term for righteous. God has revealed His justice through the cross. We deserved death and hell—that would have been justice. But instead of getting what we deserve, we were not given what we deserve. That is mercy! But God has gone one step further as we saw in 3:24. He's given us grace, which is receiving what we don't deserve—the free gift of eternal life. This is the gospel! God has acted with justice by slaying His Son, but He also acted as the Justifier by allowing us to be set free from our sin by trusting in Jesus. What a God! What a Savior! There is no one else like our God! He has created and orchestrated a sovereign plan that you and I would never have come up with. To Him be the glory! *God does what we cannot do.*

But how can all this heavy-duty theology be fleshed out in our lives? Let's review this passage and consider three applications. (1) When we present the gospel, we must always remember to emphasize sin (1:18–3:20). Unless we recognize how bad the bad news truly is, we won't sense a need for a Savior. The good news of the gospel (3:21–26) isn't truly good news until we first deal with the bad news. (2) We

need to begin to see fellow believers as those who have been “justified” by God. I rarely think this way about others. It’s easy to see the faults and idiosyncrasies in other people. Yet this passage teaches that fellow believers have been declared righteous and are now seen by the Father through the blood of Jesus Christ. (3) We must be sure to present an accurate gospel. This means we must understand the words and the central message of 3:21–26. If we do, we’ll have a proper understanding of God’s righteousness and the free gift of salvation. *God does what we cannot do.*

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### **Scripture References**

Romans 3:21–26

Romans 1:16–17

Romans 8:33–34

Job 9:2

John 6:35, 40, 47

Hebrews 2:17

1 John 2:2; 4:10

### **Study Questions**

1. Why is the righteousness of God repeated four times in this section (Romans 3:21, 22, 25, 26)? How is the righteousness of God revealed in the Old Testament (3:21a)? Where have I seen the righteousness of God expressed most clearly? How would I explain God's righteousness to someone?
2. Why is sin such an important concept in understanding and appreciating the gospel (Romans 3:22b–23)? Do I feel more lovable and closer to God when I've been doing good things than when I've done wrong? How can I place my trust more actively in Jesus' death than in my own performance?
3. Why is the phrase "justified as a gift by His grace" so significant (Romans 3:24)? How do we tend to use the word "justification"? How does Paul? How would I define it? Why does Paul include the concept of "gift" in his discussion of salvation? How would I explain the concept of salvation as a gift?
4. How is the word "propitiation" used in the New Testament (Romans 3:25a; cf. Heb. 2:17; 1 John 2:2; 4:10)? What word or phrase would I choose to simplify the translation of this word? How can I help others understand and appreciate the nature of God's wrath?
5. What does the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross prove about God (Romans 3:25b–26)? Why is the cross so central to Christianity? How can I grow in my appreciation for the cross? This week will I make a commitment to spend time responding in adoration, love, and praise for the cross?

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> A few scholars see Rom 3:21–26 as a section. E.g., Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*. New International Commentary of the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 218–43; Christopher Ash, *Teaching Romans, Volume 1* (London: Proclamation of Trust, 2009), 137–51.

<sup>2</sup> Martin Luther said Rom 3:21–26 is the center of the epistle [Romans] and of all the NT.

<sup>3</sup> Ash, *Teaching Romans*, 147 rightly notes, “This paragraph [Rom 3:21–26] is not about me and my salvation but rather about God and His reputation.”

<sup>4</sup> Brad McCoy, “The Heart of Romans” (Rom 3:21–26): Tanglewood Bible Fellowship Notes.

<sup>5</sup> Ash, *Teaching Romans*, 140–41 makes three observations about this text. (1) The central idea of the paragraph is the righteousness of God. The paragraph is about God before it is about us. (2) The emphasis of this paragraph is on the public revelation of God’s righteousness. We see this in five places: In 3:21 the righteousness of God has been manifested; and 3:21 the Law and the Prophets testify to it; in 3:25 God put forward Christ and the public display; in 3:25 God did this to demonstrate his righteousness; and in 3:26 he repeats 3:25. (3) The righteousness of God comes through the faith of Jesus Christ 3:22; the redemption that is in Christ Jesus 3:24; it comes by his propitiation 3:25; and it comes to the one based on the faith of Jesus 3:26.

<sup>6</sup> The definite article (“the”) is not present in the Greek text. However, most English versions have included it because the translators understand this use of *nomos* (“law”) to be a reference to the Mosaic Law.

<sup>7</sup> Lloyd-Jones claims that “there are no more wonderful words in the whole of Scripture than just these two words ‘But now.’” See D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *An Exposition of Chapters 3.20-4.25 Atonement and Justification* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1971), 25.

<sup>8</sup> “Righteousness” is an important word in Romans, appearing thirty–seven times. The next highest usage is seven times in 2 Corinthians. The phrase “a righteousness of God” (Rom 3:22), shows up eight times in Romans, but only twice in all the rest of Paul’s letters combined. See George R. Knight, *Exploring Romans: A Devotional Commentary* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 2010), 89.

<sup>9</sup> This is the third instance of the formula “the righteousness of God” (Rom 1:17; 3:5). This links 3:21 with 1:17 as the manifestation of the righteousness of God. Stott writes: “The second novelty in these verses is that now for the first time ‘a righteousness from God’ is identified with justification: *and are justified freely by his grace ...* (24a). The righteousness of (or from) God is a combination of his righteous character, his saving initiative and his gift of a righteous standing before him. It is his just justification of the unjust, his righteous way of ‘righteousing’ the unrighteous.” John R. W. Stott, *Romans: God’s Good News for the World* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1994), 109.

<sup>10</sup> It can be difficult to discern whether Paul is referring to the Mosaic Law (NASB, ESV, NET) or law in general (NIV, NRSV, TEV, NJB). However, the former is preferred in this context.

<sup>11</sup> Charles R. Swindoll, *Insights on Romans* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 81.

<sup>12</sup> John F. Hart, “The Letter to the Romans” (2010 ed.): Moody Bible Institute class notes.

<sup>13</sup> E.g., Gen 3:15; 15:6; Ps 51:1–2; Isa 53:1–12; Jer 23:5–6.

<sup>14</sup> Constable writes: “The reference to the Old Testament as the law and the prophets, two major sections of the Hebrew Bible, prepares the way for chapter 4 (cf. Matt. 5:17). There Paul discussed Abraham and David, two representatives of these two sections of Scripture.” Thomas L. Constable, “Notes on Romans” (2010 ed.): [www.soniclight.com/constable/notes/pdf/romans.pdf](http://www.soniclight.com/constable/notes/pdf/romans.pdf), 37.

<sup>15</sup> “‘For My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways My ways,’ declares the LORD. ‘For *as* the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways and My thoughts than your thoughts’” (Isa 55:8–9).

<sup>16</sup> Rom 3:22 literally reads “through the faith/faithfulness of Jesus Christ” (see KJV; NET). This is a genitive construction that could mean the faith or faithfulness of Jesus (subjective genitive), or Jesus as the object of our faith (objective genitive). Since neither interpretation is without its difficulties, it is worth examining the various arguments in favor of each interpretation. Witherington lists three arguments supporting the subjective genitive view. (1) It relieves us of the redundancy of Paul referring to Christian faith twice in this sentence. Instead, both objective and subjective means are referred to. (2) This reading also gives proper force to the two prepositions “through” and “unto,” one referring to the means and the other the ultimate object or recipient of the revelation. (3) This comports well with the parallel *dia* clause (“through”) and 3:24, which tells us that the gift of righteousness or being righted comes through the liberation or ransom provided in the Christ-event. See Ben Witherington, *Paul’s Letter to the Romans: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 101.

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There are four more arguments in favor of the subjective genitive view: (1) The passage focuses on the revelation (*phaneroo*) of God's righteousness publicly (3:25). This fits well with the cross obedience of Jesus, which itself argues for the subjective genitive. It is difficult to see how the righteousness of God is revealed through our faith *in* Jesus, but it is not difficult to see how it is revealed by Jesus' obedience to the Father. (2) When "faith" (*pistis*) is followed by a personal noun in the genitive case, it almost never is an objective genitive (cf. Matt 9:2, 22, 29; Mark 2:5; 5:32; 10:52; Luke 5:20; 7:50; 8:25, 48; 17:19; 18:42; 22:32; Rom 1:8, 12; 3:3; 4:5, 12, 16; 1 Cor 2:5; 15:14, 17; 2 Cor 10:15; Phil 2:17; Col 1:4; 2:5; 1 Thess 1:8; 3:2, 5, 10; 2 Thess 1:3; Titus 1:1; Phlm 6; 1 Pet 1:9, 21; 2 Pet 1:5). See Greg Herrick, "Study and Exposition of Romans 3:21–31": [www.bible.org/seriespage/study-and-exposition-romans-321-31](http://www.bible.org/seriespage/study-and-exposition-romans-321-31). (3) It was Israel's unfaithfulness which was the problem. It was Christ's faithfulness which was the solution. In chapter 4 Paul will turn to the matter of men's faith in Christ, but that does not seem to be the thrust of Paul's words here. See Bob Deffinbaugh, "Justification: A Divine Perspective" (Rom 3:21–26): [www.bible.org/seriespage/justification-divine-perspective-romans-321-26#P1711\\_530277](http://www.bible.org/seriespage/justification-divine-perspective-romans-321-26#P1711_530277). (4) The parallel expression regarding God's faithfulness earlier in the chapter (3:3); and most compellingly, the precisely parallel expression of true believers being of the faith of Jesus (3:26) and the faith of Abraham (4:16).

Despite the strength of these arguments, Schreiner marshals four arguments in favor of the objective view: (1) "Both Romans and Galatians have a plethora of passages that refer to the faith of believers" (185; he cites 38 such texts). (2) "Nowhere is there any unambiguous indication that Paul spoke of the faith/faithfulness of Christ . . . Granted, the obedience of Christ is an important element in Pauline theology. But there is not a shred of evidence anywhere else that he speaks of that obedience as Christ's *pistis* [i.e., "faith"]" (185). (3) On the other hand, "there is unambiguous evidence in the Pauline letters that Paul called for faith *in* Christ" (185). (4) "The reading 'faith in Christ' also makes the best sense of the flow of thought in Rom. 3:21–4:12" (185; see his argument for this on pp. 185–86).

Keener provides two more arguments in favor of the objective view: (1) The noun *pistis* is plainly connected with the verb *pisteuo* in 3:22, where it involves believers' faith. Although cognate nouns and verbs do not always carry the same significance, it seems likelier than not that they do here (the verb appear six times in ch. 4), and in Romans Jesus is always the object of this verb rather than its example. In forty-two uses of the verb in Romans we regularly read of believers' faith in Jesus, yet nowhere in unambiguous terms do we read of Jesus' own faith. Although Paul could have written "faith *in* Jesus" more obviously, the genitive construction allowed for a more obvious contrast with "works of law." (2) The church fathers, many of whom knew the language particularly intimately, also generally understood this particular phrase is an object of genitive. Craig S. Keener, *Romans*. A New Covenant Commentary (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2009), 58.

Hart makes three other salient points: (1) There are clear examples where *pistis* with a personal genitive means "faith in" (e.g., Mark 11:22; Jas 2:1). (2) Paul is primarily dealing with the condition for being justified (faith), not the basis for justification (Christ's faithfulness) (3) Rom 3:26 is very awkward as the "faithfulness of Christ." See NET: "so that he would be just and the justifier of the one who lives because of Jesus' faithfulness." The NET has to add the words "lives because of . . ." Elsewhere, God justifies the one who is dead in sins and believes, not one who is already alive because of Jesus' faithfulness. In 4:4, it is the ungodly who God justifies, not one who is alive because of Jesus. John Hart, personal correspondence, 13 November, 2010.

While I have come to favor the objective rendering ("faith in Jesus Christ"), I think the subjective rendering (e.g., NET) is consistent with Paul's theology too, provided we understand *pistis* as "faithfulness," as in Rom 3:3 and Gal 5:22. Note: Barnett and Lopez accept both views. See Paul Barnett, *Romans: The Revelation of God's Righteousness* (Scotland, UK: Christian Focus, 2003), 77–78, and René A. Lopez, *Romans Unlocked: Power to Deliver* (Springfield, MO: 21<sup>st</sup> Century Press, 2005), 75–76.

<sup>17</sup> Stott, *Romans*, 117–18 rightly comments: "It is vital to affirm that there is nothing meritorious about faith, and that when we say that salvation is 'by faith, not by works', we are not substituting one kind of merit ('faith') for another ('works'). Nor is salvation a sort of cooperative enterprise between God and us, in which he contributes the cross and we contribute faith. No, grace is non-contributory, and faith is the opposite of self-regarding. The value of faith is not to be found in itself, but entirely and exclusively in its object, namely Jesus Christ and him crucified. To say 'justification by faith alone' is another way of saying 'justification by Christ alone'. Faith is the eye that looks to him, the hand that receives his free gift, the mouth that drinks the living water. 'Faith . . . apprehendeth nothing else but that precious jewel Christ Jesus.' As Richard Hooker, the late-sixteenth-century Anglican divine, wrote: 'God justifies the believer—not because of the worthiness of his belief, but because of his (*sc.* Christ's) worthiness who is believed.'"

<sup>18</sup> Hart, "The Letter to the Romans."

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<sup>19</sup> Erwin W. Lutzer, *How You Can Be Sure That You Will Spend Eternity With God* (Chicago: Moody, 1996), 45.

<sup>20</sup> Ralph Walker, Concord, NC. *Leadership*, Vol. 12, no. 1.

<sup>21</sup> This is why I choose to use EvanTell's "Bad News/Good News" tract: [www.evantell.org](http://www.evantell.org).

<sup>22</sup> I understand the aorist verb as a constative aorist. It is also possible to take this aorist in conjunction with Rom 5:12 referring to Adam's sin, thinking more of the unity of the race. But it's more likely that this teaching is found in 5:12–21. Moreover, the phrase "fall short of the glory of God" (3:23) seems to support the former interpretation.

<sup>23</sup> Lopez, *Romans Unlocked*, 76–77 states: "The term *fall short* translated by the Greek *hysterountai* may best be rendered as *lack* (BDAG, 1044) God's glory. This captures Paul's idea contextually best since it expresses a lack in human nature that makes it impossible to attain eternal life through works; a subject Paul has exhausted (vv 9–20). The same Greek term appears in Matthew 19:20 where the rich-young-ruler wanted to attain eternal life through works (19:16–19). Jesus then challenges him by showing what he lacked (*hystereo*). Consequently, he went away sad (vv 21–22). Man's sin separates him from dwelling in the presence of a holy God, because he lacks His glory as a perfect being."

<sup>24</sup> The linking of our sin with God's glory is intriguing. It would seem that God intended people to share in His glory. The phrase "glory of God" seems to be a reference to the glory that we had before the fall. The sin problem, therefore, is truly universal in time as well as comprehensive in impact. See Knight, *Exploring Romans*, 92.

<sup>25</sup> See Ray Stedman, "The Faith of our Father" (Rom 4:13–25): [www.pbc.org/files/messages/4656/3509.html](http://www.pbc.org/files/messages/4656/3509.html).

<sup>26</sup> The words "righteousness" (*dikaiousune*) and "justified" (*dikaioo*) are from the same Greek word.

<sup>27</sup> Notice the participle *dikaioumenoi* ("justified") is passive. It says "being justified," not "justifying." God is the actor; we're the ones being acted upon.

<sup>28</sup> R. C. Sproul, *Romans*. St. Andrew's Expository Commentary (Wheaton: Crossway, 2009), 98.

<sup>29</sup> The New Jerusalem Bible renders the adverb "the free gift."

<sup>30</sup> See BDAG s.v. *dorea* 1: "pert. to being freely given, *as a gift, without payment, gratis*." Uteley notes that Paul uses the concept of "gift" several times using different terms. (1) *dorean*, adverb, "freely"; (2) *dorea*, noun, "free gift"; (3) *doron*, noun, "gift" (cf. Eph 2:8); (4) *charisma*, noun, "free debt" or "free favor" (cf. Rom 1:11; 5:15, 16; 6:23; 11:29; 12:6); (5) *charisomai*, verb, "grant as a free favor" (cf. Rom 8:32); and (6) *charis*, noun, "free favor" or "free gift" (cf. Rom 4:4, 16; 11:5, 6; Eph 2:5, 8). See Bob Uteley, "The Gospel According to Paul: Romans" (2010 ed.): [www.freebiblecommentary.org/pdf/EN/VOL05.pdf](http://www.freebiblecommentary.org/pdf/EN/VOL05.pdf).

<sup>31</sup> It is worth noting that in the last two chapters of the Bible—not one—but two clear verses mark out eternal life as a gift that comes without cost (see Rev 21:6 and 22:17). Hart, "The Letter to the Romans."

<sup>32</sup> Ash, *Teaching Romans*, 143.

<sup>33</sup> Preaching Today citation: Craig Brian Larson, editor, Preaching Today.com.

<sup>34</sup> Paul uses the noun *charis* ("grace") in his epistles ninety-five times (twenty-four times in Romans).

<sup>35</sup> Lutzer, *How You Can Be Sure That You Will Spend Eternity With God*, 37.

<sup>36</sup> See BDAG s.v. *apolutrosis* 2a.

<sup>37</sup> Lopez, *Romans Unlocked*, 78 explains: "Faith by itself does not justify, but faith placed on the proper object does. Christ is the object of one's faith that made it possible by His *redemption (apolytrosis)*. The term *apolytrosis* appears ten times in the New Testament (Luke 21:28; Rom 3:24; 8:23; 1 Cor 1:30; Eph 1:7, 14; 4:30; Col 1:14; Heb 9:15; 11:35) and comes from the Greek word *lytron* ("ransom," cf. Matt 20:28; Mark 10:45) that means, 'ransom payment.' Thus, *apolytrosis* diverged in meaning in New Testament times but was commonly used, as here by Paul, of buying back by a ransom payment a slave or captive to be set free (BDAG, 117). Certainly, Paul thinks here of humanity's condemned status under the Law. Redemption from this came through Christ's *ransom payment* at the cross (cf. Matt 20:28; Gal 3:13; 4:5) that freed humanity from the slave market of sin. This price was not only paid for those who will participate of its benefits but includes those who are also lost (cf. 2 Pet 2:1)."

<sup>38</sup> Tony Evans, *Totally Saved* (Chicago: Moody, 2002), 60.

<sup>39</sup> There has been some debate on whether the meaning of *hilasterion* is better captured by "propitiation" (NASB, ESV) or "expiation" (RSV). Propitiation emphasizes the effect of the sacrifice of Christ on God in turning aside God's judicial wrath toward human sin and sinners. Expiation emphasizes the effect of the sacrifice of Christ on human beings in providing them with forgiveness and the removal of guilt before God. While these ideas are not mutually exclusive, the subject of the wrath of God is clearly in view in the larger context of Romans 1:18–4:25 (see 1:18; 2:5, 8; 3:5; 4:15). In this regard, propitiation is a more appropriate translation in Roman 3:25 than expiation. See Dr. J. P. Sweeney, "An Expository Overview of Romans 3:21–31," unpublished notes.

<sup>40</sup> For an excellent study on propitiation, see Leon Morris, *The Apostolic Preaching of the Cross* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), 125–85. The word may carry the sense of "place of satisfaction," (see NET) having reference to

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the place where God's wrath toward sin is satisfied. The noun *hilasterion* is used only one other time in the NT in Heb 9:5 where it is rendered "mercy seat." There it describes the altar in the Holy of Holies where the blood was sprinkled in the OT ritual on the Day of Atonement. The same word is used twenty times in the Greek OT (LXX) to denote the golden cover of the Ark of the Covenant, the so-called mercy seat, the place where the priest sprinkled the blood of sacrifice to assuage God's just wrath on sin. F. F. Bruce, *The Letter of Paul to the Romans*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), 104–5. Similarly, Nygren argues that 3:25 should be read, "whom God displayed publicly as a mercy seat in His blood." Anders Nygren, *Commentary on Romans* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1949), 159. As compelling as these arguments are, in this context, the place seems to be used figuratively for the action accomplished there and of the One who embodied that action.

<sup>41</sup> Ash, *Teaching Romans*, 144.

<sup>42</sup> Steve Elkins, *The Roman Road Revisited* (Dallas: Allie Grace, 2005), 51.

<sup>43</sup> Evans, *Totally Saved*, 66.

<sup>44</sup> The only other NT use of *anochē* ("forbearance") is Rom 2:4.

<sup>45</sup> Harold W. Hoehner, "Romans" in *The Bible Knowledge Word Study* (Colorado Springs: Victor, 2006), 147.

<sup>46</sup> McCoy, "The Heart of Romans."

<sup>47</sup> Romans Chapter 3: [www.middletonbiblechurch.org/romans/romans3.htm](http://www.middletonbiblechurch.org/romans/romans3.htm).