

Justified Freely

A Study on Romans 3:21-24a

by Dr. Jack L. Arnold

Many Bible scholars have called Romans 3:21-31 the greatest paragraph in the Bible. It is loaded with truth and summarizes the whole of salvation. Words such as “sin,” “righteousness,” “justification,” “redemption,” “propitiation,” “grace,” and “faith” all appear in this short paragraph. If you cannot define these concepts and apply them to your life, you do not understand salvation and can never appreciate it as you should.

In the first three chapters of Romans, Paul has taken us to the depths of sin and shown us what we are really like in God’s sight: filthy, unlovable, condemned, and under his wrath. In our natural or unsaved state, we are rebellious sinners, in a helpless and deplorable condition, separated from God because of sin, and spiritually dead. We are lost and in line for judgment, devoid of any righteousness that would make us acceptable to God!

RIGHTEOUSNESS AND THE LAW — Romans 3:21-23

“But now.” The words “but now” begin the logical argument that grows out of man’s sinfulness. In man there is no hope for salvation — but God, through Christ, has made a way for men to have hope and to find salvation from sin.

“The righteousness of God [a righteousness of God].” God has provided a righteousness through the death of Christ whereby men can be accepted before him. This is a righteousness of which God is the author, which comes from him, which he gives, and which is acceptable in his sight. It comes as a result of one’s union with Christ. This righteousness is not found in man but in Christ: “For he hath made him to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in him” (2 Cor. 5:21). This righteousness is positional, spiritual — not felt, but imputed to one’s account. It deals with one’s standing before God.

Why must men have righteousness? God is righteous. Because he is perfect righteousness, he must judge sin. It is true that God is love, but we must remember that he is also righteous and just. Those who say that because God is love there will be no eternal judgment for sin do not know the God of Scripture, but show their ignorance of the Bible. God demands righteousness. If man is to have fellowship with God in time and eternity, he must have a perfect righteousness.

Most men feel that they really are not so bad, and that God will let them get by his judgment on some lower scale such as human works. Not so, but God provides the righteousness men need. God has provided a righteousness that men may have, and that he will accept, but it is found only in Christ, who provided a substitutionary atonement for sin. Because of Christ's sacrifice, God is able to impute righteousness to the one who believes in him.

"Without the law [apart from law]." Apart from any legal system, including the Mosaic Law, there is a righteousness, but no amount of human effort can produce it. It is impossible to be saved by ethics, morals, good works, keeping the Ten Commandments, practicing the golden rule, doing the teachings of the Sermon on the Mount, being a church member, having water baptism, putting money into the collection plate, etc. There is only one way to get to heaven, and that is to trust in Jesus Christ completely and totally as your substitute for sin and Lord of your life.

"Being witnessed by the law and the prophets." "Law and prophets" refers to the Old Testament. This righteousness was not something totally new to the Jews:

"And he believed in the Lord; and he counted it to him for righteousness"
(Gen. 15:6).

"The Lord hath made known his salvation: his righteousness hath he openly shewed in the sight of the heathen" (Ps. 98:2).

"Behold the days come, saith the Lord, that I will raise unto David a righteous Branch, and a King shall reign and prosper, and shall execute judgment and justice in the earth. In his days Judah shall be saved, and Israel shall dwell safely: and this is his name whereby he shall be called, the Lord our Righteousness" (Jer. 23:5-6).

In the Old Testament, the tabernacle, the sacrifices, the law, and other things bore witness to the righteousness that was to come.

"Even the righteousness of God which is by faith of [in] Jesus Christ." This righteousness is available to all who will place their faith and trust in Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour. The verse actually says "through faith." Faith is the *means* whereby the sinner lays hold of Christ. The *cause* of salvation is always God.

"Unto all." This does not mean that everyone has it, but that it is available to anyone who will receive Jesus Christ. It is not based on culture, education, heritage, refinement, good works, baptism, church membership, or any human work. It is for all who will believe.

“And upon all.” Some scholars do not think these words should be in the text, but there is not enough evidence to prove that they should not be there. A person can be clothed in the perfect righteousness of Jesus Christ; he can trade his sin for Christ’s shining robes. When God saves us, he does not merely throw a robe of righteousness around the nakedness of our fallen being. Rather, he reckons us as being as perfect as the Lord Jesus Christ himself. When you look through rose-colored glasses, everything is seen in a rosy hue. The glorious truth of the gospel is that when the Lord God Almighty looks at the one who has trusted completely in the work of the Lord Jesus Christ on the cross of Calvary, he sees that person in all the holiness of Christ. How many times have I heard people say, “Oh, if I could only start my life over again. If I could get rid of my past. I’d give anything for a new life.” Any sinner can get a new life in Christ and find acceptance with God!

“Them that believe.” This righteousness is only available to those who accept Christ. It is not for all men; it is for Christian men. Paul is not teaching universalism:

“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life” (John 3:16).

“He that believeth on the Son hath everlasting life: and he that believeth not the Son shall not see life; but the wrath of God abideth on him” (John 3:36).

“Verily verily, I say unto you, He that heareth my word, and believeth on him that sent me, hath everlasting life, and shall not come into condemnation; but is passed from death unto life” (John 5:24).

Men must believe God’s Word about the work of his Son. They are responsible and accountable before God as to what they do with Christ in their lifetime on earth.

“For there is no difference: For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God.” There is no distinction among the Jews or Gentiles, for all are sinners who constantly fall short of God’s requirements. There may be degrees of actual sinfulness, such that some people sin much worse than others, but from God’s standpoint even the least of these sinners is guilty enough to be eternally condemned.

God is infinitely perfect, and the words “glory of God” mean the sum of all his attributes, his perfection. All men fall short of God’s requirements of perfection. From Newport pier in California, one can see Catalina Island on a clear day, 36 miles away. Some people might be able to jump further than others, but no one makes it from the pier to the island; all come short. Just so, all come short of God’s perfections.

RIGHTEOUSNESS AND GRACE — Romans 3:24a

“Being justified.” This means “being declared righteous.” The person who trusts Christ receives his righteousness, and God declares that sinner righteous in his standing before God. A person is justified, not on the basis of his own works or person, but on the basis of Christ’s person and work for him. Justification includes both a negative (the forgiveness of sin) and a positive (the imputation of righteousness) side. If it were possible for everyone in the world to be forgiven and stop sinning, this still would not save them; they would still need a perfect righteousness. When a man is justified, he is accepted because of Christ, and all his life — past, present and future — is seen as righteousness in Christ.

“Freely.” This means “without a cause.” Justification is a free gift; it was given without a single cause in man. Our justification does not have its roots in us. If it did, we would always be in constant doubt as to whether we had properly fulfilled the requirements. Its roots are in God and in his Son, Jesus Christ.

Near, so near am I to God,
Nearer I cannot be;
For in the Person of His Son
I'm just as near as He.

Dear, so dear am I to God,
Dearer I cannot be;
The love wherewith He loved His Son,
Such is His love to me.

“By his grace.” It is by God’s unmerited favor that any person is justified. It is all of grace: “For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: Not of works, lest any man should boast” (Eph. 2:8-9). Will we believe the Word, or will we trust our reasoning and feelings?

Sovereign grace, o’er sin abounding;
Ransomed souls the tidings swell,
‘Tis a deep that knows no sounding;
Who its length and breadth can tell?
 On its glories
 Let my soul forever dwell.

When we understand this, we can see the true basis of our salvation. There was absolutely nothing in men that could recommend them to God. God did not sit in heaven and look down upon earth until he found something in some men that recommended them to him. He

gave salvation to men who deserved hell. There will not be one person in heaven who deserved to be there except the Lord Jesus Christ. He is the only one who merited heaven. But an innumerable company who merited hell are going to be in heaven simply because the grace of God decided that they should be there.

CONCLUSION

God will justify any person who will admit that he is sinful and come to Christ for forgiveness and righteousness. Christ alone is the only hope of the sinner! When you come to Christ, by an act of your own will, you will then come to understand that it was God's grace that drew you to the Saviour. You will then sing as millions of others have:

Amazing grace, how sweet the sound
That saved a wretch like me!
I once was lost, but now am found;
Was blind but now I see.