

Romans 3:21-31

The Revelation of God's Righteousness in the New Dispensation

A. Notes on the Text

Verse 21

The phrase "the Law and the Prophets" denotes the whole Old Testament. Verse 21 repeats 1:17! It is typical that the apostle, by appealing to the Old Testament as Law, rejects that Law as the way of salvation (which was what the Jews taught).

"A righteousness from God" refers specifically to God's redeeming and saving righteousness. (See Glossary #8.)

Verse 22

The word "Jesus" does not appear in most manuscripts, nor in the most reliable manuscripts.

For a discussion on "this righteousness from God" see v. 21.

The expression "faith in Jesus Christ" means: put all one's trust in him, accept him as Saviour and so share in all his benefits (cf. Heidelberg Catechism, A. 20). This phrase also occurs in 3:26 (cf. Galatians 3:22, Ephesians 3:12, and Philippians 3:9).

Verse 23

Dr. D. Holwerda (*O diepte des rijkdoms*) reads this as: "...and do not receive God's approval." (See Glossary #6.)

Verse 24

(See Glossary #16.) "By his grace" indicates the ground and the cause, while "through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus" indicates the way and the means. "Redemption" (the word in the Greek text is *apolutroosis*) was formerly thought to refer to a slave, who bought himself freedom from slavery by paying a ransom and thus became a free man. Today we should rather think of the ransom of someone who, condemned to death, saves his life by paying a ransom. Christ has ransomed us from death which we deserved.

Verses 25-26

Dr. D. Holwerda translates these verses as follows:

Whom God had presented as redeemer by his blood (by faith) to prove his righteousness, because he passed over the sins which were formerly committed, when God restrained himself with a view to proving at the

*present time that he is righteous, also when he justifies him who lives by faith in Jesus.*¹

Verse 25

"Sacrifice of atonement" or "Expiation" [RSV]: the Greek word also means the mercy seat which covered the ark on which the high priest sprinkled the blood of atonement once a year (Exodus 25:17,18; Leviticus 16:2,13ff.; see also Hebrews 9:5). The expiation or atonement referred to is Christ's blood. In Paul's letters "the blood of Christ" is shorthand for all Christ's suffering and death for our reconciliation (expiation). (See Glossary #26.) "Presented" means either purposed beforehand (in God's counsel), or publicly displayed on the cross (see John 3:14). It can also mean both.

"In his blood" belongs to expiation (reconciliation), so the meaning is expiation by the shedding of his blood. God's righteousness here is his retributive justice. It was made clear in Christ's suffering and death (see Heidelberg Catechism, A. 37,38,40). (See Glossary #8.)

"[God's] forbearance": in the old covenant, before Christ became flesh, God bore (carried) the sins of his people, that is, he postponed judgment over them while awaiting the coming of Christ. Hence, there was indeed forgiveness in advance for believers of the old covenant, because Christ's sacrifice was coming.

Verse 26

"To demonstrate his justice": in the suffering and death of Christ both God's retributive justice and his redeeming righteousness are revealed.

"At the present time": refers to the hour of Christ's death on the cross. The RSV does not translate the text very well. The NASB reads: "that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus." That means: by making Christ the atoning sacrifice, God maintains his justice towards the believer in Christ. Christ's atoning death means judgment as well as grace.

Verse 27

"Principle" means: a way of life, so that "the principle of works" [RSV] is doing works of the law (the Jew); "the principle of faith" [RSV] is accepting Christ and all his benefits by faith (the Christian).

Verse 28

Luther added the word "alone": through faith alone. The Roman Catholics incorrectly resented him for that. By faith alone means: without any work on the part of man. Actually, in Roman Catholic Bible translations from before the time of the reformation (four of them in the fifteenth century), "by faith alone" already

¹ Ed. Note: Quote is from *O diepte des rijkdoms* (1949).

occurred in Galatians 2:16. Roman Catholic translators and commentators already recognized this before Luther. Luther said nothing new!

Verse 31

"Uphold the law" means: make the law count, giving it its due. How? Because we, through the redeeming and saving grace of Christ, begin to live according to all the commandments of God. (cf. Romans 8:4 and 13:8; Heidelberg Catechism, A. 114).

B. Main Thoughts

1. In the above, Paul concludes that no one, neither Jew nor Gentile, is righteous before God. No man receives God's approval (v. 23), for no one is just before God. But now in this new dispensation there is salvation through the righteousness of Christ. This is apart from the law, meaning that works of the law (which really are not found in sinners, except sporadically: 2:14ff.) do not contribute anything to redemption. For the sinner there is righteousness (acquittal of guilt and a claim to eternal life) only through Christ's mediating work.
2. God is angry with sin; yet he passed over the sins of Israel in the old covenant (v. 25). He could do this, because he would later impute them to Christ (cf. Isaiah 53). So God himself is just: he does not lightly forgive. As Reformed people we say according to the Scriptures: reconciliation through satisfaction only (Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Day 5). God's covenant justice must be satisfied; he demands that we love him completely in return!
3. Does this imputation and gift of Christ's righteousness mean that the law is and will remain completely abolished? Does a believer in Christ no longer have to keep the law of God? Has the law been cancelled for believers?

Paul emphatically says: NO! For the original meaning and function of the law in paradise was to regulate the life of dedication to God. Its purpose was to show how we may serve the Lord. Through sin we turned against the law and did exactly what contradicted that law. However, through the grace of Christ we once again want to live for God. Then the law can once again function according to its original purpose. Thus we uphold the law (v. 31).

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