



## The Salvific Efficacy of the Cross: An Exegetical Study of Romans 3:21-26

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### **Abstract**

Christianity is the redemptive religion based on the person and work of Jesus Christ. Long before the incarnation of Christ, God chose Israel as his nation and gave them his law as the standard for humanity. This law, which identified and revealed sin, could not make anyone righteous before God because no one was or is able to fulfill its demands and be accepted by God on their own merits. Consequently, at the right time, God provided righteousness for people through the death of Jesus Christ on the cross. This righteousness is imputed to believers through faith. While the subject of the cross is taught in many New Testament passages, this paper focuses on Romans 3:21-26, which is arguably at the core of Pauline soteriology. This paper employed a historical-critical exegetical approach to explore what Romans 3:21-26 reveals about God's provision of righteousness for humanity apart from the works of the law. It begins with a background study of the text, proceeds with the exegesis of the text, and ends by drawing theological significance for contemporary Christianity. The central thesis is that God, through the cross, offered a solution that surpassed the limitations of Old Testament law. Therefore, the cross, rather than the law, embodies God's ultimate plan for the salvation of humanity. The paper contributes to the subjects of atonement and also provides insight into New Testament exegesis.

**Keywords:** *Christ; Faith; God; Sin; Righteousness*

### **Introduction**

The Christian cross, seen as a representation of Jesus' crucifixion, is a well-known symbol of Christianity. Christian salvation depends on the event that took place on the cross (Morris, 1972). No authentic Christianity can exist without the cross (Ferreira, 2020). A Christian message without the cross lacks a key component of the Christian faith. The cross reminds Christians of the salvific efficacy of Jesus' death (and resurrection). It symbolizes the justification of the sinner apart from the works of the law.

On the subject of the cross, Paul's Epistle to the Romans has much to say, especially regarding its purpose and accomplishments. Romans may be considered as a comprehensive exposition of all Christian theology because it touches on almost all major doctrines of Christianity, including Bibliology, Theology Proper, Christology, Pneumatology, Soteriology, Ecclesiology, and Eschatology. In this epistle, Paul argues that the pursuit of righteousness through one's own efforts leads to a dead end because no one can successfully adhere to the entire law. Paul, then, presents justification through grace and faith as the alternative to work-based righteousness.

The subject of the cross has engaged many scholar for so many years. In the contemporary society where many people fix their mind on wealth and other blessings in life, the message of the cross is sometimes relegated to the background (Atiemo, 2016). Prosperity messages abound in many Christian churches today with emphasis on wealth acquisition and accumulation instead of the pursuit of God's kingdom and his righteousness (Matt. 6:33). At the same time, people are inclined to believing that they can "buy" divine blessings and eventually "purchase" salvation once they acquire enough wealth. Good works are sometimes considered as means of salvation. Adeboye (2003, p.44), for instance, asserts, "Anybody who is not paying his/her tithe is not going to heaven. Some people have taught you that if you do not pay your tithes, God will not give you blessings. This is true, but a little more serious, you do not pay your tithes, and you do not go to heaven." First of all, this assertion implies that failing to pay tithes leads to not receiving blessings and, ultimately, not going to heaven. This can create a sense of anxiety and fear among believers, as they may feel pressured to give their tithes out of fear rather than genuine spiritual conviction. Secondly, it underlines a legalistic view of salvation, where one's actions, such as paying tithes, are seen as prerequisites for attaining heaven. Salvation is perceived as something earned through works rather than received through faith and grace. This can lead to a performance-based religion, where individuals focus on fulfilling religious obligations rather than cultivating a personal relationship with God based on faith and love. With such a work-based salvation theology, people can go on sinning and still have hope of salvation as long as they are able to pay their tithes.

Clearly, the church stands the risk of losing the evangelical tradition of the centrality of Christ and the cross if Christian theology fails to emphasize God's provision of salvation on the basis of the atoning sacrifice of Christ and on that basis alone. The need to revisit the subject of the cross in contemporary times has prompted this exegetical paper, which explores what Romans 3:21-26 reveals about God's provision of righteousness for humankind apart from the works of the law. The exegetical approach used comprises three steps: a background study of the text, an exegetical analysis of the text itself, and an exploration of its theological implications/significance. The main argument is that God provided the cross as a means to accomplish what the Old Testament regulations could not achieve. Therefore, the cross, rather than the law, stands as the epitome of God's ultimate plan for the salvation of humankind.

With these introductory notes, the paper proceeds to address contextual issues related to the text, starting with the historical context/background.

## **Historical Context of Romans 3:21-26**

The subject of the authorship of the epistle to the Romans has attracted scholarly attention and debate over the centuries. However, New Testament scholars generally identify the Apostle Paul as the author of the Epistle to the Romans. The internal evidence within the text itself suggests Paul as the author. The opening verse of the letter, Romans 1:1, explicitly identifies the writer as Paul. The letter reflects the distinctive literary, historical, and theological style characteristic of Paul's other writings. Pauline themes, such as justification by faith, the role of the law, and the universality of the Gospel, prominently feature in the Epistle to the Romans. The consistency in language, tone, and theological concepts between Romans and the undisputed Pauline letters adds weight to the argument for Pauline

authorship. Additionally, the early Church Fathers and the broader early Christian tradition support the attribution of the Epistle to the Romans to Paul (Uzodimma, 2018). Their writings and references to this epistle consistently acknowledge Paul as its author.

The Epistle to the Romans also reveals that Paul had assistance in writing it. In Romans 16:22, the writer mentions Tertius, who played a role in transcribing the letter. This practice of using scribes for composing letters was commonplace in the first-century Greco-Roman world. It was not unusual for an author to dictate the content of a letter while a scribe wrote it down. This collaboration does not detract from Paul's authorship but rather affirms it, as it aligns with the historical context and practices of the time.

The Roman church was not established by Paul; it might have been formed by Palestinian and Syrian converts (cf. Acts 2:10) (Fitzmyer, 2011). Whether the Roman church was predominantly Jewish or Gentile in nature has been debated. However, Paul's emphasis on the Jewish nation (chs. 9–11), his references to Abraham (the father of the Jewish nation [ch. 4]), his direct references and allusions to Jewish Scripture, and his defense of some Jewish traditions (2:17-3:8; 3:21-31; 6:1-7:6; 14:1-15:3) are used to argue for a Jewish audience (Gundry, 2012). Arguments for a Gentile audience include Paul's assertions like "I am speaking to you Gentiles" (11:13 RSV); "among all the Gentiles...among whom you also are" (1:5-6 RSV), and the idea that the recipients of the letter have received mercy because of the unbelief of the Jews (11:28-31), among others (Gundry, 2012). Given the foregoing evidence, I am of the view that Paul's audience consisted of both Jews and Gentiles. Paul tactfully negotiated between the Jews and the Gentiles and appealed to each of these parties in the church.

Like many other books of the Bible, the exact date of the writing of Romans cannot be known with certainty. However, most New Testament scholars date the book to the latter part of 57 AD or the early part of 58 AD (Powell, 2009). Paul probably wrote this letter immediately before his visit to Jerusalem (15:23) (Fitzmyer, 2011). If that is the case, then Romans is one of the earliest epistles of the New Testament, which would explain why writers like Peter and James make significant allusions to some texts in this epistle (1 Pet. 1:5 cf. Rom. 1:17; 1 Pet. 1:6-7 cf. Rom. 5:3-4; James 2:8 cf. Rom. 13:8-10).

It appears that Paul composed the letter from Corinth at the end of his third missionary journey (see Acts 18:23-21:15, especially 20:2-3; Gruenler, 2008). The Corinthian origin is supported by the fact that Gaius, a Corinthian, was hosting Paul at the time of writing this letter (16:3; cf. 1 Cor. 1:14). Paul's mention of Erastus, a city treasurer (16:23); and Paul's praise of Phoebe of Cenchrea (the port city of Corinth; 16:1) also supports a Corinthian origin of this letter.

Romans was written for at least three reasons (Powell, 2009; Fitzmyer, 2011; Gundry, 2012). Firstly, it was written to resolve Jewish-Gentile tensions in the Roman church (cf. Rom. 3:20-31; 11:17-32). It is because of this that Paul asked the Gentile churches to support the Jerusalem church, which was in financial distress (see 1 Cor. 16:1-4; 2 Cor. 8-9). Paul's explanation of the basic tenets of the Christian gospel to the Romans underscores a missionary purpose of his letter (see 1:16; 3:8 and 9:1-2). Furthermore, Paul wrote the letter to secure the financial support of his audience for his planned mission to Spain after visiting Rome (15:24, 28).

### **Literary Background and Structure of Romans 3:21-26**

There is no doubt that Romans is an epistle, though biblical scholars do not agree on the type of epistle it is (Moo, 1996). Suggested types include an ambassadorial letter (Jewett, 2007), protreptic letter, memorandum (Haacker cited in Moo, 1996), tractate (a series of theological arguments) (Carson & Moo, 2008), to mention but a few. While there are traces of each of these features in the letter, it seems that, on

the whole, Romans is more of a tractate, consisting of a series of theological reflections on God's salvific plan and its realization in the atoning sacrifice of Christ.

Paul begins his letter with traditional greetings (1:1) and continues to lay the foundation for his theology of salvation through faith, arguing that all humans, whether Jews or Gentiles, are under God's wrath because of sin and that it is impossible to be saved through the Law (1:18—3:20). Paul makes it clear that on the Day of Judgment, all mouths will be shut because there is not even one who is righteous (3:19-20). However, this does not mean that humans are incapable of doing any good. Paul states clearly that even those who are not under the law may be prompted by their conscience to do good deeds (2:15). Yet, such goodness cannot take away God's wrath against humanity, which is the result of sin.

He then delves into the text under consideration, where he deals with Christ's atonement as a solution to the problem of God's wrath toward humanity. Paul explains how God's salvific plan was executed in the death and resurrection of Christ. He contends that, as the God of all people, YHWH justifies everyone based on the same criteria (Gabrielson, 2016). The main concern of this passage is how God justifies the sinner—whether a Jew or a Gentile. Themes like righteousness, justification, sanctification, and expiation are treated in this passage.

The passage is followed by Romans 3:27-31, which focuses on the implications of justification. This section stresses what verses 21-26 espouse but develops the argument further by demonstrating that “when faith is properly understood, it simultaneously enforces grace (Rom. 3:24) and provides the mechanism by which Jews and Gentiles alike may be justified” (Carson, 2004, p. 138-139). This faith excludes boasting (v. 27), preserves grace (v. 28), is a necessity for all regardless of race (vv. 29-30), and does not nullify the law (v. 31).

I have adapted MacArthur's (1991, p.201) seven-fold division of the text with slight modification.<sup>1</sup>

- a. Righteousness apart from legalism (v. 21a)
- a. Righteousness built on revelation (v. 21b)
- b. Righteousness acquired by faith (v. 22a)
- c. Righteousness provided for all (v. 22b-23)
- d. Righteousness given freely through grace (v. 24a)
- e. Righteousness accomplished by redemption (v. 24b)
- f. Righteousness paid by atoning sacrifice (v. 25a)
- g. Righteousness demonstrated by divine forbearance (vv. 25b-26)

The study proceeds to consider the text closely against the background outlined above.

### Close Reading of Romans 3:21-26

#### Righteousness Apart from Legalism (Rom. 3:21a)

21a. *Νυνὶ δὲ χωρὶς νόμου δικαιοσύνη θεοῦ πεφανέρωται*

Paul begins this unit with the expression *Νυνὶ δὲ* (“But now”), which may signify a logical transition (moving to the next step in the argument; that is, “But as it is...”) or a temporal transition (moving to the next point in time; that is, “But at the present ...”). Against the background of Paul's discussions on life under the old era of Law (characterized by sin) in Romans 1:18-3:20, I subscribe to the idea that Paul uses *νυνὶ δὲ* as a temporal transition to mark a redemptive shift (as in 6:22, 7:6, 1 Cor.

<sup>1</sup> This eighth division is my own addition.

15:20, Eph. 2:13, and Col. 1:22) from the pre-Christ era characterized by sin's domination to a post-Christ era characterized by righteousness. In this sense, the word "Now" refers to everything that is contingent upon the death of Christ. Or as Cranfield (2006, p. 201) puts it, "But now" represents "a contrast between the impossibility of justification by works, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, the fact that in the recent past a decisive event has taken place, by which a justification which is God's free gift *πεφανερῶται*, and is now *πεφανερῶμενη*."

The expression *χωρὶς νόμου* ("apart from the law" or "without the law") may be connected with *δικαιοσύνη θεοῦ* (to yield: "But now a righteousness from God apart from the law, has been made known") or with *πεφανερῶται* (to yield: "But now a righteousness from God has been made known apart from the law"). Carson (2004) argues that the first interpretation, though popular, is problematic because it implies that the righteousness of God was once obtained with the contribution of the law, a position Paul both opposes in Romans 2:1—3:20 (when he argues that the law failed to justify the Jews) and rules out in Romans 4 (where he argues that justification has always been by faith without the works of the law). The second interpretation, Carson (2004, p.123) contends, removes the challenges of the first view by shifting attention from "the reception of the righteousness since it has been made known apart from law" to its disclosure, "since it has been made known apart from the law". Accordingly, Paul does not mean that the Law is now useless (cf. 3:31) but that in the new era, one does not live hopelessly under the Law's radical demands (cf. Matt. 5:21-48).

Though the word *νόμου* ("law") can be the shortened form of "works of Law" (cf. v. 20), one can agree with both Moo (1996, p. 223) and Carson (2004, p.123) in the present context where Paul emphasizes "the law as a system, as a stage in God's unfolding plan," rather than "the law as something for humans to do"; "law" most likely refers to the temporal administration of the "Mosaic covenant." Moo (1996, p. 222) argues further that "Paul's purpose is to announce how God's righteousness has been manifested rather than to contrast two kinds of righteousness." Therefore, the expression "apart from the law" means the Old Testament law system (marked by traditions of circumcision, the Sabbath, clean and unclean food, among others) does not contribute to the justification of the sinner before God. It is important to note that while Paul might have taken this position as a polemic against the Jews in the Roman church who taught that the works of the law had some significant role to play in their salvation, he (Paul) does not in any way intend to render the Old Testament legal system useless in God's salvific plan.

The expression *δικαιοσύνη θεοῦ* ("righteousness of God") is used four times (vv. 21, 22, 25, 26), the cognate adjective *δικαιος* "just" appears once (v. 26), and *δίκαιον* "to justify" appears twice (vv. 24, 26) in the passage under consideration. According to Knox (1956), the possible meanings of *δικαιοσύνη θεοῦ* include (a) God's own righteousness; (b) God's forensic declaration that someone is righteous or God's eschatological justifying act (as in Rom. 1:16-17); and (c) the state which God's justifying act confers. Arguing from the immediate context (vv. 20-22), Knox (1956, p. 428) suggests that *δικαιοσύνη θεοῦ* means "the status of approvedness, the character of being declared righteous, of being acquitted, which God alone can confer." He notes further that the use of *προφητῶν* ("manifest" or "made to appear") instead of *ἀποκαλύπτεται* ("revealed"; 1:16-17) stresses that the verb *δικαιοσύνη* is a state, rather than an action; therefore, options (a) and (c) are likely. Option (a) is also eliminated for the reason that God's own righteousness would not depend on one's faith. The only valid option, therefore, is that the expression *δικαιοσύνη θεοῦ* means God's way of putting the sinner right, that is, a state of being that is acceptable to God (cf. Rom. 1:17). Since this divine saving act is rooted in God's covenant faithfulness to Israel despite their failure to obey the Law (cf. 3:3-9; 9:1-29), it is also possible to consider that this righteousness is a fulfillment of his covenant promises as Israel's God and King in delivering, saving, and vindicating them. I conclude with Porter and Land (2019) that the designation as "God's righteousness" stresses that it is based on nothing more than God's grace and mercy; it is God-given and God-adjudicated.



**Righteousness Built on Revelation (Rom. 3:21b)**

21b. μαρτυρουμένη ὑπὸ τοῦ νόμου καὶ τῶν προφητῶν

The phrase *νόμου καὶ τῶν προφητῶν* (“Law and the Prophets”) refers to the entirety of the Old Testament (cf. Matt. 5:17; 7:12). Paul’s point, then, is that the new means of justification occurs outside the Old Testament legal system, although this new activity is predicted by the Old Testament (Moo, 1996). In support of the idea that the gospel of Christ is veiled in the Jewish Scriptures but fully revealed in the New Testament, Wiersbe (2007, p. 417) states, “Beginning at Genesis 3:15 and continuing through the entire Old Testament, witness is given to salvation by faith in Christ. The Old Testament sacrifices, the prophecies, the types, and the great ‘Gospel Scriptures’ (such as Isa. 53) all bore witness to this truth. The Law could witness to God’s righteousness, but it could not provide it for sinful man. Only Jesus could do that.” Therefore, the text suggests both the continuity and discontinuity in God’s salvific history, in that “God’s justifying activity in the new age takes place outside the confines of the Old Testament, but at the same time, Scripture as a whole anticipates and predicts God’s new work in Christ” (Porter & Land 2019, p. 139). In other words, there is both continuity and discontinuity in God’s justifying activity between the Old Testament and the New Testament. While the new age of salvation through Christ represents a significant departure from the Old Testament law and sacrificial system, it is not entirely divorced from the Old Testament. This implies that there is a theological connection and progression from the Old Testament to the New, as the New Testament fulfills and surpasses the anticipations and predictions found in the Old Testament.

**Righteousness Acquired by Faith (Rom. 3:22a)**

22a. δικαιοσύνη δὲ θεοῦ διὰ πίστεως Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ εἰς πάντας τοὺς πιστεύοντας.

Paul now directs himself to the human side, telling his audience what humans ought to do for God to put them into a right relationship with Him. He answers that *δικαιοσύνη θεοῦ* (“righteousness of God”) comes through faith (not works) *εἰς πάντας τοὺς πιστεύοντας* (“to all who believe”). The emphasis on *πάντας* (“all”) who believe in Christ being recipients of God’s saving activity (v. 22a) parallels the emphasis on “all” who have sinned (v. 23a), and this agrees with Paul’s argument in 1:18–3:20. Paul uses the present text to clarify that salvation is not universal but only for those who express faith in Christ.

Whether the expression *πίστεως Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ* is a subjective genitive (“faithfulness of Jesus Christ” [NET]) or an objective genitive (“faith in Jesus Christ” [NRSV]) is a subject of debate (Keener 2009, p.57). The first interpretation, which emphasizes Christ’s faithfulness toward God throughout His earthly life and ministry, especially in His passion and death, is favored by Paul’s view of the centrality of Jesus’s work in Romans 3:24-25 and the obvious meaning of *πίστεως* as “faithfulness” in Romans 3:3 (Keener, 2009, p. 57). Arguing for this position, Gorman (2004, p. 351) asserts, “Paul’s melding of faith and obedience in 1:5 has prepared the reader to understand Christ’s death as His act of faith (3:25-26) as well as obedience (5:19).” Furthermore, this interpretation has linguistic support because it endeavors to avoid the tautology of asserting the importance of faith twice: “faith in Jesus Christ” and “for all who believe” (Carson, 2004, p. 126). Nonetheless, it is argued that the most consistent reading of this expression in Romans and Galatians (Rom. 1:5, 8, 12; 3:27, 28, 30, 31; 4:5, 9, 11, 12, 13, 14, 16, 19, 20; 5:1, 2; 9:30, 32; 10:6, 8, 17; 11:20; 14:23; 16:26; Gal. 2:20; 3:2, 5, 7, 8, 9, 11, 12, 14, 26; 5:5, 6) supports the objective genitive position. Outside the Pauline literature, Mark’s (11:22) uses the expression “*πίστεως* of God” to imply “faith in God.” The case of Galatians 2:16 where the identical phrase “through faith of Jesus Christ” is followed by the explanatory statement, “we believed in Christ Jesus,” also supports this position (Harrison, 1976). Furthermore, it seems “faith in Christ” is more likely in a book like Romans, where Paul’s major argument is that salvation comes through no other means than faith in Christ. Finally, there is no other text where Paul speaks of the “faith of Christ,” making it unlikely this would be his only mention of it.

Considering both sides of the debate, I support the objective genitive position ("faith in Jesus Christ"). The problem of the seeming tautology of "faith in Jesus Christ" and "for all who believe" is solved if it is rendered somewhat paraphrastically as "this righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ—to all who have faith in him" (Carson, 2004, p. 126). This rendering not only takes the expressions "righteousness" and "faith" in their most natural senses but also provides an important link with the preceding text (Rom. 1:18-3:20) and prepares the reader's mind for Paul's emphasis on faith in Romans 3:27-31 (Carson, 2004).

### Righteousness Provided for All (Rom. 3:22b-23)

22b. οὐ γὰρ ἐστὶν διαστολή,

23. πάντες γὰρ ἥμαρτον καὶ ὑστεροῦνται τῆς δόξης τοῦ θεοῦ

In verse 22b, Paul makes the point that the righteousness of God shows no *διαστολή* ("distinction") between Gentiles and Jews. The reason for this assertion is supplied in verse 23, signaled by *γὰρ* ("For"). The expression *πάντες ἥμαρτον* ("All have sinned") summarizes the human predicament, referring to 1:18-3:20 and sharing the thought of first-century Jews, as evident in 4 Ezra (7:46, 8:35). The verb *ἁμαρτάνω* ("have sinned") is in an aorist tense and so may be interpreted as a historical summary of all that Paul has described earlier regarding the unrighteousness of humanity—indeed, all humans have sinned. It may also be considered as relating to the imputation of Adam's sin as the natural representative of the human race (as in Rom. 5:12-21). Whichever way one looks at it, the message is that all humans are sinners, and thus cannot achieve right standing before God without God's mercy. The consequence of the universal sinfulness of humanity is that all *ὑστεροῦνται τῆς δόξης τοῦ θεοῦ* ("fall short of the glory of God").

The Greek verb *υστερουνται* ("fall short") literally means "to be behind," "to lack," "to want," "to be destitute of" (cf. Matt. 19:20; Luke 15:14; 1 Cor. 1:7; 8:8; Phil. 4:12) (Murray 1997, p.112), "come too late," "miss through one's own fault"; hence, "lack, fall short of" (Fitzmyer, 2011, p. 840). The use of *υστερουνται* in the present tense suggests an ongoing condition rather than a single action, indicating that humans continuously find themselves in a state of falling short of divine glory. This ongoing condition may result from a persistent lack of action or inability to fully attain divine perfection.

Commentators differ regarding what the *δόξα* ("glory") of God constitutes. Murray (1997) identifies four views: (1) the glory humans are to give to God (cf. Luke 17:18; Acts 12:23; Rom. 4:20); (2) the glory or honor God bestows on humans (cf. John 5:41, 44; 8:50; Rom. 2:7); (3) the image of God in humans (cf. 1 Cor. 11:7; 2 Cor. 3:18; 8:23); (4) the state of future glory (cf. Rom. 5:2; 8:18, 21; 1 Cor. 2:7). Option 1 does not seem to fit the context where the sinful nature of humanity is said to be the cause of the lack of divine glory. Option 4 seems unlikely because humans can hardly be blamed for lacking a future thing. Option 2 may be supported by Israel's possession of divine glory at the time of their redemption from exile (Isa. 35:2) and the departure of the divine glory from them due to their rebellion against God (1 Sam. 4:21; Ezek. 11:22-23). In support of option 3 is the first-century Greco-Roman Jewish thought that "all humans were sharing in the divine glory before Adam, that in Adam all fell away from that glory (Gen. Rab. 12:5; 3 Bar. 4:16; Apoc. Mos. 2:16), and that the same glory will be restored in the eschatological future (Rom. 5:2; 8:18, 21, 30)" (Porter & Land, 2019, p. 141). Since this divine glory is communicated to those who draw near to God (cf. 2 Cor. 3:18; 4:6) and alienation from God due to sin makes one lose it, it is most likely that it refers to the glory God bestows on humans.

**Righteousness Given Freely through Grace (Rom. 3:24a)**

24a. *δικαιούμενοι δωρεάν τῆ αὐτοῦ χάριτι*

Paul uses two images to explain what God has done for the repentant sinner through Jesus's death. The first image is justification, which is grounded in the imagery of the law court (v. 24a). The particle *δικαιούμενοι* ("being justified"; lit. "to set right" or "put right with") refers to the "alls" of the previous two verses—that is, all those who have believed (v. 22), of whom all were sinful (v. 23). Paul uses this legal term to denote the legal declaration that someone is righteous, without implying the ethical sense ("to make righteous") which is sanctification (Moo, 1996, p. 227). Here, it means God's action in acquitting believers from all charges that could be leveled against them because of sin, and then imputing the righteousness of Christ to them based on their faith in Christ. The use of the passive form *δικαιούμενοι* emphasizes that humans are passive in obtaining God's righteousness. Paul makes this explicit by using the term *δωρεάν* ("gift"), which signifies that humans make no contribution toward being justified (Moo, 1996). God's greatest gift to humanity is the salvation he gives through his Son, given totally out of his divine grace. This understanding reinforces the foundational principle that salvation is a result of God's initiative and love, not a reward for human deeds or righteousness. It emphasizes the profound reliance on God's grace in the process of justification.

**Righteousness Accomplished by Redemption (Rom. 3:24b)**

24b. *διὰ τῆς ἀπολύτρωσεως τῆς ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ*

The second word Paul uses to explain God's justifying grace is *ἀπολύτρωσις* ("redemption"), which appears 10 times in the New Testament (including Luke 21:28; Rom. 3:24; 8:23; 1 Cor. 1:30; Eph. 1:7, 14; 4:30; Col. 1:14; Heb. 9:15) with the basic sense of "deliverance" or "acquittal," especially through the payment of a price (Moo, 1996). According to Fitzmyer (2011), both the Greco-Roman and Jewish worlds used "redemption" to denote the ransoming of prisoners of war, slaves

The concept of propitiation sounds appealing. Christ's death satisfied the righteous wrath and anger of God toward those who believe. The cross not only accomplished something for humans but also something for the Father. Paul's assertion that God's wrath is upon all humanity due to sin (Rom. 1:18-3:20) just before addressing the current section makes this position plausible. However, it has the potential to present God as resembling pagan deities with capricious anger that requires constant appeasement, the only difference being that in this case, it is God (not humans) who is said to have presented the sacrifice. To clarify, propitiation deals with God's wrath, while expiation deals with the guilt of sin. God's wrath is provoked by sin and its guilt. In biblical tradition, God never appears as the one who requires placation, but He does appear as the one who expiates (forgives) sins. Therefore, the primary concern should be the cultic defilement resulting from sin, hindering the communion of the sinner with God. In this context, Christ's death must address the root, which is the guilt of sin. Until sin, which justly triggers God's wrath, is expiated, propitiation cannot be effective.

This view is strongly supported by the fact that it is God who provides and presents the *ἱλαστήριον*. Thus, Christ was *προέθετο* ("put forward") as the mercy seat of the new age, as a means of wiping away sins that have alienated humans from God. It is important to note that expiation leads to propitiation because the former is the root and the latter is the fruit. When the root is no longer present, the fruit cannot exist either. Therefore, expiation implies propitiation, as the reconciliation between God and humanity is only possible when both God's wrath and the guilt of sin are addressed. One cannot exist without implying the other. Following this view, *ἱλαστήριον* means "expiation that leads to propitiation," resulting in the translation: "whom God displayed publicly as a sacrifice by which sin is forgiven and thereby turns away God's wrath," or simply put, "whom God displayed publicly as a sacrifice of atonement"—atonement being the consequence of expiation that leads to propitiation. This proposition



aligns with the Old Testament cultic tradition, which serves to "wipe away" the guilt of sin simultaneously with, and indeed because of, the appeasement of God's wrath (Moo, 1996, p. 234).

In the phrase *διὰ [τῆς] πίστεως ἐν τῷ αὐτοῦ αἵματι* ("through faith in his blood"), *αἷματι* ("his blood") is used figuratively to signify Christ's atoning sacrifice, the shedding of his blood, his sacrificial death that provides atonement for the lost world. Paul parallels the terms "blood" and "death" in Romans 5:9-10 in a way that makes them nearly synonymous. The crucifixion of Christ and other people in the Greco-Roman world involved the outpouring of blood (cf. John 19:34). The blood was the means through which he expiated, as without the shedding of blood, there is no forgiveness, redemption, or reconciliation (cf. Heb. 9:22). This echoes Jesus's words at the Lord's Supper that His death is represented as pouring out His blood for many (Mark 14:24; cf. Isa. 53).

### Righteousness Obtained through Atoning Sacrifice (Rom. 3:25a)

In this passage, the translation of the Greek term *ἱλαστήριον* has given rise to various interpretations. One perspective translates it as the "mercy seat," referring to the cover of the Ark of the Covenant where the blood of the sin offering was sprinkled on the Day of Atonement for reconciliation (Lev. 16:2, 16-17). This meaning aligns with its predominant usage in the Septuagint (LXX) and its sole usage in the New Testament in Hebrews 9:5. If this is Paul's intended meaning, he portrays Christ as the ultimate "place of atonement" and, consequently, the ultimate atonement sacrifice. Much like the mercy seat was where God met his people, this view sees Christ as the intersection of divinity and humanity through the incarnation (John 1:14), making Christ God's presence in human form.

Another interpretation views *ἱλαστήριον* as "propitiation," signifying the act of appeasing a deity through sacrifice to change the deity's disposition toward humans. Support for this view comes from the propitiatory use of the verb *ἰλάσκεσθαι* in the LXX and other literature. If this stance is accurate, then Paul perceives Christ's death as the means by which God's wrath is appeased, allowing God to favor humanity.

According to the third view, *ἱλαστήριον* means expiation—that is, the act that takes away the guilt of sin. A study of the verb *ἰλάσκεσθαι* and its cognates in the LXX shows that *ἱλαστήριον* can mean "to propitiate" or "to expiate" depending on the context. Dodd (in Longenecker 2016, p.428) traces the root of *ἱλαστήριον* to a verb which is used in pagan literature to mean: "(a) 'to placate' a [person] or a god; (b) 'to expiate' a sin, i.e. to perform an act (such as the payment of a fine or the offering of a sacrifice) by which its guilt is annulled." Dodd (in Longenecker 2016, p.428) further argues that "In accordance with biblical usage, therefore, the substantive (*ἱλαστήριον*) would mean, not propitiation, but 'a means by which guilt is annulled': if a man is an agent, the meaning would be 'a means of expiation': if God, 'a means by which sin is forgiven.'"

In assessing these interpretations, while the LXX's usage of *ἱλαστήριον* as "mercy seat" carries weight, that should not be the deciding factor in the present context where Paul's non-literal use of *ἱλαστήριον* seems clear. The writer of Hebrews (9:5) uses *ἱλαστήριον* with the article *ho* to mean "the cover of the ark." Paul omission of the definite article before *ἱλαστήριον* indicates that he is not referring to the object itself but to what happened in the ritual at the Ark and afterward. Ekem (2005) notes that the literal reading makes an illogical comparison between Christ and a piece of the inanimate mercy seat. Though the Jews held the mercy seat in high esteem it is unlikely that Paul would make such a comparison. Finally, the public display of Christ and the hiddenness of the mercy seat makes their comparison a weak one.

The concept of propitiation, although appealing, has the drawback of potentially depicting God as capriciously angry, needing constant appeasement, which is inconsistent with biblical tradition. Therefore, it is vital to address the cultic defilement resulting from sin, hindering communion with God. Christ's death must address sin's root, its guilt, for propitiation to be effective. This aligns with the fact

that God provides and presents the *ἱλαστήριον*. Consequently, Christ is portrayed as the mercy seat of the new age, eliminating sins that have separated humans from God. Notably, expiation leads to propitiation, where the former is the root and the latter is the fruit, and both must occur for reconciliation between God and humanity. Thus, *ἱλαστήριον* implies "expiation that results in propitiation," yielding the translation: "whom God publicly displayed as a sacrifice for the forgiveness of sins, turning away God's wrath," or more simply, "whom God publicly displayed as a sacrifice of atonement."

Regarding the phrase *διὰ [τῆς] πίστεως ἐν τῷ αὐτοῦ αἵματι* ("through faith in his blood"), "blood" symbolizes Christ's atoning sacrifice, his sacrificial death, providing atonement for humanity's redemption. Paul parallels "blood" and "death" in Romans 5:9-10, emphasizing their near synonymy. The crucifixion, common in the Greco-Roman world, involved the outpouring of blood (cf. John 19:34). This bloodshed served as the means of expiation, as without the shedding of blood, there is no forgiveness, redemption, or reconciliation (cf. Heb. 9:22). This aligns with Jesus's words during the Lord's Supper, where he described his death as the pouring out of his blood for many (Mark 14:24; cf. Isa. 53).

### Righteousness Demonstrated by Divine Forbearance (Rom. 3:25b-26)

25b. *εἰς ἔνδειξιν τῆς δικαιοσύνης αὐτοῦ διὰ τὴν πάρεσιν τῶν προγεγονότων ἁμαρτημάτων*

26. *ἐν τῇ ἀνοχῇ τοῦ θεοῦ, πρὸς τὴν ἔνδειξιν τῆς δικαιοσύνης αὐτοῦ ἐν τῷ νῦν καιρῷ, εἰς τὸ εἶναι αὐτὸν δίκαιον καὶ δικαιῶντα τὸν ἐκ πίστεως Ἰησοῦ.*

This section discusses divine forbearance as a demonstration of God's righteousness. The verb *πάρεσιν*, used exclusively here in the entire Greek Bible, can mean "passing over," "letting go unpunished," or "forgiveness," signifying "the temporary remission of debt." This is quite distinct from "putting away sins" or "forgiveness" (*αφεσις*) (Matera, 2010, p.95). MacArthur (2011, p.218) asserts that God withheld the full penalty for human sins because of His *ἀνοχῇ* ("forbearance" or "patience"), indicating "a temporary passing over of sin and withholding judgment on it for a certain period." This implies that God patiently endured human sins committed under the Old Covenant, looking forward to the new Day of Atonement when Christ would pay the ultimate ransom (Fitzmyer, 2011), but not that he paid no attention to sins or was completely unaware of or condoned human sins. Divine forbearance does not imply that forgiveness of sins was impossible prior to the time of Christ (cf. Rom. 4). Instead, it signifies that "God 'postponed' the full penalty due to sins in the Old Covenant, allowing sinners to stand before him without having provided an adequate 'satisfaction' of the demands of his holy justice (cf. Heb. 10:4)" (Moo 1996, p.240). Finally, God's forbearance does not render him unjust; it is a manifestation of his patience and grace, desiring that all come to him in repentance and not perish (2 Pet. 3:9; cf. Ps. 78:38) (MacArthur, 1991).

The use of *προγεγονότων* ("before now," "up until now," or "in years that are gone") is meant to contrast the generations of the past when God "allowed all the nations to walk in their own ways," the "times of ignorance," with the present time when God no longer overlooks sin but commands all people everywhere to come to the cross to experience his pardoning grace (cf. Acts 14:16; 17:30). The *προγεγονότων ἁμαρτημάτων* ("former sins") therefore refers to sins committed before the new era, not just sins committed before conversion (Moo, 1996).

Paul also asserts that the atoning death of Christ was a demonstration (*ἔνδειξις*) of God's righteousness and proof that in justifying the one who has faith in Christ, God's holiness and justice are not compromised (v. 26). God could not have maintained his justice—"His impartiality and fairness, or his acting in accordance with his own character and for his own glory" (Moo, 1996, p.237)—and holiness if he let sin go unpunished or if he accepted people without addressing their sins. God resolved this by placing the full penalty of sin on his Son out of his love for humanity and the need to demonstrate his supreme justice (MacArthur, 2011). Christ, having borne the full penalty of human sin, acquired merit

that could be imputed to anyone expressing faith in him. The incarnation is relevant in this context, as Christ could pay the price for human redemption due to His divine nature, capable of paying the highest price for humanity's redemption. His human nature qualifies him to represent humanity on the cross—this is why Paul refers to him as the Second Adam, who, unlike the first Adam, obeyed every command of God (Rom. 5:12-21).

### **Theological Significance**

The above analysis has great theological value for the contemporary church. In this section, selected theological values are outlined to guide the church. Firstly, the passage underscores the universal sinfulness of humanity (Carson, 2004; Dunn, 1998). It reminds the church that sin knows no boundaries or exceptions. Regardless of one's race, gender, socio-economic background, or religious affiliation, all individuals stand before God as sinners in need of redemption. This universal recognition of human sinfulness serves as a humbling reminder that no one can boast of their righteousness before God.

Secondly, the passage exposes the futility of human efforts to earn God's favor or justification through their own merit (Moo, 1996; Dunn, 1998; Carson, 2004). The history of God-human relationships attests that human works cannot achieve righteousness. This theological truth prepares believers to relinquish their reliance on self-righteousness and instead embrace God's gracious provision for justification through faith.

Thirdly, the passage highlights the centrality of the cross in addressing humanity's quest for justification (Moo, 1996; Dunn, 1998; Carson, 2004). It is through the sacrificial work of Christ on the cross that God justifies sinners. Rather than relying on their own works, sinners are called to place their faith in the atoning sacrifice of Jesus Christ. Here, essential theological concepts such as mercy, grace, justice, and holiness come into play.

Fourthly, God's mercy and compassion are evident in his willingness to reconcile with humanity despite their sinfulness (Moo, 1996; Dunn, 1998; Carson, 2004). However, his justice demands that sin be punished because holiness cannot overlook (or condone) sin without addressing it justly. This dilemma underscores the necessity of the incarnation and Christ's subsequent death on the cross. Jesus takes upon himself the sins of the world, thus becoming the perfect and willing sacrifice to satisfy God's justice. This theological understanding emphasizes the substitutionary nature of Christ's death. On the cross, Jesus stood in the place of sinners, bearing the full weight of their sins and the just punishment they deserve. Through faith in Christ, believers receive not only forgiveness but also the imputed righteousness of Christ and thus become justified before God.

### **Conclusion**

In this paper, I have contended that the cross, rather than the law, represents God's ultimate design for the salvation of humanity. Through his condemnation of humanity, God revealed his own infinite righteousness, underscoring the undeniable truth that, with the exception of Christ, no human being past or future can meet his righteous standard and attain justification through their own merits. In response to this profound human inadequacy, God extended his righteousness to humanity through the cross, offering salvation independently of legalistic works. It is important to emphasize that the transformative power of the cross is fully realized only by those who express faith in Christ. God's provision of the cross as a means of salvation leaves no room for excuses for those who hear the gospel; salvation is now attained not through human effort but through unwavering belief in what Christ has accomplished on behalf of humankind.

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