

Lesson Seven

(3:21-31)

THE ETERNAL ESSENTIAL

The main thrust of this paragraph of writing by Paul is that Jews and Gentiles alike are justified from sin through faith in Jesus Christ. Distinction is made between the Gospel and the law and between the Christian era ("now" of verse 21) and the Mosaic era in which the law and the prophets looked ahead to the coming of Christ. The high point of this section is reached in Christ being set forth for our redemption. The most profound point of this discussion is developed as one is led to contemplate the nature of God and to attempt to explain how the death of Jesus can satisfy God to the degree that God can justify man of sin and at the same time be just and true to Himself. It is here that we see the cross as an eternal essential. It was essential to God and to man. George Mark Elliott observes, "This is one of the deepest sections in the New Testament." The book of Revelation is claimed to be the most difficult to interpret of all the books of the New Testament. If that be true, it is because of the symbolic language of that book. Romans has the reputation of being the most profound book of the New Testament and we are now ready to plunge into one of the deepest parts of Romans.

THIRTEEN LESSONS ON ROMANS

THE NEEDS OF MAN

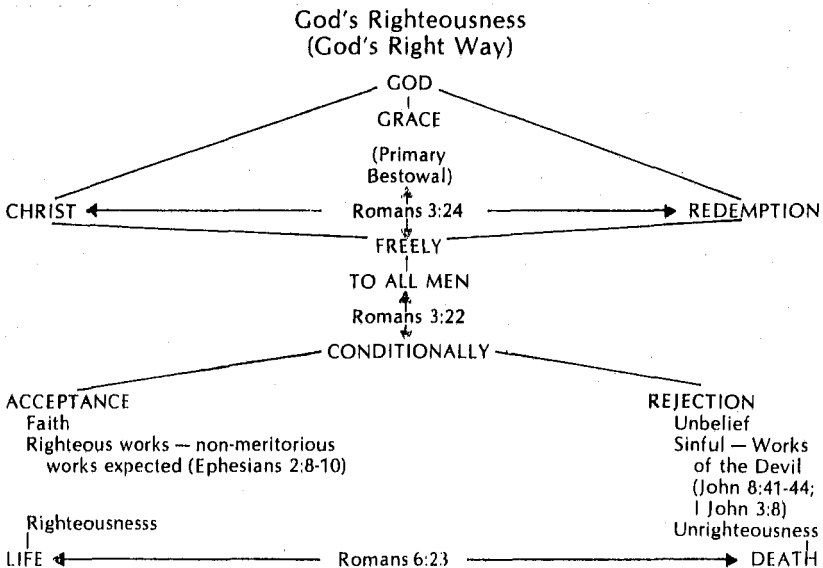
21 But now apart from the law a righteousness of God hath been manifested, being witnessed by the law and the prophets; 22 even the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ unto all them that believe; for there is no distinction; 23 for all have sinned, and fall short of the glory of God; 24 being justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus: 25 whom God set forth to be a propitiation, through faith, in his blood

The phrase, "the righteousness of God" has been discussed at length in lesson three under the heading, "The Content of the Gospel." The reader is now urged to review that lesson. Although the law and Gospel are clearly distinguished from one another in this passage, Paul again affirms that there is no disharmony between the two. The "law and the prophets" gave predictive testimony concerning the coming of the Christ and the Good News about Him, and the law and the Gospel are in perfect accord. It is not the law versus the Gospel in Paul's writings. They are not enemies, but they complement and fulfill each other. The law was never intended to justify men from sin (3:20). According to Luke, Paul preached the same truth while at Antioch of Pisidia, saying, "You could not be justified by the law of Moses" (Acts 13:39). The book of Hebrews is in agreement noting that Christ, the mediator of a New Covenant died for "the transgressions that were under the first covenant," (Hebrews 9:15). Many functions of the law are set forth in the book of Romans, but to justify from sin is not specified to be one of those things which the law could do. Every sacrifice under the Mosaic system looked forward to the one sacrifice which could remove sin (Hebrews 10:4, 12, 14). The most basic function of the law is "to bring us unto Christ, that we might be justified by faith," (Galatians 3:24).

Salvation is not gained through any system of merit, but all are saved by grace through faith in Jesus Christ. God makes no distinction in His treatment of men. "All have sinned," and "all them that believe" in Jesus Christ are "justified freely by his grace," (vv. 22-24). One does not merit salvation through faith anymore than he can earn salvation through any other act, mental or physical. A person is no more worthy of salvation after he has believed than before he has arrived at faith. Salvation is free, but conditional. The grace of God is the absolute ground or foundation of our salvation and the thoughts of man cannot probe beyond the grace of God when salvation is pondered. God's grace in its original bestowal is potentially universal and therefore, in its primary offering by God to man may truly be said to be unconditional. The umbrella of God's grace covered all mankind without exception.

So the giving of God's grace is apart from any condition, but the reception of that grace by each individual is conditional. It can only be received by faith. So Paul will later say, "We have access by faith unto this grace" (5:2). As is often said, "King and beggar are on common ground before the cross." There is no other way to enter into God's grace except by faith in Christ and confidence in that which He did for man at Calvary. So Paul can doubly affirm, "by grace have ye been saved," and "Ye have been saved by faith," (Ephesians 2:5, 8). Faith, of course, includes far more than mere mental assent to some facts about Jesus Christ, and it is more than mere trust in God. Faith must be understood to include all that a man secures by the act of faith. Faith is foundational to the Christian system, and we are saved by faith because that act is essential to justification, sanctification, good works, and ultimately glorification. We tend to see faith as a simple act that stands alone. Obviously God views faith inclusively with all that appertains to it. So God's Word declares we are "saved by faith." In the next lesson we shall return to a discussion of faith and all that faith includes in the eyes of God. We shall try to ascertain why God could count Abraham's faith to be righteousness.

The following diagram may help to visualize the content of verses 22-24 and the listing which follows the diagram should help one to see clearly the specifics of God's scheme of redemption.



THIRTEEN LESSONS ON ROMANS

Elements of "The Righteousness of God"

(3:21-24)

1. Author	God	v. 22
2. Recipient	Man	
3. Effect	Redemption	v. 24
4. Ground	Grace of God	v. 24
5. Condition	Faith	v. 22
6. Manifested	Involves the incarnation of Christ and the total Gospel message	v. 21
7. Witnessed	The law and the prophets foretold the Gospel with limited previews	v. 21

Jesus Christ is at the heart of God's plan to save man and He was "set forth (to be) a propitiation." The word propitiation (*hilasterios*) is a deeply meaningful word and its meaning is not easy to capture for the English reader. The great variety of translations indicate that there is a problem involved in trying to find a generally accepted definition:

"mercy seat," *New Testament Interlinear*, George Ricker Berry

"A sacrifice of reconciliation," - - - Williams

"A reconciling sacrifice," Berkley Translation, Gerrit Verkuyl

"Put forward as an expiation by his blood," RSV

"Presented him as a sacrifice of atonement," NIV

The same word in the same form is found in Hebrews 9:5. The same word, but a different form is found in I John 2:2 and 4:10. Berry's translation above gives the literal meaning of the word which Thayer defines as: "The well-known cover of the ark of the covenant in the Holy of Holies which was sprinkled with the blood of the expiatory victim on the annual day of atonement." (*Thayer's Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, p. 301)

Any Jew who read Romans and any Gentile readers who had become Christian via the Jewish proselyte route would have been familiar with the terminology "mercy seat" as used in the Old Testament. The Hebrew verb, *kaphar* means literally, "to cover," whereas figuratively it may mean to cancel, appease, forgive, make atonement or reconcile. *Kapporeth* is a noun which stems from the root *kaphar* and means a lid or cover. In the Old Testament this word is used only of the cover of the sacred ark, the "mercy seat." Exodus 25:10-22 is a helpful paragraph in understanding the origin of the "mercy seat" concept. According to verse 22 of the passage in Exodus, it is at the "mercy seat" where God promised to meet with Israel and commune with them. Occasionally one reads in religious articles of the "shekinah glory" of God although the Anglicized Hebrew word "shekinah" does not appear in the English

Bible. It comes from the Hebrew, *shakan* which means to abide, rest, or remain and involves God's abiding presence and glory in the tabernacle (Exodus 40:34, ff.), and later in the temple where He promised to meet with his people at the "mercy seat." All of this history would pass before the mind of one knowledgeable of the Old Testament when he read this statement by Paul that Christ is our *kaphar-hilastèrios* = "mercy seat." The crux of the whole matter is that Jesus is our mercy seat. It is only in Jesus Christ that Jew or Gentile can come to God. Where else can sinful man meet with God? "There is one mediator between God and man . . . Jesus Christ," (I Timothy 2:5). How else can one hope to have sin forgiven and its effects removed and to share in the glory of God apart from union with Jesus Christ? "Christ in you, the hope of glory" is the only hope realistically possessed by man (Colossians 1:27). Jesus was sent to man to bridge the chasm between God and man, and through Christ, God comes to us. Also, through Christ we are brought to God for "God was in Christ reconciling the world unto Himself" (II Corinthians 5:19). Truly Christ is our "mercy seat," and "there will I meet with thee," (Exodus 25:22). What a rendezvous of God with man!

THE NEEDS OF GOD

25b to show his righteousness because of the passing over of the sins done aforetime, in the forbearance of God; 26 for the showing, I say, of his righteousness at this present season: that he might himself be just, and the justifier of him that hath faith in Jesus.

It is evident from verses 25b and 26 that God is not indifferent to sin although He had for centuries, in forbearance, passed over sins. In light of the facts that there was no immediate judgment upon the sins of men and nations, it did seem that God was not calling men to give account for their sins. Only occasionally startling judgments occurred like the rain of fire on Sodom and Gomorrah and centuries later the destruction of Jerusalem. Now and then individuals like Korah, Dathan and Abiram experienced immediate judgment by God. But over all one might think that God merely winked at sin. Paul faces this problem and indicates that the defense of God's righteousness and justice is Christ and His blood. God had planned before the creation of the world to handle the sin problem through the death of His Son. Sins being "rolled ahead to the cross" is a good Biblical concept although the words "rolled ahead" cannot be found in the Bible in connection with the word sin. For the truth of the statement see such passages as Hebrews 7:11, 18, 19; 9:8, 15; 10:1-4, 11, 16-18; John 1:51; 3:13; Jeremiah 31:31, ff.

THIRTEEN LESSONS ON ROMANS

The cross is the eternal essential! It is just as necessary to satisfy the nature of God as it is essential to man for the forgiveness of his sin. God could not ignore sin and be true to Himself. Divine justice is somehow satisfied by the death of Jesus. Mystery is involved.

One wonders what happened in the heart and mind of God when Christ died at Calvary. How could the very nature of God, to which sin is repulsive, be turned to look with forgiveness upon sin? How could the wrath of God against sin be allayed by the death of His Son to the extent that God could love, and long for fellowship with one who has sinned? How can God maintain a moral universe, forgive sin and still be true to Himself. Truly this is a deeply profound passage. It is very superficial to answer that Jesus satisfied God because He was His Son or because Jesus was heaven's best, etc. It is God's nature to be just and "God is love." Both elements of God's nature are met and satisfied in the cross. Perhaps we shall learn how that satisfaction was supplied when we are in heaven and see face to face and know even as we are known. As F. F. Bruce indicates, "It is a problem fit for God."

Paul makes no pretense to know the mind of God when divine revelation is not given to him. He states unequivocally what he does know: that the cross demonstrates that God is just and that He is also a justifier of them that believe in His Son and accept God's plan through which man can be saved. This is all we need to know at the present.

BOASTING IS OUT OF ORDER

27 Where then is the glorying? It is excluded. By what manner of law? of works? Nay: but by a law of faith. 28 We reckon therefore that a man is justified by faith apart from the works of the law. 29 Or is God the God of Jews only? is he not the God of Gentiles also? Yea, of Gentiles also: 30 if so be that God is one, and he shall justify the circumcision by faith, and the uncircumcision through faith? God forbid: nay, we establish the law.

Paul is ready to draw some conclusions based upon what he has already written. Those conclusions are found in verses 27-31.

The first conclusion is that a man is justified by faith, and he has nothing to boast about. Man is not good because he performs works of law, and faith is nothing one can brag about. Faith, as previously stated, is not in itself meritorious (vv. 27, 28).

The second conclusion is that there is one God of both the Jews and Gentiles. As there is one God, so also there is one plan of salvation. God is saving both the Jew and the Gentile through faith (vv. 29, 30).

The third conclusion is that salvation through faith does not destroy the law but rather, faith complements the law (v. 31). God's plan of righteousness through faith was predicted by the law and the prophets. The law was not designed to justify from sin. Rather it defined sin, convicted concerning sin, restrained from sin and ultimately brought man to the "Mercy Seat," even Christ, that sin might be forgiven. Does faith make the law null and void of meaning? "Don't think like that!" says Paul. Faith establishes the law.

READER'S REVIEW:

1. Why is this section of Romans considered to be deeply profound?
2. What is the main thrust of Paul's argument in this section?
3. Paul says God's plan is "apart from the law" but how does he relate this plan to the Old Testament?
4. Many functions of the law are noted in Romans. What is the one thing which the law could not do?
5. Give the pros and cons concerning the statement, "A man is not more worthy of salvation after he has believed than he was before in unbelief."
6. Explain the difference between the primary bestowal of God's grace upon man and the reception of that grace by each individual.
7. Can you cite from memory at least the first five elements in God's plan of righteousness?
8. What is the literal meaning of the word "propitiation"? State also a figurative definition.
9. How is the word "propitiation" related to Old Testament history?
10. Putting the above definitions and the Old Testament usage of the word "propitiation" together, state as concisely as possible what this term means to the Christian.
11. Why would some men come to the conclusion that God is not really very concerned about sin?
12. What problem is involved in the statement, "This is a problem fit for God"?
13. Name two basic elements in the nature of God which are satisfied by the cross?
14. What is it that is ruled out if Paul's claim is true that a man is justified by faith and not by law?
15. A basic truth affirmed by every Jew from childhood is that "God is one." What is Paul's argument based upon that truth?
16. At the end of Chapter Three, Paul returns to a discussion of the relationship of the law and the Gospel. What is his conclusion?