

Romans 3-21_4-25 - SALVATION

Last week we spent quite a bit of time in the valley of sin, with Paul diagnosing our problem – the problem of all of us, whether rebellious types (Gentiles) or religious types (Jews) – prodigal types or older brother types:

“All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.”

“I not okay – you not okay.”

“There is no-one righteous, not even one.”

However, after the bad news, Paul is ready to share the good news. To place the diamond of the gospel on the black velvet backdrop of our sinful condition.

Paul's letter to the Romans hinges on these two words:

3:21 “But now....”

Paul often uses these words to introduce the crucial intervention of God **when all hope seems lost**.

There is a way out of the valley.

There is a righteousness that can be ours.

3:21-22 “But now apart from the law the righteousness of God has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. This

righteousness is given **through faith** in Jesus Christ to all who believe."

The crux of salvation – Romans 3:21-26

How can a just and holy God declare sinners to be righteous?

How can we be made right with God when we have messed up – when we are not okay?

Three metaphors

Slave market redemption

"All are justified freely **by his grace** through the **redemption** that came by Jesus Christ." (Rom. 3:24)

"Out of sheer generosity he put us in right standing with himself. A pure gift. He got us out of the mess we're in and restored us to where he always wanted us to be. And he did it by means of Jesus Christ." The Message

"'Redemption' refers to the emancipation of a slave through payment of what was known as the ransom price."

At least one-third of the population of Rome would have been slaves in the first century AD.

Imagine Phoebe reading this section of the letter to Gentile Christians meeting secretly in a poor part of the city. How might these words have sounded to a slave who know what it felt like to be sold in the market?

"In Jesus Christ, God has stepped in to pay our ransom or freedom price. When we were trapped like a slave in the market, Jesus died to liberate us." Andrew Ollerton

But this idea of being redeemed didn't just appeal to the Gentiles. The Jewish Christians would have connected the idea of redemption to the **Exodus story**.

The Jews were also slaves in Egypt – and God set them free. A series of plagues was visited on the land of Egypt culminating in the death of every firstborn child.

At the Passover event, a spotless lamb was sacrificed and its blood daubed on the doorposts of the Israelite homes to save them from the angel of death.

When the angel of death saw the blood of the lamb, he passed over the house – the inhabitants were saved.

God's people were set free from slavery. The ransom price was the Passover Lamb.

That's why Paul declares that redemption is through the shedding of Christ's blood (3:25).

He is our Passover Lamb. By his blood we have been redeemed.

Whether slaves or masters, Jews or Gentiles, the message is clear. Jesus paid our ransom price.

When we turned our back on God, when we ended up in the Valley of Sin, he purchased our freedom.

As Paul writes to the Galatian Christians:

"So Christ has truly set us free. Now make sure that you stay free, and don't get tied up again in slavery to the law." (Gal. 5:1)

Les Misérables – the redemption of Jean Valjean.

Jean Valjean has taken refuge in a monastery, where a kind bishop has given him dinner and a bed for the night. However, despite the bishop's generosity and hospitality, he catches Jean Valjean stealing the silverware. Valjean strikes the bishop in the face and runs away into the night. The next day Jean Valjean is caught by the gendarmes and returned to the monastery.

In a deeply moving scene, the bishop insists that he gave the silverware to Valjean and tells him he forgot to take the candlesticks as well. The bishop is determined to give Valjean a new start – to show him **grace**.

Later on, Valjean asks the bishop, "Why are you doing this?", to which he replies:

"Jean Valjean, my brother, you no longer belong to evil. **With this silver, I've bought your soul. I've ransomed you** from fear and hatred. And now I give you back to God!"

Redemption pays the price to buy us back from evil. To set us free from slavery.

But the Bible says we were redeemed not with silver....

This is how the Apostle Peter puts it in one of his letters:

"it was not with perishable things such as silver.... that you were **redeemed** but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect."

1 Peter 1:18-19

This is the first metaphor that Paul uses to explain to the Roman believers how they have been made right with God.

The second metaphor is...

Temple sacrifice

"God presented Christ as a **sacrifice of atonement**, through the shedding of his blood." (Romans 3:25)

This is an image from the Jewish temple.

At the heart of the temple was the "most holy place" or the "Holy of Holies".

The Ark of the Covenant was housed here – a large rectangular box which contained the stone tablets with the Ten Commandments written on them.

This was covered by a lid known as the "mercy seat" – (*hilasterion* – the word Paul uses here).

When sacrifices were made for the sins of the people on the Day of Atonement (*Yom Kippur*), blood from the offering was brought and sprinkled on the mercy of seat by the High Priest. This was a sacrifice of atonement.

"The symbolism was clear – only the blood of a perfect sacrifice could atone for or cover over the law-breaking guilt of God's people." Andrew Ollerton

CEB: "the place of sacrifice where mercy is found"

Paul deliberately compares the sacrifice of Christ with this Old Testament tradition. As the blood of an animal symbolised atonement for Israel, so the sacrifice of Jesus – his blood shed on the cross – purifies us from all sin and makes us right with God.

"God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement, through the shedding of his blood." (Romans 3:25)

Peter marries these two images together as does Paul:

¹⁸ For you know that it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you from your ancestors, ¹⁹ but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect.

1 Peter 1:18-19

As the old hymn puts it:

What can wash away my sin?

Nothing but the blood of Jesus.

What can make me whole again?

Nothing but the blood of Jesus.

The third metaphor that Paul uses to explain how we are justified or made right with God – declared righteous is:

Law court justice

²⁶ – [God] did it to demonstrate his righteousness at the present time, so as to be **just** and the one who **justifies** those who have faith in Jesus.

God's justice and justification are two sides of the same coin.

He must deal with sin – wrongdoing – to act justly.

How to do this and yet make us right with God?

Our charge sheet is very long.

We stand condemned and guilty.

Guilty as charged.

But by his death on the cross – Jesus took our place. He took our punishment. He took our guilt. And he declared us not guilty – free to go – just as if we had never sinned.

The way Paul puts it in one of his other letters is like this:

13 You were dead because of your sins and because your sinful nature was not yet cut away. Then God made you alive with Christ, for he forgave all our sins. 14 He cancelled the record of the charges against us and took it away by nailing it to the cross.

Colossians 2:13-14

“Think of it! All sins forgiven, the slate wiped clean, that old arrest warrant cancelled and nailed to Christ’s cross.” (The Message)

Those are Paul’s three word pictures – metaphors.

- Redemption of slaves by paying a ransom price
- A sacrifice of atonement through a blood sacrifice
- A court of law with God being both just in his judgment and yet finding a way to declare us not guilty and to let us go free

Wonderful grace that gives what I don’t deserve,
pays me what Christ has earned then lets me go free.

Wonderful grace that gives me the time to change,
washes away the stains that once covered me.

And all that I have I lay at the feet
of the wonderful Saviour who loves me.

So the smallest phrase “But now” in Romans 3:21 is an important turning point for us – a way out of the Valley of Sin.

“The ‘righteousness of God’ has dealt with the ‘wrath of God’ in a way that fully satisfied the justice of God. Two small words have made all the difference.” Andrew Ollerton

In 1955 Billy Graham was invited to speak at Cambridge University to the students in Great St Mary's Hall for a week of evening meetings. When it came out to the public that he was going to be doing that, letters appeared in The Times of London very upset that this fundamentalist Baptist American preacher was going to come and speak to Britain's best and brightest about a primitive kind of religion based on blood and atonement and hell.

Graham admits that this got to him. He smarted under the characterization of being an uneducated provincial. So the first three nights he was there, he quoted intellectuals and scholars and sought to speak in more of an academic mode-but he could sense that his message was falling flat. And so he got down on his knees, prayed, and determined to throw out his prepared notes and simply preach about the blood of Christ and the cross.

Dick Lucas, who for many years was rector of St Helen's Bishopsgate Anglican church in London, recalled in a taped sermon what he saw that last night.

I'll never forget that night. I was in a totally packed chancel, sitting on the floor at Great St Mary's (Church] with the Regius Professor of Divinity sitting on one side of me and the chaplain of the college (who was a future bishop) on the other side of me. Both of these were good men, but completely against the idea that we needed salvation from sin by the blood of Christ. Dear Billy Graham got up that night and began at Genesis and went right through the whole Bible and talked about every single sacrifice in it.

The blood was flowing all over the great hall, everywhere, for three quarters of an hour. Both my neighbors were horribly embarrassed by this crude proclamation of the blood of Christ and also must have been sure that no bright, sophisticated, young British person was going to believe any of this stuff. But at the end of the sermon, to everyone's shock, four hundred young men and women stayed to commit their lives to Christ. [There were only eight thousand students in the student body then.]

I remembered meeting a young pastor some years later, a Cambridge graduate, at Birmingham Cathedral. Over a cup of tea I said, "Where did Christian things begin for you?"

Oh, at Cambridge in fifty-five," he said.

"When?"

"Billy Graham."

“What night?”

“It was Wednesday night.”

“How did that happen?”

“Well,” he said, “all I remember is that I walked out of Great St Mary’s for the first time in my life thinking ‘Christ really died for me.’”

Community group questions and discussion points:

Romans 3:21–4:25

1. “But now” — the turning point of the gospel (Romans 3:21–23)

Paul moves from the bad news of our sinfulness to the good news of God's righteousness. Why are these two words, “But now,” so significant? How does understanding our own sinfulness help us appreciate the good news of salvation?

2. Saved by grace, not by our achievements (Romans 3:22–24)

Paul says that we are justified freely by God's grace through faith in Jesus Christ. What is the difference between trying to earn God's acceptance and receiving it as a gift? Are there ways in which you still try to earn God's favour?

3. Redemption — Jesus has set us free (Romans 3:24; Galatians 5:1)

The message describes redemption as the payment of a ransom price to set a slave free. From what has Jesus set us free, and what has he set us free for? Are there any habits, attitudes, fears or patterns of sin that you need to stop allowing to enslave you?

4. The precious blood of Christ (Romans 3:25; 1 Peter 1:18–19)

The Passover lamb and the temple sacrifices help us understand the significance of Jesus' death. What do these Old Testament pictures teach us about the seriousness of sin and the cost of our salvation? How should reflecting on Jesus' sacrifice affect the way we live?

5. Atonement — where justice and mercy meet (Romans 3:25–26)

God is both just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus. Why is it important that God does not simply ignore sin, but deals with it through Christ? How does the cross help you understand both God's holiness and his love?

6. Justification — the guilty declared righteous (Romans 3:26; Colossians 2:13–14)

Imagine standing before God with your record of sin exposed, only to discover that Christ has taken your guilt and cancelled your debt. What difference does it make to know that, through faith in Jesus, you are forgiven and made right with God? How can this truth help you deal with guilt, shame or a fear of condemnation?

7. Faith rather than works (Romans 3:27–31)

Paul teaches that we are justified by faith, not by observing the works of the law. Why does salvation leave no room for boasting? If we cannot earn salvation, what should motivate our obedience, good works and service to others?

8. Abraham — trusting God's promise (Romans 4:1–8)

Paul uses Abraham as an example of someone who was counted righteous through faith. What can we learn from Abraham about trusting God rather than relying on our own efforts? Is there an area of your life where God is asking you to trust his promises even when you cannot see how things will work out?

9. Faith when circumstances seem impossible (Romans 4:18–22)

Abraham believed God's promise despite his circumstances appearing hopeless. What is the difference between biblical faith and simply being optimistic? How can Abraham's example encourage you when you face disappointment, uncertainty or unanswered prayer?

10. "Christ really died for me" — responding to the gospel (Romans 4:23–25)

The message concludes with the Cambridge student who left Billy Graham's meeting thinking, "Christ really died for me." What does it mean personally to move from knowing facts about Jesus' death to trusting that he died and rose again for you? In light of this message, what is one practical step you could take this week to live more fully in the freedom, forgiveness and grace Jesus has given you?