

Salvation by Surprise

Paul's Good News in Romans 3.21—4.25

A Prep Guide for Sessions 3

by Dr. Allen Hilton

In our last session, we followed prosecutor Paul's chain of argument all the way to the bleak catena of passages in chapter 3 that portray humanity, ultimately, as helpless in the face of our human predicament. In fact, by the time we reach Romans 3.20, where Paul has squelched all hope about the last human recourse, either we've thrown the letter down and gone looking for a [Farrell song](#), or we know that humanity needs saving! Gentiles have turned away from God, and Jews have failed to live out God's Law. There is none righteous, there is not even one!" (Romans 3.10b) It's enough to ruin a person's day.

How will God solve this complex problem? What are the options?

God could offer universal amnesty. "Ah, forget about it. I forgive you all." This solution is complicated by God's character: God is just (DIKAIOSUNE) and God created the universe within a structure of justice that flows from the divine character. As we saw in our last session, human sin is not trivial. It has a cosmic cost, both in its distancing of the sinner from God and in the way it naturally leads to gouges in human community. How will God both welcome sinful humanity and remain true to the just divine character?

God's answer takes us by surprise: the same God who sent Paul out to prosecute human failings has now supplied the way forward.

But now, apart from the Law, the righteousness of God has been disclosed, and is attested by the law and the prophets, the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe." (3.21)

God has offered access to God, not through fidelity to Moses' Law or achieving superhuman Gentile morality – those ships have sailed – but only by riding the coattails of the one righteous one, Jesus, the Messiah. God has remained just and yet welcomed unjust humanity home, through the faithfulness of Jesus the Messiah.

Wouldn't you have expected Moses to be the solution? The Hebrew scriptures from Exodus 20 forward revolve around the Law – mostly chronicling Israel's failure to keep it. But when Jeremiah and Ezekiel envision God's solution to this constant failure, they imagine God will give Israel new hearts so they will be newly able to keep the Law – that God will even write the Law on their hearts. (Jeremiah 31—32 and Ezekiel 32.26-27) But the goal was always to keep the Law. Now, God is welcoming humanity home "apart from the law" through Jesus.

The language of the passage sounds familiar to anyone who's heard the first three chapters of this letter. In his thesis statement of Romans 1.16-17, Paul featured "the righteousness of God" and "faith." Listen to how often the language of righteousness and faith appears in this single paragraph:

*But now, apart from the law, **the righteousness of God** has been disclosed and is attested by the Law and the Prophets, **the righteousness of God** through **the faith** of Jesus Christ for all who **believe** [i.e., have faith]. For there is no distinction, since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; they are now **justified** by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a sacrifice of atonement by his blood, effective through faith. He did this to demonstrate his righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over the sins previously committed; it was to demonstrate at the present time his own **righteousness**, so that he is **righteous** and he **justifies** the one who has the **faith** of Jesus. (Romans 3.21-26)*

Every bolded word translates either the Greek word for righteousness/justice (**DIKAIOSUNE/DIKAIOW**) or faith (**PISTIS/PISTEUO**). The language of righteousness and faith is definitely back!

This relationship between God's righteousness and faith is crucial to understanding the salvation Paul offered in 1.16-17. It is therefore important to look closely at the verbiage of this paragraph. In fact, this dense passage has often been the epicenter of theological conversation about salvation – a.k.a. "soteriology." Remember what is at stake: how can God both maintain the divine justice and receive people who have violated justice, by abandoning God or God's law. As Paul offers access to a new hope, it all comes down to faith and the righteousness of God.

So what is the relationship between the two? The New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) translation above is important to notice and compare with others. In fact the wording may have caught some of you up short as you read. Compare Romans 3.22-26 in the NRSV on the left with the NIV on the right below:

NRSV	NIV
But now, apart from the Law, the righteousness of God has been disclosed....	But now apart from the law the righteousness of God has been made known...
the righteousness of God through the faith of Jesus Christ for all who believe....	This righteousness is given through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe...
it was to demonstrate at the present time his own righteousness, so that he is righteous and he justifies the one who has the faith of Jesus .	he 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 .

The New International Version probably rings more familiar. Faith in Jesus has been a stock phrase in many Christians circle since the King James Version of 1612 rendered the last words of the passage: “the justifier of him who believeth in Jesus.” In fact, since the Reformation “faith in Jesus” or “belief in Jesus” has been the way most circles of Christianity have understood this passage.

In the last four decades, though, there has been a significant shift in some corners of New Testament scholarship on precisely this part of Paul’s letter. When Dr. Richard Hays published *The Faith of Jesus* in 1983, he argued that in a similar and central passage from Paul’s letter to the Galatians, the better translation of our phrase is “faith OF” Jesus – what Greek scholars call a “subjective Genitive” – in which it is Jesus’ trust in God and not our trust in Jesus that is primary. Jesus was faithful all the way to the cross on our behalf. As Dr. Lou Martyn writes in his Anchor *Galatians* commentary, “If we take the genitives as subjective genitives... they refer to Christ's faith, that is, Christ's faithful death in our behalf wherein he died faithfully for human beings while looking faithfully to God.” (*Galatians* p. 251)

The difference is in the focus. Part of the good news is the sturdy faithfulness of Jesus; the other is our access to the good news via belief in that Jesus. It’s a both and. We’re saved by Jesus’ faith/trust/faithfulness, and we access it by our faith in him.

How does Jesus’ faithfulness save us? Paul loads three quick answers into one paragraph:

1. Jesus is like the animal sacrifice priests offered on the altar; (Romans 3.25)
2. Jesus is like the place in the Temple where God’s mercy is experienced (Romans 3.25b and 1 Samuel 4.4);

3. Jesus' blood – his death – shows the faithfulness of the one Isaiah described, who “was wounded for our transgressions, bruised for our iniquities.” (Isaiah 53)

Jesus has done what Israel never did – remain faithful to God, even to death. In his faithfulness, Jesus fulfills God's intention for Israel. Through him, the rest of us receive the forgiveness that comes at the altar, experience the mercy that comes in the Temple's “holy of holies,” and get into God's graces through the obedient, faithful one – all by simply putting our trust in him.

Does this good news sound too easy? Or too hard? What does all this say to you about God? About Jesus? About you?

Theories of the Atonement

Atonement is the theological term for what Paul describes in Romans 3—5 and elsewhere in his letters. Naturally, the mystery of salvation has animated Christian discussion through the twenty centuries of church history, and this conversation has birthed a range of metaphors and explanations for what God did through Jesus to save us. Some of these emerge from Romans, many originate elsewhere; but the long list likely influences you and me in ways of which we're not fully aware. In this way it provides us with context that has ground our theological lenses and impacts the way we read Romans. For your convenience, I've compiled a list here from a wide variety of sources.

- **The Ransom Theory:** The earliest theory of all, sprung from brilliant early church minds like Origen of Alexandria (185-253 C.E.), Gregory of Nyssa from Cappadocia (335-395 C.E.), and Augustine of Hippo in North Africa (354-430 C.E.) and widely held in the church's first centuries, this theory claims that Christ offered himself as a ransom. Jesus provided the scriptural basis when he told his disciples, “The Son of Man came, not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for man.” Jesus did not clarify to whom the ransom was paid, so many early church fathers supplied Satan as the kidnapper.
- **The Recapitulation Theory:** Irenaeus of Lyon (125-202 AD). Saw Christ as the new Adam, who systematically undid what Adam had done. In Romans 5, Paul writes, “sin came into the world through one man, and death came through sin, and so death spread to all because all have sinned... If, because of the one man's trespass, death reigned through that one, much more surely will those who receive the abundance of grace and the gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man, Jesus Christ.” (5.12, 17-18) Thus, where Adam was disobedient in Eden, eating the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge, Christ was obedient even to death on the wood of a tree. In reversing the wrongs done by Adam, and living full humanity out into the world, Irenaeus thinks of Christ as “recapitulating” or “summing up” or “fulfilling” human life.
- **The Satisfaction Theory:** The medieval theologian Anselm of Canterbury (1034-1109), in his book, *Cur Deus Homo* (lit. *Why the God Man*), held that God's offended honor and

dignity could only be satisfied by the sacrifice of the God-human, Jesus Christ. For Anselm, Christ was not a ransom paid by God to the devil, but instead was a debt Jesus paid to God on behalf of sinners. Anselm's work established a foundation for the early Protestant reformers' understanding of justification by faith. Ironically, given the *Sola Scriptura* conviction of the reformers, Anselm mostly argues from logic, though he assumes scriptural knowledge in his reader.

- **The Penal-Substitution Theory:** The 16-century Protestant reformers saw Anselm's theory as insufficient because it referred to God's honor rather than his justice and holiness and was couched more in terms of a commercial transaction than a penal substitution. This view says simply that Christ the innocent one died in the place of humanity, taking on and bearing human sins. In this way Christ also takes the punishment for sins and sets believers free from the penal demands of the law. Consequently, the just character of the law and God's holiness are satisfied by this substitution. It's not accidental that Luther posted his 95 Theses on a Wittenberg door after teaching Romans for three semesters. He read Paul through Anselm-influenced eyes.
- **The Moral-Example Theory:** Peter Abelard (1079-1142) believed that Christ's death was not a transaction with God, but rather an exemplary act of compassion intended to woo humankind toward moral improvement -- to impress humankind with a deep sense of God's love in a way that could soften their hard hearts and lead them to repentance. Thus, the cross is not directed towards God with the purpose of maintaining divine justice, but towards humanity, evoke us to right action.
- **The Governmental Theory:** God made Christ an example of suffering to exhibit to sinful humanity that our sin is displeasing to him. The divine moral government of the world made it necessary that God show anger at sin by venting it on Christ. Christ died as a token of God's displeasure toward sin and it was accepted by God as sufficient; but actually God does not exact strict justice. This view was formulated by Hugo Grotius (1583-1645) and popular among Arminian theologians like the 18th-century views of Jonathan Edwards (the son of the famous one) and the 19th-century American revivalist Charles Grandison Finney.

Modern theories

- **The Declaratory Theory:** A version of the Moral Influence theory, wherein Christ died to show men how greatly God loves them. This view held by Albrecht Ritschl (1822-89).
- **The Guarantee Theory:** Reconciliation is based not on Christ's expiation of sin, but on His guarantee to win followers and thus conquer human sinfulness. This view held by J. C. K. von Hofmann (1810-77).

- **The Vicarious Repentance Theory:** by John McLeod Campbell (d. 1872). It assumes that a perfect repentance is sufficient to atone for sin. In his death, Christ entered into the Father's condemnation of sin, condemned sin, and by this, confessed it.
- **The 'Christus Victor' or Dramatic Theory:** by [G. E. H. Aulén](#) (1879-1977). The atonement is viewed as divine conflict and victory over the hostile powers that hold humanity in subjection. This is a modified form of the classic Ransom theory with the emphasis on Christ's victory over evil. *See main article [Christus Victor](#).*
- **The Martyr Theory:** Christ gave up His life for a principle of truth that was opposed to the spirit of His day, without any sort of cosmic significance or transaction with the divine. This view is usually found outside of mainstream Christianity.
- **An End to the Cycle of Violence:** Rene Girard and others have looked at the cross and seen a version of the Moral Example theory. In it, Jesus, who could “call 10,000 angels,” as the hymn goes, chooses not to fight back or avenge himself, but rather absorbs the violence in a move to halt the cycle of human violence. The death then becomes a pattern of non-violence that winds its way through history, most recently notable in the lives of Gandhi and Dr. Martin Luther King.

Each of these theories attempts to get its mind around the mystery of atonement. A few of them find their initial home in the biblical nexus of Romans and Galatians.

Who's Your Daddy?

How do you and I get in on this great news? We know that it is by faith, but what does faith look like? Time for a quick walk down a biblical memory lane:

Remember Abraham? From Genesis 12 onward, any Bible reader tracks Abraham and Sarah's family and how they have been “blessed in order to be a blessing.” Since Genesis 17, that covenant has included circumcision for males.

Remember Moses? Since Exodus 20 and those familiar Ten Commandments, God's covenant with Israel has included a God-centered way of life spelled out in Moses' Law. But through its idolatry and disobedience, Israel has broken its covenant with God and failed to be a blessing to the world.

Now God is doing a new thing: God is welcoming all people, Jew and Gentile, into the covenant through Jesus by faith. This is the new way into Abraham's family. So naturally, as he lays out his gospel, Paul speaks, not of Moses the lawgiver, but of Abraham, the one who had faith – the one God welcomed as a partner before Moses was a gleam in his mother and father's eyes. Paul sees his connection in Genesis 15:6.

Do you remember the scene? God has promised Abraham and Sarah children, but years, maybe decades later Sarah still isn't pregnant. So Abraham complains to God: “My slave will be

my heir!” God lifts Abraham’s eyes to the sky full of stars: “Your descendants will one day outnumber the stars.” Instead of contending again – “It’s been years, and still no baby. Why should I trust you?” But instead, “Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness.” (Genesis 15.6) Abraham’s trust becomes for Paul, both an example to the Roman Christians, and proof that faith is the main coinage in God’s new realm.

This was God’s way all along. In Abraham and in Jesus, God clarifies that it was never primarily about keeping the Law. It was always about trusting God. That’s why Paul can call Abraham the forefather of both Jews and Gentiles: “For the promise that he would inherit the world did not come to Abraham or to his descendants through the law but through the righteousness of faith.” (Romans 4.13)

In chapters 3 and 4, then Paul moves from his proclamation of God’s salvation to his poster child for how we get in on this: Abraham, who believed God.

A Note on Your Preparation

As you prepare for our next session, I urge you to read Romans 3.21—4.25 very closely. On Tuesday, I will send out two articles to assist you:

- ◇ The first will be the article on the Bible and Homosexuality that I mentioned in our Session 2 and which many of you have requested.
- ◇ A scholarly article that also reads Romans 3—4 carefully and might help you as you read.

I’ll look forward to seeing you then!