

All Roads Lead Here: But Now...A Righteousness From God
By Jason Huff
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Isaiah 42:1-7; Philippians 3:8-9; Romans 3:21-26

Friends, our final Scripture reading today comes from Romans 3:21-26. May God add His blessing on the reading of His holy Word. “But now a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement, through faith, in his blood. He did this to demonstrate his justice, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished-- he did it to demonstrate his justice at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus.”

There’s nothing like a great turnaround. This year’s SuperBowl was one of the great come-from-behind victories – and it’s the only time the SuperBowl has gone into overtime. We’re all amazed when the shot at the buzzer makes a swoosh and the results change. We love it when the girl realizes she loves the hero in the last chapter or when the villain finally gets his on the last page. It’s exciting even when we expect it coming.

We get to celebrate a great turnaround this week in our Scripture lesson. For the last six weeks, Paul has taught us in Romans about sin and the human condition. Through Scripture and reason and careful argument, he’s shown that every human being is rightfully under the condemnation and wrath of God for betraying God and His ways. If something doesn’t change, our sin will destroy us both now and in the life to come. We felt the weight of it together as every excuse and every defense was shut down.

Just as it seems there’s no hope, we reach the turnaround – “but now.” Sin overshadowed everything once – but it’s a new day. Something has changed. Hope dawns on the horizon. Sin has been shattered. What’s so different? A righteousness from God has been revealed. That’s what we’ll be talking about today...the promise we have because God has intervened.

Here’s the first sentence: “But now a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify.” Righteousness – a state of being right with God – has been made known; literally, it’s been revealed to us. It wasn’t on display before; we didn’t know about it. It’s like a play where everything’s hidden behind the curtain. Now the curtain’s drawn and everything’s on display. His righteousness has been revealed, and every time God draws someone close to Himself, that revelation happens again.

This righteousness is made known to us apart from the Law. The Law told us how to be right with God, but nobody could follow it, so it pointed out our separation from God. This righteousness is different. It doesn’t come through practicing the law and doing good works. This righteousness is separate from anything we accomplish or contribute. The Old Testament tells us this special righteousness, this being set right with God, is coming, and it gives examples of it. The Old Testament saints weren’t saved by following the law but through faith in God.

So how do we get this righteousness? How do we go from being sinners without a prayer of being accepted by God to being seen as fully whole and complete and perfect in His sight? Here's what Paul says: "This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe." There's nothing to do to get this righteousness, no ten-step program, no bill to pay, no law to follow. It's just through faith – belief, trust, a counting on Him for everything. This is not just believing He exists. It is faith that He was crucified for our unrighteousness, that He has risen from the dead, and that He has set things right for us. It is faith that He has given us this righteousness and that we are saved through Him alone, not by what we have done.

Now is the way open for all people, Jews and Gentiles alike? Yes! Paul says it this way: "There is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus." Nobody matches God's perfect standard. Everyone falls short of that perfection that God could praise. There's not some special arrangement for the Jewish people when it comes to sin. We're all in the same boat.

But Jews and Greeks alike are justified freely by God's grace through the redemption that came through Jesus Christ. Anyone who believes in Jesus receives His righteousness as their own at the judgment day. Now when Paul says "all" here, it's not all individuals but all peoples. All people groups – Jews, Greeks, Romans, you and me – are under the curse of sin, and all people groups are justified by God through Christ. It isn't saying that all individuals are saved. It's that whatever tribe, country, or city you come from, justification crosses all those boundaries.

God is never going to say, "You're from India, you can't come in," or "You, you Michigan State fan, go away." In Revelation 7:9-10, people from every nation, tribe, people and language praise God. This is huge because Jews, Greeks, Romans, they all saw themselves as so different that God couldn't possibly accept people from all of them. But He does.

Now we're told we're justified freely by His grace. What does that mean? Justification is a legal term. To be justified means that we've been put on trial and found not guilty. It doesn't mean guilty but excused – it's not like the insanity defense. It doesn't mean pardoned or forgiven alone – our sins are pardoned, they are forgiven, but being justified goes beyond that. When we are justified, God declares us right with Him.

It does not mean we never sinned, but it means that we are right with God through Jesus. Preacher Chuck Swindoll put it this way: "After a day of dirty yard work, a hot shower and a bar of soap [gets you] clean. It is tempting to say, 'It's just as if I'd never been dirty.' But that [doesn't] convey the power and the value of the water and soap. Better to look in the mirror and say, 'I was filthy and now I'm clean'." And that's what we are: clean and right in God's sight.

That's huge. Because you can forgive and be forgiven and still not be right with someone. You can decide not to hold something against somebody, but you can also choose not to have any future dealings with them. When someone really hurts us, we may choose to forgive, but the best way for us to keep that forgiveness intact is to get away from that person. But God doesn't do that. He forgives, and through Jesus, He sets us right with Himself. He doesn't say, "You never sinned." He says you are not guilty. We are justified in His sight.

And not only that, we're justified freely. The adjective means "without cost; a free gift; for nothing." We can't say it enough; salvation comes at a great cost, but it has no cost to us. If someone gives you a free TV, it doesn't mean the TV wasn't paid for; it was at no cost to you. Our rightness with God comes at great cost, but it's given to us as a gift. That gift is given by His grace. Grace means to be given what you don't deserve. Do we deserve righteousness? No. We do nothing to deserve it and no good works to obtain. It is ours because God is kind to us.

How can God show us grace? We don't deserve God's mercy; we've seen that over the last six weeks. And God is just; God cannot overlook sin but must do something about it. By all rights, we should be punished. So how can God be graceful to us and still be just? Paul says that grace comes "through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus." We are redeemed by Christ. Christ paid the price necessary for us to receive grace rather than wrath.

Have you ever redeemed something? We do it all the time, right? Redeem this coupon and get a free burger at McDonalds. Remember the old A&P Grocery stamps -- redeem these stamps and you get a free gift. Our cash dollars used to be redeemable for gold a long time ago. Redemption means you have turned in whatever is necessary to gain what it is you want. Every transaction we make is a redemption of some sort -- money, time, effort, those things pay for the things we want to buy. God wanted us. There was a cost to make it so that God could be both just -- a perfect judge -- and accept justified sinners into his presence. Jesus paid that price.

How did it happen? Paul tells us. "God presented him [Jesus] as a sacrifice of atonement, through faith, in his blood." Now what does that mean? In the Old Testament covenant God made with the Israelites, sins were overlooked when the priest made atonement -- he sacrificed an animal on behalf of someone. No sin could be forgiven without the shedding of blood. The betrayal of God deserves death, but God allowed an animal's death to cover sin.

In the new covenant God has made with humanity, sins are not covered by the blood of animals but forgiven by the blood of His own Son. By the death of Jesus, the guilt of sin is removed from us and the just wrath of God no longer falls on us. He was sacrificed on our behalf, and His blood removes our sin. The sacrifice God the Father presented, Jesus, counts for us -- it makes us righteous before the Father -- as we have faith in Jesus and what He did for us.

Here's the last part of what Paul says: "He [God] did this to demonstrate his justice, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished-- he did it to demonstrate his justice at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus." What does that mean? God chose not to punish every sin in the way that it should have been. We wouldn't be here if God punished every sin according to what's due.

And in the Old Testament, God did not punish the serious sins of some of His saints according to their due. For example, the law had no sacrifice for murder or adultery. You had to pay for those with your life. David committed both. Yet David turned from his sin and was genuinely grief-stricken over it when he was confronted with it. God did not strike him down. This happens numerous times over the course of Scripture.

But God's justice must be carried out. Those sins were left unpunished. Hebrews chapter 10 tells us that the blood of animals can't remove sins. God allowed them during the Old Testament period, to cover sin from His sight, but His justice demanded a sacrifice that could remove sin permanently from His people. God can't be just if sin isn't accounted for. God presented the sacrifice of Jesus for our sins so He could be just – so sin could really be dealt with, all sin throughout all time – and still show grace to all who have faith in Jesus, who by faith receive His righteousness and are judged by His righteousness rather than their own.

To be honest, there is a ton of concepts here. It's been called the most important passage in all of Scripture because it explains everything that happened in our salvation in just a few words. It's OK if you didn't catch everything. But if you had to boil the message down to just a few things you could tell a friend, what could you say? Here are my suggestions:

Number one: *Christians don't believe in a religion; we believe in good news.* According to the Internet, there are 4200 different religions in the world. Many of those are just subsets of major religions, but there are at least 4200 different systems explaining how we can get ourselves to God. Religion is about our approaching God – our positioning ourselves in favor with God for this life and the hereafter.

But none of those religions has a point where they say, "Enough." Who's to say that you've done enough to merit whatever afterlife is promised to you? How much? When? What can make up for your bad deeds? Do you really want it all to depend on you? Because I can't go a single day, some days not a single hour, without thinking badly of someone or saying something I shouldn't or being just plain old selfish. And those are my best days! What hope do I have of making the grade if it's all on me?

Christianity is different. If religion is our attempt to get right with God, then Christianity is not a religion. It is about good news, the literal meaning of the word "gospel." It's news because we are observers of it; we didn't accomplish it. We learn of it; we hear about it; it is revealed to us just the same way a story is revealed to us when we turn to page 2 in the newspaper. We receive it. Our sole point of participation is whether or not we believe it to be true or not, whether the news is fantastic or phony.

All the things that change in our lives, all the New Testament tells about dying to self and living for Jesus, all the calls to live with compassion and grace and love and joy and peace, all those happen as a result of belief. If we never change, if we aren't ever marked by the love of God and the love of others, then we didn't really believe it. Believing the story changes us.

When I was young, I was in the play "The Diary of Anne Frank." I believed the story and it changed me. It gave me compassion for the victims of the Holocaust and a love for the Jewish people that wasn't there before. When I first heard Christian rock and roll, I believed that people could be changed by hearing great music about Jesus, and it changed the course of what I did with my life – first going into radio in college, then moving into ministry later on.

God offers us a free gift of grace through Jesus. That's good news. Do you believe the gift is real or not? That's the only issue. When you talk to others about Jesus, you don't have to talk about being better people – though they will act differently eventually if they trust Jesus. Just talk with them about the good news. That news is all we've got – it's more than enough.

Second thing: *we can trust in the good news for countless reasons, but one of the biggest is that no one would make this up.* Can you believe that out of 4,200 faith systems, only Christianity preaches grace? All the others are on you. As author R. H. Mounce put it, "God justifies the ungodly, not the well intentioned. What makes the "good news" news is that no one would have come up with a plan that excluded their own contribution toward a future salvation." No one thinks like this. No one acts like this. Some Christian churches attempt to make our contribution a bigger deal because we want to earn it. We want to deserve it. But we can't.

Who would make up a story where God's wrath against evil is directed not at the people who did the evil, but against His own Son so that He can make people who did evil right with Himself? Who would make up a story where the person through whom the universe was made would suffer and die in order to save His creation? Who would say no, you can't do anything to secure a good afterlife, but God wants you there so He sacrificed His own perfect Son to get you there? It's foolishness, craziness, madness to human thinking – but there you go. It's true.

But what's not crazy is that the Bible mirrors human behavior and goes against any way that we make ourselves look good. The disciples are foolish and ignorant. The women see Jesus first – and run off to tell the guys, who don't believe them. The best biblical people sin big-time. Who would write a story putting themselves down? It only makes sense if it isn't made up.

Third and final thought: *if you have faith in Jesus, rejoice because the curse of sin no longer binds you.* You have been clothed with Christ's righteousness. God the Father sees you not in the filthy rags of sin but the royal robes of Christ's perfection. You are claimed by Him, loved by Him, and accepted by Him. The cost for your sin has been paid. You are not under the curse of the old law. You are now under the lordship of Jesus Christ, and your allegiance is to Him. God's divine wrath is not on you; you are in His good pleasure. What else is there to do but to rejoice, to be happy, to be merry?

Throughout his letters, Paul tells his readers to expect to suffer for Jesus. But he writes with amazing joy and contentment in the midst of all sorts of disasters. We find out why in 2 Corinthians 4, where he writes this: "we do not lose heart," he says, "for our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all." Your faith won't keep you from hard times, troubles, even disasters. But it will keep you in Jesus. It will keep you clothed in His righteousness. It will keep you safe for eternity. Hold on to that. It's good news that no matter what happens in this world, you have Christ.

The great turnaround has happened. Paul will be telling us more and more about it in the coming weeks, so you'll want to be here and get all the details. But as we leave this week, let's live in celebration – all who believe have been set free from our sin by the blood of Jesus. That's good news.