

p 27 WEEK 4: THE SAVING RIGHTEOUSNESS OF GOD

Romans 3:21–4:25

The Place of the Passage

Every good gospel presentation must tell us the bad news before it tells us the good news. This is what makes the good news so good. There is something terribly wrong with us and with the world. Thus far in Paul's letter to the church in Rome, he has been explaining just what that problem is—the rebellious transgression of God's righteousness revealed generally in creation, universally in our consciences (dead though they are), and especially and specifically in the Scriptures. Paul has revealed and reaffirmed that we are sinners, following our perverted instincts into more and more death. The only justifiable response to our sin against God's righteousness is his right and just wrath. But that is the bad news; the gospel means "good news." In Romans 3:21–4:25, Paul articulates the heart of this great news of the gospel: God's remarkable and gracious response to our sin, and also how this response does not diminish or contravene but rather upholds his righteousness.

p 28 The Big Picture

Paul explains how sinners can be saved from God's wrath and counted as righteous before him through faith in Christ's atoning work.

Reflection and Discussion

Read through the complete passage for this study, Romans 3:21–4:25. Then review the shorter passages below and write your own notes on the following questions. (For further background, see the *ESV Study Bible*, pages 2163–2165; also available online at www.esvbible.org.)

1. God's Righteousness in the Death of Jesus (3:21–26)

The law of God is a great equalizer. The ground is level at the foot of the cross, because, since all have sinned and fallen short of God's glory (3:23), all need Jesus. How is God's righteousness manifested in Jesus Christ (3:21–22)?

How can God be called just if he passes over sins (3:25–26)?

p 29 2. Righteousness by Faith for Jews and Gentiles (3:27–31)

What is it about the nature of faith that precludes boasting (3:27)?

Paul is clear that salvation comes to us as a gift received by faith, not by works, but at the same time that God's commandments are not abolished. How does justification by faith uphold the law?

3. Abraham as the Father of Jews and Gentiles (4:1–25)

In 4:9–11, what does Paul point out about the order of Abraham's faith and his circumcision? Why is this significant for our lives today?

Reflect on 4:19. What is the connection between Abraham's seeing his own aged body and Sarah's barrenness, and his realization that he could not find strength through the law?

p 30 Read through the following three sections on *Gospel Glimpses*, *Whole-Bible Connections*, and *Theological Soundings*. Then take time to reflect on the *Personal Implications* these sections have for your walk with the Lord.

Gospel Glimpses

GRACE. The “spiritual operating system” of the Christian's salvation and indeed his or her entire Christian life is grace. Grace is sometimes defined as God's undeserved favor, and that is true. Grace can also be defined in terms of Jesus Christ himself. In Romans 3:24–25, Paul proclaims something astounding. We wretched sinners stand before God's unfathomable holiness with utter need, with nothing to offer except poverty of spirit, a depravity of such totality that God would be completely justified in pouring out an eternity of wrath upon us. But instead he pours out that wrath upon his Son, Jesus Christ, and thereby we are “justified by his grace as a gift.” In God's grace, he justifies sinners and at the same time validates his own righteousness because he *has* punished us—in Christ!

GRACE AND LAW. In Romans 4:9–10 Paul once again confirms the necessary order of God's grace and our obedience to God's commands. He points out that Abraham was circumcised *after* his faith was credited to him as righteousness. We must see that the obedience of circumcision was a sign of an already existing faith—this act of obedience was the fruit of Abraham's salvation, not the cause of it. In the same way, we must make sure, as Martin Luther puts it, not to “muddle grace and law.” We are not set free *by* our obedience; we are set free *to* and *for* obedience.

IMPUTATION. Paul uses the phrase “counted to him as righteousness” in Romans 4:22–25 and goes on to say that our faith is “counted” to us as righteousness. This phrase expresses the vital truth of what is called the imputation of Christ’s righteousness. We have no righteousness of our own. But when we believe in Christ’s saving sufficiency, by faith we receive his saving righteousness as if it were our own! It is “counted to us,” or credited to our account. As Christ takes our sin upon himself on the cross, receiving the wrath of the Father which is sin’s due penalty, Christ’s perfect obedience and sinless sacrifice and triumphant victory are reckoned to be ours (2 Cor. 5:21).

Whole-Bible Connections

JESUS AS FULFILLMENT. As Jesus is preaching the Sermon on the Mount, he announces that he has not come to abolish the law but to fulfill it (Matt. 5:17). [p 31](#) Paul provides an echo of this announcement in Romans 3:21–22 as he reveals that Christ is the manifestation of the righteousness of God that the law and prophets bore witness to. Because Jesus obeys the law perfectly, he fulfills its demands perfectly and becomes its perfect embodiment (Col. 2:17; Heb. 10:1). At Christ’s transfiguration, Moses and Elijah appear beside him, emblematic of the law and prophets; yet by the end of that blazing vision, Jesus stands there alone. He is the fulfillment of all the biblical hope (Luke 24:27).

PSALM 32:1–2. In Romans 4:6–8, Paul quotes lines from one of David’s psalms (Ps. 32:1–2). Paul shows that David’s righteousness, like Abraham’s, was credited to him by faith. The scandal of full forgiveness for sinners who trust in God was present even under the old covenant (see also Isa. 40:2; Mic. 7:19; Hab. 2:4). The Old Testament is flavored with eruptions of worship like Psalm 32:1–2, rejoicing in God’s kindness to those who will trust in him despite their many failures.

THE PROMISES OF GOD. Abraham’s faith in God’s promise is commended in Romans 4:20–21. The promises of God, which are irrevocable (Rom. 11:29), sustained God’s people throughout the history of redemption that unfolds in the Bible, and right up to the present day. Through sin, struggle, sacrifice, and suffering, even as God’s people persistently dabble in faithlessness, God remains faithful. We can place our hope in him. And 2 Corinthians 1:20 tells us that the promises of God made to all the patriarchs and prophets find their “yes” in Jesus. If you are in Christ, every promise made to God’s people down through the ages belongs to you as much as it did to its first hearers.

Theological Soundings

PROPITIATION. Paul writes in Romans 3:25 that God put Christ forward “as a propitiation by his blood.” Propitiation is a great theological term that refers to the turning away of God’s wrath. A propitiating sacrifice is one that makes its recipient “favorable” by averting God’s wrath. So the offering of Christ on the “altar” of the cross was a payment that made the wrathful God propitious, or favorably disposed, toward those who believe.

THE JUST GOD. Romans 3:26 makes a curious statement: “It was to show [God’s] righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.” In this verse we learn that in offering Christ up on the cross to be crushed for our sins (Isa. 53:5–6), God simultaneously accomplishes the forgiving of our sin and the maintaining of his own holiness. For justice was indeed meted out. It was meted out on the one who did not deserve it, but who stood in the place of those who did.

CREATION *EX NIHILO*. Romans 4:17 displays the omnipotence and eternity of God by affirming the biblical doctrine of creation, which is that our uncreated [p 32](#) God created all that is not himself from absolutely nothing. He spoke nonexistence into existence. The theological phrase often used to refer to this truth is the Latin phrase *ex nihilo*, which means “out of nothing,” that is, when nothing was there before. In the context of Paul’s letter to the Romans, we see not only the affirmation that God created the world *ex nihilo*, but that by his grace he even creates *ex nihilo* the faith we need in our hearts to receive Christ.

Personal Implications

Take time to reflect on the implications of Romans 3:21–4:25 for your own life today. Make notes below on the personal implications for your walk with the Lord of (1) the *Gospel Glimpses*, (2) the *Whole-Bible Connections*, (3) the *Theological Soundings*, and (4) this passage as a whole.

1. Gospel Glimpses

2. Whole-Bible Connections

3. Theological Soundings

[p 33](#) 4. Romans 3:21–4:25

As You Finish This Unit ...

Take a moment to ask for the Lord’s blessing and help as you continue in this study of Romans. And take a moment also to look back through this unit of study, to reflect on some key things that the Lord may be teaching you.¹

¹ J. I. Packer and Lane T. Dennis, [“Series Preface,”](#) in *Romans, A 12-Week Study*, ed. J. I. Packer, Dane C. Ortlund, and Lane T. Dennis, Knowing the Bible (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013), 3–33.