

## “Why Did Jesus Have to Die?” (Romans 3:21-26)

If you were given a choice, how would you choose to die? In front of a firing squad? The electric chair? Hanging? The gas chamber? I bet if you had a choice it wouldn't be any of these. You would likely choose something far less spectacular and traumatic. You might wish to die peacefully in your sleep at a ripe, old age, with a lucid mind. Better yet, if you are married, you'd probably choose to die simultaneously with your spouse. Wouldn't that be a perfect scenario?

Jesus Christ predetermined His death (Acts 4:28). Yet, the death He chose doesn't look like the perfect scenario I described. In fact, it was quite different. Speaking of a spectacular and traumatic death, Jesus' death was the epitome of drama. His death was by torture and crucifixion. The question is WHY? Couldn't Christ have accomplished more by living a full and happy life? Think of the people He could have healed, the teaching He could have done, the problems He could have solved. Wasn't it enough that He taught us to love others as God loves us? Wasn't the example of His life enough for us to follow? Why was He obsessed with dying? Why didn't He defend Himself in court for the sake of His family, His disciples, and all who admired Him? Why did He have to suffer and die? What was the point?

The best passage in the Bible that answers the question, “Why did Jesus have to die?” is Romans 3:21-26. This is the most critical passage in Romans. Not only is it the heart of Romans, it's been called the greatest paragraph in the entire Bible. Therefore, if we fail to understand this passage correctly, we'll be unable to grasp the central message of the Scriptures. For it's here that we see what we are, what God is, and what God had done for us.

Now you may be thinking to yourself, “I already know these things; can't we go back to our study through Revelation?” Yet, before you let your mind get the better of you, let me say something very important. A travesty in the American church is that we have heard about Jesus' death so many times that it no longer amazes us. Perhaps you recall that the famous *Star Wars* trilogy was released in 1997 with additional computer-generated footage that was not included in the original version. It was advertised with this slogan: “*Star Wars*: See it again for the first time.” I hope something like that happens as we consider the deeper meaning of Jesus' death—that we will “see it again for the first time.”

[Read Romans 3:21-26.] These six verses tell us that Jesus had to die to fulfill prophecy, rescue mankind, and satisfy God.

**1. Jesus had to die to fulfill prophecy (3:21).** In Romans 1:18-3:20, Paul constructed a 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 helpless and hopeless. This is the bad news. A great chasm lies between Romans 3:20 and 3:21. It's a deep canyon, a wide gap separating man's condition and God's character. Man is a sinner 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.

In 3:21, Paul writes, “**But now.**”<sup>1</sup> These two words made up of three letters each serve as the hinge pin for the fate of humanity. These words look back to the death of Christ. Paul states, “**apart from the Law the righteousness of God has been manifested.**”<sup>2</sup> In the plan and purposes of God, salvation has always been “**apart from the Law.**”<sup>3</sup> Yet, man hasn't always understood this. However, as a result of Jesus Christ exiting eternity and entering time, there can no longer be any question. Truly, “**the righteousness of God has been manifested.**” This righteousness has been “**manifested being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets.**” This phrase declares that God's righteousness has been “**manifested**”<sup>4</sup> through His Word. The phrase “**the Law and the Prophets**” is a summary term for the entire Old Testament.<sup>5</sup> “The Law” referred to the first five books of Moses and “the Prophets” to everything else.

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 (Gen 15:6; Hab 2:4; Rom 1:17). 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. This is a wonderful time to ask you about your Bible study habits. Do you call yourself a “New Testament Christian” and avoid the Old Testament at any expense? 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? After all, the only way to truly understand the New Testament is by knowing the Old Testament. Today, will you write down a 2004 goal to study through an Old Testament book of your choice? I would suggest the book of Genesis. Write this down today!

[Jesus had to die to fulfill prophecy but in 3:22-24, we’ll also see that...]

**2. Jesus had to die to rescue mankind (3:22-24).** In 3:22a, Paul writes that the righteousness of God is revealed **“through faith in Jesus Christ for all those who believe.”** The condition to experience God’s righteousness is **“faith”** and the object is Christ. The faith it takes to swallow medication is in essence the same faith as the faith it takes to be saved. Faith is simple trust.<sup>6</sup> In order to be rescued from sin, everyone everywhere must **“believe”**<sup>7</sup> in Jesus Christ alone.

Have you ever used Vaseline? Most people have at one time or another. The reason that you and I have received the benefits from Vaseline is because Robert Chesebrough believed in the product he invented. He believed in his own product so much 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 his wounds, now healed, to see the value of his work and the extent of his belief. The Gospel is looking at Jesus and the price He paid for our sins and believing His work alone can take you to heaven.

Romans 3:22b-23 serves as a parenthesis in Paul’s argument. It is essential that we believe in Christ for Paul states, **“there is no distinction.”** In other words, all mankind is guilty of sin. I have been fortunate enough to reach the top of some very tall buildings: the Sears Tower, the Eiffel Tower, and the Statue of Liberty. When you are looking down to the ground from one of these tall buildings, all people look like ants. It doesn’t matter what the person’s height or weight is, they are all tiny. Well, God is so high and above His creation that all men look alike. His holy and righteous character sees all men as sinners—there is no distinction.

The word **“for”** (3:23) gives the reason that there’s no distinction: **“All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.”**<sup>8</sup> The tenses in the two verbs are important. The first phrase **“all have sinned”**<sup>9</sup> is a snapshot of mankind’s sinful characteristics that have tainted his past. This is a picture of original sin. The doctrine of original sin teaches that man is born sinful because he has inherited sin from his ancestor Adam. The second phrase **“fall short”** is a moving picture, a video or DVD showing the continual failure of man to reflect the glory of God. This is what we experience in our daily lives. The biblical concept of sin is any failure in word, thought, or deed to glorify God.

How many of you travel for business? How important is it for you to catch your flight? What would happen if you missed your flight? You’d have “fallen short” of your departure, right? Think of sin as two travelers missing their flights at the airport. One traveler misses the flight by just five seconds, while the other is 45 minutes late. Is the first person any better off? No, it’s irrelevant how far short of the standard the two people fell. They are both stuck at the airport.

In the same way, God has already determined that you have fallen short of heaven, and it doesn’t matter whether you miss heaven by an inch or a thousand miles.<sup>10</sup> We must not compare ourselves with other passengers; to fall short is to fall short.

The reality of our sinfulness ought to fill our hearts with gratitude to God for His goodness for us. Realizing that Christ died for our sins should compel us to be patient with others when they sin. We should be willing to forgive others when they offend us, we should be people who freely give to others, we should be willing to lay down our lives for others (at least to pray for them or to hold their hands when they are in need or to telephone them to see how they are doing or to pick up groceries for them if they can't get out or to surprise them by doing something nice for them or to listen to them, etc.).

Before we move on, it is worth asking the question, "Why does Paul spend so much time on the subject of sin?" Probably because it is a subject we avoid. Yet, if we fail to focus on mankind's sin we will never truly appreciate God's salvation. Therefore, when we present the Gospel, we must always remember to emphasize sin. 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 isn't truly good news until we first deal with the bad news.

Paul now moves on to the good news. Here lies Paul's greatest contribution to the Bible and the pinnacle of the Scriptures. Jesus had to die to redeem mankind and that is seen clearly in 3:24. Paul writes that those who have believed (3:22a) are **"being justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus."** This verse is the continuation of 3:21-22a. This is such an important verse that we must tear it apart word by word. First, let's consider the word **"justified."**<sup>11</sup> Justification takes us to the courtroom. It's a legal term which means "to declare righteous"—to be acquitted in God's court.<sup>12</sup> Notice the verb "justified" is passive. It says, **"being justified,"** not "justifying." God is the actor; we're the ones being acted upon. Justification takes place instantaneously in the courts of heaven. The moment we believe in Jesus Christ, we are on the other side of judgment day! God has declared us, "Not guilty." The Judge of the entire universe tells me that I am acquitted. I can go free. Now, if God were to judge me according to my own righteousness, He would have to declare me unrighteous and wicked. But when I believed in Jesus Christ, then God declared me to be righteous on the basis of Christ's work.

Justification is a pardon from the death penalty. It's like sitting in the electric chair and having the phone ring five seconds before the switch was to be thrown. The message comes over the phone that you have been pardoned; you are free to walk out of prison. That would be something to celebrate! If that happened to you, you wouldn't just yawn and say, "That's nice." Not when you were in the electric chair! We ought to be celebrating the fact that we have been justified because of Christ's death.<sup>13</sup>

To better understand justification, it may help if we expose what justification is not. (1) *Justification is not forgiveness.* It's more than forgiveness. While forgiveness is a part of it, it's not all of it. A child may throw a rock through a window and admitting wrong be forgiven, but he's still guilty. Justification removes the guilt through the work of Christ. (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. Christ's righteousness is applied to the believer.

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 others. Yet, this passage teaches that fellow believers have been declared righteous and are now seen by the Father with no trace of the sin that was fully removed by the blood of Jesus Christ. We need to have high hopes for fellow believers and believe the best about them. This is the third key to the strategy of our church "to love the body."

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"** can also be translated "freely" or "for nothing."<sup>14</sup> Paul is saying that we can't do anything to merit being declared righteous. In fact, we are forbidden to do good works in the hope of earning God's favor.

Paul also states that our salvation is solely **“by His grace.”** **“Grace”**<sup>15</sup> is the free and unmerited favor of God.<sup>16</sup> It is getting what we need but do not deserve. Mark Twain said it well, “Heaven goes by favor. If it went by merit, you would stay out, and your dog would go in.”<sup>17</sup> God always saves people in spite of themselves.

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. Today, would you begin to study out this passage for yourself? You could spend this week familiarizing yourself with this passage to ensure that you have a handle on the greatest news known to man.

Paul continues his thought by further explaining that this gift came **“through the redemption, which is in Christ Jesus.”** Redemption takes us to the slave market. The word **“redemption”**<sup>18</sup> means “the release of a slave by the paying of a price.” Redemption means that our debt of sin was paid due to Jesus’ death on the cross. We are delivered from condemnation and released from slavery and we are also brought into sonship and freedom.<sup>19</sup> My prayer for you today is that you will see your redemption again for the first time.

[Jesus had to die to fulfill prophecy and rescue mankind. Lastly, we’ll see in 3:25-26...]

**3. Jesus had to die to satisfy God (3:25-26).** The Bible is clear that sin must be punished. God is holy and He cannot allow sin to go unpunished. His justice demands that every sin be punished—no matter how small it may seem to us. If God were to forgive sin without proper punishment, He would cease to be holy and just. God would no longer be God because He would have denied His own character. Therefore, all offenses against God must be punished. That’s why a sinner can’t simply say, “I’m sorry,” and instantly be forgiven. Someone has to pay the price.

We follow this same principle in our criminal justice system. Suppose a man is found guilty of embezzling six million dollars from his employer. Let us further suppose that just before sentencing, he stands before the judge, confesses his crime, begs for mercy, and promises never to embezzle money again. How would you react if the judge accepted his apology and released him with no punishment? Suppose the man had been convicted of rape and was set free with no punishment simply because he apologized. Let us go further and ask about a group of terrorists who break into the White House and murder the president. Upon their capture, trial, and conviction, they apologize and promise to never murder a president again, and are released on good behavior. What would we do with the judge who set them free? We would throw that judge in jail for a long time.

In 3:25, Paul explains, **“God displayed”**<sup>20</sup> [Jesus] **publicly as a propitiation in His blood through faith.”** The word **“propitiation”** takes us to the temple. The word is used only one other time in the New Testament: 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 Old Testament ritual on the Day of Atonement.<sup>21</sup> So Paul is saying, our sins have been propitiated, covered or blotted out by the shed blood of Jesus Christ. But the word “propitiation” also means “to turn away wrath by the offering of a gift.” For example, I propitiated my wife’s wrath by bringing her flowers and taking her out to dinner. Here the word “propitiation” refers to the satisfaction of God’s righteous anger toward sin, so that He can now deal with men graciously.<sup>22</sup> This wrath has been appeased by the death of Jesus Christ on the cross. God’s holy anger has been satisfied in the work of Christ.

It’s important that we recognize that the first purpose of the cross in Romans isn’t God’s love; it’s His righteousness. The theme of the book of Romans revolves around God’s righteousness. God’s “righteousness” also stands at the heart of this great text.<sup>23</sup>

The righteousness of God is the starting point of salvation. It provides release from (1) the fear of death. People who aren't afraid of death are either Christians or those who refuse to think about it. The worst that can ever happen will never happen and the best that could ever be is certain! (2) The guilt of sin. The blood of Jesus Christ is the only thing that will set you free from a guilty conscience.

In 3:25, Paul also mentions **“in His forbearance, God passed over the sins previously committed.”** Although the death of Christ for the sins of mankind 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.

Verse 26 tells us that God did this **“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.”** As we continue to consider this revelation of God's righteousness, it's interesting to note what's emphasized and what's not.<sup>24</sup> Now that salvation is in view, one would expect that God the Son would be the most prominent Person in this passage. Such isn't the case. God the Father is referred to in our text approximately twice as often as God the Son. Paul is emphasizing the demonstration of God's righteousness, through the Father's provision of His righteousness for men, in His Son.

The words **“just”** and **“justifier”** are both renderings of the root term for righteous. God has revealed His justice through the cross. We deserved death—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. This is the Gospel! God has acted with justice by slaying His Son but He's also acted as the justifier by allowing us to be set free from our sin by trusting in Jesus.

The story has been told of a man who was caught and taken to court because he had stolen a loaf of bread. When the judge investigated, he found out that the man had no job, and his family was hungry. He had tried unsuccessfully to get work and finally, to feed his family, he had stolen a loaf of bread. Although recognizing the extenuating circumstances, the judge said, “I'm sorry, but the law can make no exceptions. You stole, and therefore I have to punish you. I order you to pay a fine of ten dollars.” He then continued, “But I want to pay the fine myself.” He reached into his pocket, pulled out a ten-dollar bill, and handed it to the man. As soon as the man took the money, the judge said, “Now I also want to remit the fine.” That is, the man could keep the money. “Furthermore, I am going to instruct the bailiff to pass around a hat to everyone in this courtroom, and I am fining everyone in this courtroom fifty cents for living in a city where a man has to steal in order to have bread to eat.” The money was collected and given to the defendant.<sup>25</sup> This is an excellent example of justice (i.e., getting what we deserve), mercy (i.e., not getting what we deserve), and grace (i.e., getting what we do not deserve).

A couple of years ago, my oldest son, Joshua, was having a day of disobedience. I had already disciplined him several times and I was getting weary. As I took him into the bathroom once again, I thought of the longsuffering nature of Christ. I was reminded that Jesus laid down His life for me. So I explained to Joshua that his sin had to be dealt with. I couldn't ignore his sin and look the other way. I would not be a just and loving father. So I then explained to Joshua that I wanted to take his discipline myself. He then disciplined his dad. Now I would be lying if I said that Joshua was crushed over the burden of spanking his dad. On the contrary, he seemed to find a sadistic glee and pleasure in it. Nonetheless, I noticed that Joshua began to take his sin more serious as a result of this episode.

Why did Jesus have to die? He died to fulfill prophecy, rescue mankind, and satisfy God. I hope that you have seen Christ's death again for the first time and it will be more difficult for you to sin in the future.

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## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Gk. *nuni de* (Rom 6:22; 7:6, 17; 15:23, 25; 1 Cor 12:18; 13:13; 15:20; 2 Cor 8:11, 22; Eph 2:13; Col 1:22; 3:8; Phlm 1:9, 11; Heb 8:6; 9:26).

<sup>2</sup> Paul uses the perfect tense, pointing to an action in the past with results continuing in the present.

<sup>3</sup> Gk. *choris* = “apart” or “without.” See the same use of this word in Heb 4:15 where Jesus was tempted in all points as we are “yet without sin.” Just as sin and Jesus Christ have nothing in common, so too God’s righteousness was not manifested in keeping the Law but in the work of Christ on the cross (cf. 2 Cor 5:21; Gal 3:13).

<sup>4</sup> The root word “manifested” (*phaneroo*) is used back in Rom 1:19-20 where Paul writes that God has made Himself “evident” to man through His creation. Now Paul states that God has revealed Himself through His Word.

<sup>5</sup> See Matt 5:17; 7:12; 22:40; Luke 16:16; 24:27, 44; Acts 13:15; 24:14; 26:22; 28:23.

<sup>6</sup> The object of faith doesn’t determine the nature of faith. If someone writes a check sincerely believing she has adequate funds to cover it when she really doesn’t, has she believed any less than if she did have adequate funds? Of course not! Likewise, one can believe in Buddha and another believes in Christ. Both believe in the same way, but only one will be saved. The difference is the object of their faith.

<sup>7</sup> There are almost 200 verses that use the word “believe” or its synonym “faith” as the sole condition of salvation.

<sup>8</sup> The linking of man’s 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 what God intended man to be. The glory that man had before the fall (see Gen 1:26-28; Ps 8:5-6; Eph 4:24).

<sup>9</sup> The Bible continually asserts, “All have sinned” (1 Kgs 8:46; Ps 103:3; 143:2; Rom 5:12).

<sup>10</sup> Tony Evans, *Who is the King of Glory?* (Chicago: Moody, 1999), 64-65.

<sup>11</sup> Justification is the doctrine for which Romans is most famous—and rightly so. Paul uses some form of the verb “justify” (*dikaioo*) 15 times in Romans. It is worth noting that in the word “justified” is the word “just.” Now “just” is essentially the same as “righteous.” The word “justified” and “righteousness” in 3:22 have the same root, which shows that the meaning of “being justified” in 3:24 and the meaning of God’s “righteousness through faith” in 3:22 are very similar.

<sup>12</sup> Justification is not an act of God that makes us righteous. It’s an act of God that declares us righteous. When Paul says “God’s righteousness is through faith for all who believe” (3:22), he means that this righteousness is counted as ours. God’s act of justification is not inside us, but outside of us. It’s not in us, but for us. It’s not a change of our nature or state, but a change of our standing before him. It’s not the same as sanctification, which is done in us, and does change our character. Sanctification is the work of the Spirit of God gradually changing us into the image of His Son. Justification is the act of God, once for all declaring us just and righteous in His sight.

<sup>13</sup> Tony Evans, *Who is the King of Glory?*, 70-71.

<sup>14</sup> The idea of “freely” reaches back to Paul’s comment in Rom 3:21 about the righteousness of God being revealed “apart from” (or “without”) the Law.

<sup>15</sup> Paul uses the word “grace” (*charis*) in his epistles 95 times (24 times in Romans).

<sup>16</sup> God could have exercised justice (i.e., getting what we deserve) or mercy (i.e., not getting what we deserve) but He granted grace (i.e., getting what we do not deserve).

<sup>17</sup> Preaching Today Citation: Mark Twain, *Leadership*, Vol. 17, no. 2.

<sup>18</sup> Gk. *apolutrosis*. Paul used this word in Rom 8:23; 1 Cor 1:30; Eph 1:7, 14; 4:30; Col 1:14; cf. Heb 9:15; 11:35.

<sup>19</sup> We, just as Israel was redeemed from the slavery of Egypt, have been redeemed from the bondage of sin. He gave His life as a “ransom for many” (Matt 20:28). He “gave Himself for us to redeem us from every lawless deed” (Titus 2:14). The price He paid was with “precious blood, as of a lamb unblemished and spotless, *the blood* of Christ” (1 Pet 1:19). We have “redemption through His blood” (Eph 1:7).

<sup>20</sup> The Greek word *proetheto* (from the root *protithemi*) means: 1) to set something before someone as something to be done, set before someone as a task/duty; 2) to set forth publicly, display publicly, make available publicly (Rom 3:25); and 3) to have something in mind beforehand, plan, propose, intend (Rom 1:13 and Eph 1:9). See BDAG, Electronic Ed. The English versions differ in their rendering of this word (e.g., “put forward” [ESV, NRSV], “set forth” [KJV, NKJV], “presented” [NIV], and “sent” [NLT]).

<sup>21</sup> This word is also used in the Greek Old Testament for “mercy seat” which covered the ark in the Holy of Holies.

<sup>22</sup> God’s wrath is a prevalent biblical theme. It is spoken of 580 times in the Old Testament, and over 20 words are used to describe it. The theme continues in the New Testament. So it is hardly a secondary issue that can be easily dismissed. See Leon Morris, *The Atonement: Its Meaning and Significance* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1983), 153.

<sup>23</sup> “Righteousness” is mentioned four times, while two of its root words, “justify” and “just” are also mentioned three times.

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<sup>24</sup> Ironically, the cross of Calvary is indirectly alluded to in our text but never specifically mentioned. Neither is the resurrection of our Lord referred to in this passage. Clearly, Paul's "demonstration" (lit. "proof") is in reference to the righteousness of God the Father.

<sup>25</sup> Michael P. Green, *Illustrations for Biblical Preaching* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1989), Electronic Ed.