

## **Romans 3:21-31**

### **'How can it be?'**

**The London skyline is full of interesting landmarks to see which I suppose is one of the reasons why the London Eye has been so popular.**

- From Big Ben to the Gherkin, Battersea Power Station to Buckingham Palace there is much to see.
- But there are two particular buildings that help make up London's skyline, near to one another, that I want us to think about for a moment: the Old Bailey and St Paul's Cathedral.
- The Old Bailey is the home of British justice.
- On top of the building is Pomeroy's magnificent golden statue of the goddess Justitia. In one hand she is holding the scales of justice and in the other she holds the sword of wrath.
- Upon anyone who is found to be guilty, the sword of wrath must fall.
- Then there is St Paul's Cathedral designed by Christopher Wren and seat of the Bishop of London, and this too has a golden object upon it.
- A cross.
- A reminder that God loves the world so much that He sent His only son, so that all who believe in Him shall not perish but have eternal life.<sup>1</sup>

**So, two golden objects, on top of two buildings, that reminds us of two important truths.**

- Firstly, the guilty must be punished for justice to take place.
- And secondly, that God has made a promise to bring blessing the whole world by gathering a people for Himself and for His glory.

**The problem comes when we try to reconcile these two things.**

- How can God keep His promise to gather a people when the all the people are guilty sinners?
- How can God gather guilty sinners when the guilty must be punished for justice to take place?

**How can it be?**

**The answer comes in this wonderful section of Paul's letter to the Romans.**

- Romans 3:21-26 has been described as "*possibility the most important single paragraph ever written*".<sup>2</sup>
- It's been called the 'heart of the Bible'<sup>3</sup> or the 'marrow of theology'<sup>4</sup>.
- And it contains truly wonderful news which I'm going to do my best this morning to explain.

**This is news that should make our hearts leap for joy.**

- These truths should give us an emotional buzz better than any drug, or music, or even scoring the winning goal in a World Cup final.
- Our whole being should be moved by this.
- But no matter how well I preach this passage this morning I can't cause you feel this way.
- And the truth is that I need the affections of my heart to be moved by God's Word too.
- Because the gospel is something we have heard so, so, many times before and with familiarity there is the danger that the excitement goes.
- So I long that God's Spirit will take hold of each of us here so that when we leave, our hearts will blaze with love for Jesus.
- That we would shed tears of joy as we realise so clearly that we deserve to be and should be in hell now, but instead we have been forgiven and loved by Him and are going to heaven.

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<sup>1</sup> Adapted from Christianity Explored by Rico Tice and Barry Cooper

<sup>2</sup> Leon Morris

<sup>3</sup> Dr Barnhouse

<sup>4</sup> Martin Luther

**Up until verse 21, the verdict on the human race has been guilty, guilty, guilty.**

- We have all rebelled against God our maker.
- We have all broken God's law. There is no-one righteous, not even one.
- We have all failed to love God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength, and love our neighbour as ourselves.
- Every aspect of our lives is tainted by sin.
- The charges have been made and the verdict on our lives is guilty.
- We are sinners, guilty before God, and deserving of His judgment and there is nothing we can do about it!
- God's eyes are too pure to look on evil, he cannot tolerate wrong so must condemn us to hell.

**But then we have the surprise of verse 21.**

- But now... But now...
- The verdict should be guilty but instead we hear not guilty.

**How can it be? How can it be that guilty sinners can be declared not guilty so God's promise is kept? How can it be that God can be righteous if sin is not punished and justice takes place?**

**Well, there are 3 sides to the answer to these questions.**

*Firstly,*

**Point 1: It's all down to grace!**

**READ ROMANS 3:21**

- *"But now a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify."*

**A righteousness from God has been made known.**

- God's righteousness has been made visible for all to see.
- And it has been in two ways:

**The first way is that, God's righteousness has been made known in the sense of his character.**

- God has been seen to have acted rightly, in that He has kept His promise but at same time punished sin.
- Something has happened which shows that He is right and that He has done right.

**The second way is that, God's righteousness has been made known is as He declares that guilty sinners are now righteous.**

- A change has taken place.
- People, who earlier are described by Paul as not being righteous, not in a right relationship with God, are now called righteous.
- It's at this point we ask the same question Job asked in Job 9:2:

**READ JOB 9:2**

- *"How can a mortal [a man] be righteous before God?"*

**And the first part of the answer is that it is down to grace!**

- This righteousness from God is apart from the law, which basically means that following the law won't get you the righteousness you need.
- Following the 10 Commandments won't get you righteousness.
- Good works won't get you righteousness.
- Being baptised won't get you righteousness, nor will giving money or praying a lot!

- We can't be righteous before God by doing something.
- In fact verse 20 tells us that law has the opposite effect of making us more aware of our sin, that all we do is unrighteous.
- So, that it is apart from the law is good news because it means that it is available to those who have broken the law.
- It's not about what we do; instead it's all down to grace. Look at verses 23-24:

**READ ROMANS 3:23-24**

- *"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."*

**We'll come back to those words 'justified' and 'redemption', but slap bang in the middle between them is that word 'grace'.**

- God doing good for undeserving sinners.
- And this is a gift, not a reward for being successful in some area.
- It's like a King clothing a beggar.

**U2's song 'Grace' contains some incredible lyrics that capture a glimpse of the wonder of grace.**

- *"Grace, she takes the blame  
She covers the shame  
Removes the stain*
- *What once was hurt  
What once was friction  
What left a mark  
No longer stings...  
Because Grace makes beauty  
Out of ugly things*

**Grace makes beauty out of ugly things.**

- It does seem too good to be true. But it is!

**So, the first part of the answer is that it's all down to grace.**

- It's not down to anything we've done; it's down to what God has done.

*Secondly,*

**Point 2: It's all down to Jesus!**

**And here we come to the heart of the answer.**

**READ ROMANS 3:23-25**

- *"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."*

**It is because of Jesus that we can be declare righteous and it is because of Jesus that God can be seen to be righteous in punishing sin and keeping His promise.**

- And to show this Paul takes us on a journey.
- He takes us to the law courts, then to the slave market, and then to the temple.
- The image of what happens at each of these places overlap to give a wonderful picture of what Jesus has done for us, by dying on the cross in our place.

*So come we me, as firstly, we travel to the law courts, and...*

## a) Our justification (v24)

### READ ROMANS 3:23-24

- *“for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely by his grace”*

#### **We’re taken to the law courts, and unsurprisingly it turns out that we’re in the dock.**

- We’re in front of God, and it appears that the verdict is certain.
- We know that we are guilty. It’s a foregone conclusion.
- But to our surprise we are declared to be ‘not guilty’.
- We are justified.

#### **To be justified is to be declared to be in right, righteous, not guilty.**

- It is the opposite of condemnation.

#### **But how can we be justified?**

- How can God look at us who are sinners and say we are righteous?

#### **He can do this because of what Jesus has done.**

- Jesus lived a perfect and righteous life, He never sinned and had no guilt before God.
- Yet something extraordinary happened when He died on the cross.
- He died as a substitute, His death was in our place.
- And on the cross a double transfer took place.
- Our sin and guilt was transferred to Jesus, and so as God looked down from heaven at Him hung up on the cross, bloody, naked, mangled, He said “Guilty” and Jesus received God’s judgment which we deserved.
- But at the same time Jesus’ own righteousness was transferred to us, so that now and in the future when God looks at us, He no longer see our sin and guilt but Jesus’ righteousness, and says “Not guilty”.
- Paul sums this up well in 2 Corinthians 5:21:

### READ 2 CORINTHIANS 5:21

- *“God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.”*

#### **But that’s not all that has happened.**

*The image now changes from the law court to the slave market, and secondly...*

## b) Our redemption (v24)

### READ ROMANS 3:24

- *“and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.”*

#### **If we arrived in the law court and found ourselves in the docks, we arrive at the slave market in chains.**

- We are one of the slaves.
- We’ve rejected God, the best master of all and that has made us a slave to sin.
- Jesus said that everyone who sins is a slave to sin.<sup>5</sup>
- And as a slave we can’t buy our freedom.
- But in the slave market among all the other masters looking to buy slaves we see the one we rejected and He is there with His Son.
- Even more surprising He makes a bid for us, who have treated Him so badly and this is accepted.

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<sup>5</sup> John 8:34

- He buys us, but the payment isn't money. Instead He hands over His Son, and then takes off our chains and says you are free.
- We have been rescued from slavery to sin, from under sin's power, but this has come at an enormous cost.
- The precious blood of Jesus shed for us.

**The story is told of an orphaned boy who was living with his grandmother when their house caught fire.**

- The grandmother, trying to get upstairs to rescue the boy, perished in the flames.
- The boy's cries for help were finally answered by a man who climbed an iron drainpipe and came back down with the boy hanging tightly to his neck.
- Several weeks later, a public hearing was held to determine who would receive custody of the child.
- A farmer, a teacher, and the town's wealthiest citizen all gave the reasons they felt they should be chosen to give the boy a home.
- But as they talked, the boy's eyes remained focused on the floor.
- Then a stranger walked to the front and slowly took his hands from his pockets, revealing severe scars on them.
- As the crowd gasped, the boy cried out in recognition.
- This was the man who had saved his life.
- His hands had been burnt when he climbed the hot pipe.
- With a leap the boy threw his arms around the man's neck and held on for dear life.
- The other men silently walked away, leaving the boy and his rescuer alone.
- Those marred hands had settled the issue.<sup>6</sup>
- Jesus has the scars on his hands as proof of the rescue, and as proof of how much God in spite of our rebellion, loves us.

**So in our justification we have seen how God can declare us not guilty.**

- In our redemption we have seen how God in His love, has rescued us by paying the price to free us from slavery to sin's power.
- But there is one more thing we need to know has happened.

*And for this, the scene now changes to the temple, and thirdly...*

**c) Our propitiation (v25)**

**READ ROMANS 3:25**

- *"God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement, through faith in his blood."*

**If you look at the footnotes you'll see there is an alternative way of understanding this phrase 'sacrifice of atonement'.**

- *"As the one who would turn aside his wrath, taking away sin."*
- The word for this is propitiation.
- So in a more literal translation of the Bible like the ESV verse 25 reads:

**READ ROMANS 3:25 (ESV)**

- *"...whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood."*

**We are now in the temple in Jerusalem, and there is blood everywhere, someone has died violently, but it's not us, and as a result God's anger and wrath towards us has been satisfied.**

- God is angry at our rebellious attitude towards Him and actions against Him.
- Our sins stir up His wrath which acts in judgment.
- In the Old Testament, God made provision for His people in the form of the sacrificial system.

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<sup>6</sup> Quoted in Cross Examined by Mark Meynell

- The Israelites who deserve God's wrath because of their sin would bring a lamb that God had provided, and lay their hands on it as a sign that it was representing them, and the animal is killed and God's anger diverted to it.
- On the Day of Atonement it was the goat who died in the place of the people.
- The problem was that these animals didn't deal with the problem. They had to keep on sacrificing them.
- But then a sacrifice comes, a representative for us, once for all time.
- On the cross God's anger at you kills Jesus.
- Jesus is punished for our sin, and God's anger at us is diverted to Him until it was satisfied.

**Jesus by His death has achieved our justification, our redemption, our propitiation.**

**Now before we look at the third part to the answer...**

- I want us to return to the question of how God's righteousness is revealed, firstly, in the sense of revealing His righteous character by keeping His promises but at the same time punishing sin.

**READ ROMANS 3:25-26**

- *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."*

**God had been treating people not as their sins deserve for thousands of years and still does today.**

- Sins committed have yet to be punished.
- But God's justice demands that they are. If God doesn't punish sins He would not be just.
- Now I hope you've seen that God is just because the punishment the sins of the people He declares righteous has been unleashed on His Son the Lord Jesus Christ, and for those who are not saved by Him, they will be punished for them in hell.
- Can you see that God cares about sin? He's not brushing it aside, sin is punished.

**But God's righteousness is, secondly, also revealed in the sense that we can be declared righteous because Jesus' righteousness has been transferred (or if you want to use the technical word 'imputed') to us.**

- But how is it transferred to us?
- How do we receive all the blessings and benefits of Christ's death?
- How does it become on our behalf?

*Well, that brings us to the third point,*

**Point 3: It's all down to faith**

**READ ROMANS 3:22**

- *"This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe."*

**READ ROMANS 3:25**

- *"God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement, through faith in his blood."*

**READ ROMANS 3:26**

- *"...so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus."*

**Faith is the only right response to Christ's death.**

- It is putting all our hope, reliance, dependence, trust in what Christ has done.

- It is saying I need someone to pay for my sin otherwise God will punish me in hell, and Jesus is the only one who can.
- It's to say: "God, have mercy on me, a sinner".

**It's down to grace. It's down to Jesus. It's down to faith. Grace alone, Christ alone, faith alone.**

**This is truly good news for everyone.**

- But at the same time it is not good news for everyone.
- It is good news for everyone who recognises they are sinners under God's wrath and facing eternity in hell and who accept this rescue.
- Look if you don't think you are a sinner, this won't be good news for you. And if that's you, can I urge you to pray that God will help you to see yourself the way God sees you.
- But even if you recognise you are a sinner, this won't be good news for you unless you accept the rescue on offer.
- If you don't, you miss out on the good news and remain in the deadly position your sins puts you in.
- So, let all begin by asking ourselves whether this is good news for us!

**And then if it is, how wonderful is this good news to us.**

- Becoming a parent or grandparent is good news.
- Getting a promotion or raise or good grade at school is good news.
- Being picked for something, winning a competition is good news.
- England winning the World Cup is good news.
- The political party we vote for winning the election is good news.
- Getting married is good news.
- But how does this news that we can be in right with God, freed from the power of sin, no longer under God's wrath and anger, loved by God and precious to Him, and have the hope of heaven compare?
- Does it move us to wonder, love, and praise in a way that nothing else does?

**Think about these lines from some of the hymns and songs that we sing:**

- *"This the power of the cross, Christ became sin for us, took the blame, bore the wrath, we stand forgiven at the cross."*
- *"Were the whole realm of Nature mine, that were an offering far too small, Love so amazing, so divine, demands my soul, my life, my all!"*
- *"Till on that cross as Jesus died, the wrath of God was satisfied – for every sin on Him was laid, here in the death of Christ I live."*
- *"No condemnation now I dread; Jesus, and all in Him, is mine! Alive in Him, my living Head, and clothed in righteousness divine. Bold I approach the eternal throne, and claim the crown, through Christ my own."*
- As we sing them do our hearts fill with joy and gratitude and thankfulness?
- I haven't got the words to express how wonderful the righteousness of God that has been revealed is.
- I pray God's Spirit will move your hearts.

**But as well let me suggest 4 ways that we can respond to God's Word.**

- Some of these might be more relevant to you than others.
- But can I encourage you to take time this week to think further and explore some of these ways.

*Firstly,*

**a) Don't boast (v27-28)**

**READ ROMANS 3:27-28**

- *“Where, then, is boasting? It is excluded. On what principle? On that of observing the law? No, but on that of faith.*
- *For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from observing the law.”*

**Because we are saved by grace we have nothing to boast about.**

- To claim any credit in our salvation is to rob God of His glory, the amazing thing that He has done.
- A swimmer who is drowning and is yanked out of the water by the lifeguard doesn't brag because they trusted the lifeguard to save them and in the same way we can't take any credit for putting our faith in Jesus.<sup>7</sup>
- That is a gift from God too.

*Secondly,*

**b) Don't look down on people (v29-30)**

**READ ROMANS 3:29-30**

- *“Is God the God of Jews only? Is he not the God of Gentiles too? Yes, of Gentiles too,*
- *since there is only one God, who will justify the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through that same faith.”*

**God is the God of all people.**

- Whether Jew or Gentile, young or old, middle class or working class, arty or sporty, grammar school educated or comprehensive, living in a mansion or on the streets.
- All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.
- No-one has right to think that they are better than someone else.
- The cross is the great leveller.
- All God's people are saved the same way, by faith in the Lord Jesus and His work on the cross.
- We contribute nothing to our salvation.
- You see, a right understanding of the gospel should lead us to treating people the right way.

*Thirdly,*

**c) Value the law (v31)**

**READ ROMANS 3:31**

- *“Do we, then, nullify the law by this faith? Not at all! Rather, we uphold the law.”*

**Verse 31 I've found quite an intriguing verse.**

- It seems that because the law does not justify you or save you, then some might argue it has no purpose at all and we might as well get rid of it.
- But Paul here says no, the law is to be upheld. To be valued!

**Why should we value the law?**

- Firstly, because it shows us what it means to live a righteous life, and the fact that Jesus lived that life should amaze us.
- Secondly, because as we compare ourselves to this standard, it makes us so aware that we are sinners, and why the gospel is so needed, otherwise nobody would be saved. So this should lead us to a thankfulness for what Christ has done.
- But there is also a third reason, which is that since we are no longer slaves to sin we can now choose to live in a way that pleases God which is what the law shows us.
- Obedience to God's law doesn't save us but doesn't mean that the law shouldn't be valued.

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<sup>7</sup> Warren Wiesbe, Bible Exposition Commentary

Fourthly,

#### **d) Be Confident**

**In the North American Prairies the threat of fire is very real.**

- Once a farmer and his daughter were walking out across some of their vast farmland.
- In the distance, they spotted a prairie fire.
- Because the wind was driving the fire towards them, they knew they had only one chance for survival.
- They quickly lit a fire where they were and ensured that it burned a large patch of grass around them.
- When the flames of the larger fire approached, they stood on their burnt patch.
- The child was terrified, but her father assured her, 'the flames can't get us. Fire can't burn the same place twice,'<sup>8</sup>

**We can have great confidence if we have put our faith in Jesus.**

- Because Christ has taken punishment for us we can be sure that justice has been done.
- The fire of God's wrath will not strike twice in the same place.
- And because our justification has nothing to do with our performance but on Christ's, we can know now what the future verdict on our lives will be and don't have to worry about facing God if we continue to put out faith in Him.

**That's exactly the point Paul will make later in his letter:**

#### **READ ROMANS 8:33-39**

- *"Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies.*
- *Who is he that condemns? Christ Jesus, who died— more than that, who was raised to life— is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us.*
- *Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword?*
- *As it is written: 'For your sake we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered.'*
- *No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.*
- *For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers,*
- *neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord."*

**For guilty sinners facing God's judgment a verdict of 'Not guilty' can be ours. How can it be?  
Because Christ my God has died for me!**

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<sup>8</sup> Quoted in Cross Examined by Mark Meynell