II. **SALVATION - THE RIGHTEOUSNESS OF GOD REVEALED (3:21-8:39)**

**Question:** How does God save sinners?

**Answer:** “in Christ Jesus” (8:1)

In Romans 1:18-3:20 Paul has proven that all men are guilty before God and, therefore, under condemnation. Since God is just, there are now only three options open to God. He must either (1) condemn them, (2) compromise His own righteousness and accept them as they are, or (3) give them righteousness. If He could perform the third option, men would be free from condemnation and God would remain just.

To state the problem in Job’s words, “How can a man be righteous before God?” The answer is found in the gospel.

A. **Justification – declared righteous in Christ (3:21-5:21)**

1. **The Divine Method (3:21-31)**

   a. **Righteousness provided (3:21-22)**

   3:21 But now apart from the Law the righteousness of God has been manifested, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets,

   3:22 even the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all those who believe; for there is no distinction;

   “But now” signals a change in Paul’s thinking from the old era dominated by the power of sin to the new era of salvation. It introduces a new context in which God’s righteousness is disclosed. In 1:18-3:20 Paul has proven that under the old system men cannot merit righteousness nor can the law grant it. But now, he tells his readers, that righteousness is attainable by another means that the OT also witnessed (the law and the prophets). “Apart from the law” the righteousness of God is revealed through faith in Jesus Christ (i.e. the idea of justification by faith is not new with Paul, also see notes on Ro. 1:17). Faith is the condition for our justification, the channel by which righteousness is received and
appropriated, not a way that we “earn” righteousness. The object of saving faith is Christ.

The act, therefore, which man is required to perform in order to be made a partaker of the righteousness of God, is to believe in Christ (cf. Jn. 1:12; 3:15-16; 8:24; Ro. 9:33; 10:10, 14, etc.). This righteousness is offered to all men, but it only comes to rest upon those who believe.

Although these verses share much in common with Romans 1:17, there is one significant difference. In 1:17 it states that the righteousness of God “is being revealed” (present tense). That is, in the gospel the righteousness of God is revealed every time it is proclaimed. In 3:21 the verb “revealed” is in the perfect tense in Greek, which points to a past event with continuing results. God revealed His righteousness two thousand years ago at the cross, and the effects of that event are still being experienced today.

b. Righteousness needed (3:23)

3:23 for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,

A number of commentators see verse 23 as parenthetical. It would be possible to move from verse 22 to verse 24, but Paul once again reminds men of their great need. All men have sinned (viewed as a past action) and as a result of their sin all experience abiding consequences - they continually fall short of God’s glory (present tense verb, McClain, 105).

It is difficult to know what Paul meant by “fall short of the glory of God.”

There are three possibilities:
1. men fail to glorify God because they are sinful
2. men fail to receive the glory that God wants to give them
3. men come short of reflecting the glory of God as beings created in His image.

The third interpretation seems most tenable. Because all sin, all fall short of displaying the glory of God which we were created to display. The glory of God, displayed in the image of God in man, is marred by sin.
c. Righteousness bestowed (3:24)

3:24 being justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus:

Paul now picks up the thought he had begun in verses 21 and 22. “But now the righteousness of God . . . is revealed . . . through faith in Jesus Christ . . . [they that believe are] justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.”

From its Hebrew root, to be righteous means to have a right relationship with God, or to be accepted by Him. To be justified means to be declared righteous, that is, to be declared acceptable to God. Proverbs 17:15 says, "He who justifies the wicked and he who condemns the righteous, both of them alike are an abomination to the Lord." "Justifying is something that a judge does. The opposite of justify is condemn. When you condemn someone you declare their guilt and assign them their punishment. You don't make them guilty. And when you justify someone you declare their innocence and assign them their freedom.” (sermon by John Piper, Ro 3:21-26, May 16, 1999 - John Piper. © Desiring God. Website: desiringGod.org)

We need to note that justification does not mean to be made righteousness. That would involve a change in character. Rather, justification is a legal declaration that states that whatever has made man unacceptable to God has been dealt with so that he can be placed in a position to receive God's favor. God has acquitted men of all the charges (Moo, 227). Therefore, “it is not a change of our nature or state, but a change of our standing before him. It is 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.” (sermon by John Piper, Ro 3:21-26, May 16, 1999 - John Piper. © Desiring God. Website: desiringGod.org)

We are justified as an undeserved gift from God. That is, it is "a gift by His grace." If it was not by grace, none could experience it (Titus 3:7) for all that we do only leads to condemnation. “In other words, if you work for
someone, you don’t get grace, you get wages. If you relate to somebody as one who works for them, what you bring about is not grace, but debt. They owe you wages. This is why it’s an abomination to try to work for God. God cannot be put in anyone’s debt. As Romans 11:35 says, "Who has given a gift to him that he might be repaid?" The answer is "no one," and the reason given is that "from him and through him and to him are all things" (Romans 11:36). So if you are going to get something by grace, you can’t work for it. Grace is the good that you get from someone when he owes you nothing. So what Paul means when he says that we are "justified as a gift by his grace" is that we can’t work for justification. So the phrase "as a gift" means you can’t pay for it. And the phrase "by his grace" means you can’t work for it.

(sermon by John Piper, Ro 3:21-26, May 16, 1999 - John Piper. © Desiring God. Website: desiringGod.org)

Justification involves redemption (3:24). To redeem something means to purchase it (cf. notes on 1:1). It indicates a transfer of ownership. Christ has purchased us from our enslavement to sin and delivered us from the punishment of sin by substituting His own life for ours (Eph. 1:7; Col. 1:14; Acts 20:28; Heb. 9:15; I Pet. 1:18; Rev. 5:9-10, etc.). "Justification is through redemption that is in Christ Jesus; it is not through any price of ours; it is the costly price that Christ paid in order that free grace might flow unto the justification of the ungodly" (Murray, 115). In theology this is called substitution.

The concept of substitution could be illustrated from Paul’s letter to Philemon concerning Philemon’s runaway slave Onesimus. Onesimus had apparently taken some of his master’s money and escaped to Rome where he heard and believed the gospel. Onesimus desired to return to his master so Paul wrote to Philemon and asked him to receive Onesimus as a brother in Christ. Paul said "if he has wronged you or owes anything, charge it to my account." (Phm. 1:18). Onesimus had sinned but Paul said that he would cover any debt that he owed. In a like manner, the debt we owe for our sin was billed to Christ’s account. God accepts the sinner for Christ’s sake.

"Because Christ has borne the punishment for our sins in His own body, God is able to remit the penalty and to restore us to His favor. In justification, sins are not excused but are punished in the person of Christ, the substitute" (Thiessen, Lectures in Systematic Theology, 274).
d. Righteousness declared (3:25-26)

3:25 whom God displayed publicly as a propitiation in His blood through faith. This was to demonstrate His righteousness, because in the forbearance of God He passed over the sins previously committed;
3:26 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.

The holiness of God responds to sin with wrath and judgment. "To the men of the OT the wrath of God is both very real and very serious. God is not thought of as capriciously angry (like the deities of the heathen), but, because He is a moral Being, His anger is directed toward wrongdoing in any shape or form. Once aroused, His anger is not easily assuaged, and dire consequences may follow. But it is only fair to add that the OT consistently regards God as a God of mercy. Though men sin and thus draw down upon themselves the consequences of His wrath, yet God does not delight in the death of the sinner. He provides ways in which the consequences of sin may be averted" (Morris, The Apostolic Preaching of the Cross, 149; Morris has an excellent discussion about the wrath of God and its effects 149-154). In Romans 1 Paul showed that the judgment of God rests upon the pagan world. In chapter two he spoke of the judgment to come (2:2, 3, 5, 8, 12, 16). He concluded his argument in 3:19 by saying that "the whole world may be held accountable to God."

In the OT one of the ways that God's wrath could be avoided was through the sacrificial system. When the people of Israel murmured against Moses and Aaron, God was going to consume them on the spot. Aaron avoided God's judgment of the people by offering incense (Num. 16:41-50). "If it be objected that there is no great monetary value in the offering of a small quantity of incense, so that the atonement attained is out of all proportion to the price paid, the answer must be that the atonement obtained is always out of proportion to the price paid... There is always an element of grace in atonement" (Morris, The Apostolic Preaching of the Cross, 167). Atonement in the OT was not the soothing of God's anger, but was God's instituted means of receiving His grace. "It was the expression of God's anger on the one hand and the expression and putting in action of God's grace on the other hand... The sacrifices were in themselves prime acts of obedience to
Paul now describes how the wrath of God can be averted in Christ. Men can avoid God’s wrath because the death of Jesus was accepted by God as a propitiation. Propitiation means to turn the wrath of God away by means of an offering. It is “the acceptance by the wronged party of a compensatory payment, by which his anger against the one who has injured him is soothed” (Morris, *The Apostolic Preaching of the Cross*, 146). In other words, the death of Christ was a sacrificial act that made God propitious (favorable) toward the sinner. When the wrath of God for our sins was poured out upon Christ at the cross, it was averted from us (see Morris, *The Apostolic Preaching of the Cross*, 184-202 for a detailed discussion). Normally in propitiation the offender offers a payment to gain the favor of the one who was offended, in this case God is both the offended party and the One who offers the payment. That is, God Himself sets forth the sacrifice that satisfies His own sense of justice. This is the love of God. This is the gospel.

One may ask, “If the wrath of God could be averted in the OT by something as simple as offering incense, or by some other means, why was the death of Christ necessary? Why not just continue doing what men had always done?”

In this passage Paul says that Jesus died on the cross “to demonstrate His [i.e. God’s] righteousness.” But why did God’s righteousness need to be demonstrated? Didn’t people know that He was righteous?

God demonstrated His righteousness “because in His forbearance He had passed over the sins that were previously committed.” In other words, the sins in the OT were never taken away until the cross of Christ. God had set up a means to avert His wrath at that time (see above), but offering an animal sacrifice or paying money is not equal compensation for the life of the sinner. Even so, God accepted those offerings as tokens of the full payment for sin yet to come. One could say that the OT saints were only on credit. The actual payment for their sin was the death of Christ. In that sense Paul can say that “God had passed over the sins that were previously committed.” Though the payment for sin had not yet been paid, God did not pour out His
wrath upon people. He passed over their sins. But the death of Christ declares (demonstrates) God’s righteousness, for it shows that the actual payment for sin was made. This also explains why the death of Christ was necessary and superior to the OT system in averting wrath. The OT system was only a mere shadow of reality.

He did this so that “He might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus” (3:26). Not only did the death of Christ vindicate God by showing His justice, it explains how a holy God can be just in justifying the one who has faith in Christ. “A judge is unjust when he allows a criminal to be pronounced righteous, and treated accordingly. On the other hand, he acts justly when he pronounces the offender guilty, and secures the infliction of the penalty which the law denounces. What the apostle means to say is that there is no such disregard to the claims of justice in the justification of the sinner who believes in Christ. This is seen and acknowledged when it is known that he is justified neither on account of his own acts and character, nor by a mere sovereign dispensing with the demands of the law, but on the ground of a complete satisfaction rendered by the substitute, i.e. on the ground of the obedience and the death of Christ. The gratuitous nature of this justification is not at all affected by its proceeding on the ground of this perfect satisfaction. It is to the sinner, still the most undeserved of all favors, to which he not only has not the shadow of a personal claim, but the very reverse of which he has most richly merited. It is thus that justice and mercy are harmoniously united in the sinner’s justification. Justice is no less justice, though mercy has her perfect work; and mercy is no less mercy though justice is completely satisfied” (Hodge, 98).

“The man who believes that Jesus is the propitiation . . . is not fictitiously regarded as right with God; he actually is right with God, and God treats him as such” (Morris, The Apostolic Preaching of the Cross, 273).

e. Advantages of this method (3:27-31)

There is no room for boasting.

3:27 Where then is boasting? It is excluded. By what kind of law? Of works? No, but by a law of faith.
3:28 For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from works of the Law.

The Jews boasted over the many advantages they had over the Gentiles (2:17; 3:1-2, 9). One might now conclude that since the Christian has even more advantages than they, he has even more reason to boast, but such is not the case. Since justification is totally unmerited and is a gracious gift from God, no one has reason to brag about receiving it. Paul says that boasting is “excluded,” it is shut out, not having any place.

“By what law? Of works? No, but by the law of faith.” In this case the word “law” means “principle” (Lenski, 266; Harrison, 46; Murray, 122-123; Moo, 250, TDNT IV, 1071, etc.) In other words, Paul’s question is “By what means did God shut out boasting? What principle did God use? Did He use the principle of works?” His answer is “Absolutely not!” Anything that is tied to works gives room for boasting since human achievement is involved. But God didn’t use a principle that even touched on works. Boasting is shut out through the principle of faith (the law of faith). In this way all boasting is removed from the very beginning, nor can it enter in along the way. As Paul had said, the gospel is “from faith to faith” (1:17, see notes).

“Therefore we conclude that a man is justified by faith apart from the deeds of the law” (3:28). Paul concludes that if God works from the principle of justification through faith in Christ, then deeds play no part in salvation.

God is seen to be the God of all men.

3:29 Or is God the God of Jews only? Is He not the God of Gentiles also? Yes, of Gentiles also,

3:30 since indeed God who will justify the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through faith is one.

The second question, “Is He the God of the Jews only?” (3:29), introduces the second advantage of this method of salvation. “He [God] deals with both classes [i.e. both Jew and Gentile] on precisely the same principles; He pursues, with regard to both, the same plan, and offers salvation to both on exactly the same terms. There is, therefore, in this
doctrine, the foundation laid for a universal religion, which may be preached
to every creature under heaven; which need not, as was the case with the
Jewish system, be confined to any one sect or nation. This is the only
doctrine that suits the character of God, and His relation to all His
intelligent creatures on earth" (Hodge, 101).

3:31 Do we then nullify the Law through faith? May it never be!
On the contrary, we establish the Law.

Verse 31 has many different interpretations attesting to its
difficulty. The following one seems to fit the context the best.

If the principle that God uses to justify men is faith, then shouldn't
we draw the conclusion that the law is useless? "Perish the thought!" Paul
exclaims. Justification by faith does not abolish the law, it supports what
the law has already established. The law revealed sin (3:20), our total
inability to justify ourselves before God (3:10 ff.), and the need of grace.
Justification by grace through faith is the logical conclusion to what the law
teaches. Furthermore, even after we come to faith the law continues to
reveal our sins and need of daily cleansing.

Summary/ Review: Paul began in 1:16-17 by saying, "For I am not
ashamed of the gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God to salvation for
everyone who believes, for the Jew first and also for the Greek. For in it
the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith; as it is written,
"The just shall live by faith." In 1:18-3:20 Paul has proven that all men, Jew
and Gentile, are guilty before God and in need of righteousness. In 3:21-31
he has described how the gospel reveals the righteousness of God and how it
is received by faith. He will next illustrate the principle of justifying faith
from the OT.