

Commentary

21-22a

THERE IS A RIGHTEOUSNESS AND IT COMES FROM GOD

The same Greek word-root (translated *righteousness, justified, just, justice*) appears six times in these verses. In the gospel, God has revealed his righteousness (1:16), meaning both his righteous character (25-26) and the righteousness he gives to people (21-24). This answers the key question from 1:18-3:20: 'if everyone is under God's condemnation, what hope is there for us?' Nothing can change the fact that God is angry with us, except God himself – certainly not what we do (cf 1:29-2:6), nor the Law (which only makes us conscious of our sin 20). Paul's bold and emphatic 'But now ...' is that God himself makes people righteous; not as a new idea, but as he promised in the OT (21 cf 1:2).

22-24

GOD'S RIGHTEOUSNESS IS AVAILABLE TO ALL

The whole of humankind is on a level footing when it comes to receiving righteousness from God: 'there is no difference' because ...

- ***God's righteousness is given to all who believe (22)***

Paul will define what it means to believe/have faith in ch 4. Here, his point is that the scope of the gospel is universal (cf 1:5, 16). Just as we may have been devastated by the fact that every human being is facing condemnation (in 1:18-3:20), so now we should be amazed that every human being has the possibility of being made righteous (though NB we know from the wider context that this doesn't mean everyone will be saved).

- ***all have sinned and salvation (23)***

The reason there can be no distinction as to how people are saved is because everyone has sinned and so needs to be saved. Paul summarises the argument since 1:18 in the brief sentence of 23: all have sinned (past tense) and continue to be falling short of God's glory (present tense).

- ***all may receive salvation (24)***

Yet, though all face condemnation for their rebellion against God, Paul declares that all are able to be justified, to be declared righteous (24). The key question now is 'how?'

24-26

GOD IS RIGHTEOUS IN SALVATION, THROUGH JESUS' DEATH

Paul must explain how he can turn his argument from proclaiming universal condemnation to announcing, suddenly, the possibility of universal righteousness. Yes, God does it ... but how does he do it, particularly since Paul claims that God remains perfectly righteous and just (3:3-6)? If God simply lets us all off the hook, then his justice is a sham and the gospel is a scandal. Paul explains what God has done by explaining three related concepts: justification, redemption, atonement.

- ***(All) ... are justified ... (24)***

To justify does not mean 'let off the hook' or 'treat as righteous', but 'to declare righteous'. It is a legal term meaning that someone is justly acquitted because the penalty of his crime has been paid. Furthermore, this verdict can be given on the spot, the moment someone believes (22).

- ***'... freely by his grace ...' (24)***

Paul says that the verdict comes as a gift from a generous God. It must be 'given' since it patently cannot be earned ... all we deserve as our earnings is death (1:32). But this begs the question all the more: how can the blatantly guilty be pronounced innocent, justly?

- ***'... through the redemption that came by Jesus Christ' (24)***

The word 'redemption' means 'a costly deliverance'. It's commonly associated with the slave market, where a slave is purchased in order to set him free. But, for the Jews, the stronger connection is to their deliverance from captivity in Egypt (cf Exodus 15:13), and especially to the night of the Passover when they were rescued from God's judgement by means of the blood of a lamb, painted on their houses as a means of identification (cf Exodus 12:1-13). Paul has said that our situation is similar: we are all enslaved, because we are under the power and consequences of sin (3:9). What he is now saying is that we may all be redeemed through Jesus' death, and so be acquitted. We see here how our rescue comes free to us, but at a great cost to God. And yet, the question is still unanswered: how is it that God can set us free if we are facing his wrath?

- ***'God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement ...' (25)***

25a tells us the essence of what God has done. 'Sacrifice of atonement' (NIV)/'propitiation' (ESV) means 'the satisfaction of wrath'. This language comes from the temple and particularly the Day of Atonement. Just as the goat was slaughtered so that God's anger against sinful Israel could be satisfied, so Jesus is sacrificed to satisfy God's wrath against humankind: he 'took up our infirmities ... the punishment that brought us peace was upon him' (Isaiah 53:4-6). It is through faith in 'his blood' (meaning 'his death') that the benefit of this comes to us. God takes the initiative, and provides the solution to address the problem: 'God himself gave himself to save us from himself' (John Stott).

But why did God do this? Our standard answer might be 'because of his love'. But Paul's answer is 'to demonstrate his righteousness/justice':

- ***God shows he was righteous in passing over former sins (25)***

God was resolving a problem as old as the OT: how did God forgive his people for their sins when he should have punished them (Exod 34:6-7)? The answer is that he was not being soft on them, but looking forward to the cross when his wrath against them would be satisfied.

- ***God shows he is righteous now in justly justifying (26)***

God is able to do all this righteously because his justice is carried out at the cross (where sin is rightly punished) and he is vindicated as the God who makes people righteous. His absolute integrity is thereby upheld, even exalted, through the gospel: he justly justifies the unjust!

Romans 3:21-26

NB this is a difficult passage on which to lead a study because it's easy to lose the wood for the trees of big theological words! Do good prep so you can be clear, and keep the main point clear ...

Launching question

Complete this sentence: 'the heart of the Christian good news is ...'

Summarise what we've learnt from our *Romans* sermons (and [Study 2](#)): what is the problem that the gospel must solve?

READ 3:21-26

There's a lot in this passage about God's 'righteousness'. What does Paul mean by that word in 21-22a? and in 25-26?

List all the things Paul tells us about God's righteousness in 21-22a. What is the significance of each phrase?

Who is this righteousness for (according to 22-24)?
Why is this surprising after all we've seen in Romans so far?
Why must Paul give some explanation of how this is possible?

NB Be ready with some simple definitions of the three big theological words!

God declares people as not guilty: when?
How does God justify? (lots of answer; but especially through what?)
'Redemption' pointed Jews back to the Exodus: how is our situation similar?
How does God redeem?

Read Leviticus 16:15-17 and 17:11
How does the Day of Atonement deal with the problem of God's wrath?
How does this background help us to understand Romans 3:25?

Summary: how does God's righteousness come to all who believe?

How does all this show that God himself is righteous?
What has he done about sins committed before Jesus' death?
What has God done about sins committed 'at the present time'? and now?
How is God just in justifying those who have faith in Jesus?
Why does this issue of God's justice matter so much?

Comment on the following sentences (*NB most have some truth in them!*):

- On the cross, God forgave our sin
- God lets Christians off the hook over their sin
- Jesus took our sins away
- It's 'just as if I'd' never sinned
- God overcame his justice with his love

Why does it matter to be precise in understanding and explaining the gospel?
How will this passage affect how you'd now explain the gospel to someone?

Romans 3:21-26

Study 3

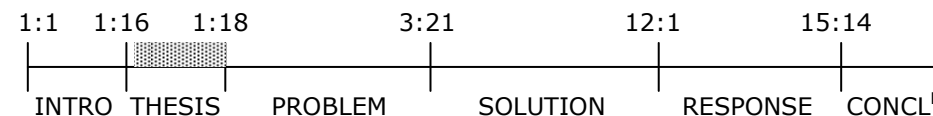
G O D ' S G I F T

Summary

Paul's letter to the young church in Rome has long been understood as 'a compendium of Christian doctrine'. Certainly it is difficult to imagine a more comprehensive summary of 'the gospel of God'. But Paul writes this gospel into a specific context, appealing to both Jewish and Gentile Christians to accept one another just as God accepts both (which he does on the same basis, from the same plight, by the same means). These studies focus on 'the melodic line' of this gospel running through the letter.

The gospel logic

Paul writes *Romans* with a very tight logic:



It is vital to keep clear in our minds what Paul has defined as 'the problem' (in 1:18-3:20) or we may struggle to see why 'the solution' (summarised in the passage for this [Study 3](#)) solves it: the problem is not our sin, but its consequence – namely, that God is angry. The whole of Romans (and of the gospel) is about God: it is God himself who needs to be propitiated, God himself who provides the propitiation, God himself who is the propitiation.

Theme Sentence

In the gospel, God satisfies his anger, redeems sinners and declares them not guilty ... and he does all this in a way which is completely righteous.

Ideas for application

- The gospel truly is 'the gospel of God' (1:1): the problem is his wrath; the solution is his propitiation/redemption/justification. We should be overwhelmed with thankfulness that God has done for us what we couldn't do for ourselves. Are we now even more thankful to him?
- This solution puts the emphasis again on the true problem: we must present the gospel as Jesus bearing God's wrath for our sake. Any other emphasis (eg the cross as taking away sin, or as an example, or as martyrdom) leaves us facing the same problem at final judgement.
- Vindicating the character of God may not seem as significant to us as the personal blessing of our salvation. But it is essential that God is just as well as gracious or we'd doubt whether our salvation would remain secure. Also, although we are beneficiaries of his grace, the emphasis is God himself – it's all for the sake of his name (cf 1:5).