

# **ARE YOU READY TO LISTEN? ROMANS 3:21-31**

**By Pastor John Carlini, D. Mn**

**M.I. IT IS BOTH HUMBLING AND EXHILARATING TO FINALLY UNDERSTAND AND RECEIVE SALVATION IN FAITH.**

**I. ARE YOU READY TO LISTEN TO GOD'S WAY? (Vs. 21-26)  
WE ARE SAVED BY GRACE THROUGH FAITH. THERE IS NO OTHER WAY AND NO OTHER ADDITIONS. WE WERE BOUGHT AT A HIGH PRICE.**

- A. GOD'S PLAN (Vs. 21-22a)
- B. GOD'S REASON (Vs. 22b-23)
- C. GOD'S METHOD (Vs. 24-26)
  - 1. FROM THE COURTROOM (V. 24)
  - 2. FROM THE MARKET PLACE (V. 24)
  - 3. FROM THE TEMPLE (V. 25a)
    - a. THE PURPOSE
    - b. THE PLACE
    - c. THE PAYMENT
  - 4. GOD'S CHARACTER (Vs. 25b-26)
    - a. GOD'S HOLINESS (V. 25b)
    - b. DEALS WITH SIN IN THE PAST (V. 25c)
    - c. DEALS WITH SIN IN THE PRESENT (V. 26)

**II. ARE YOU READY TO SHUT YOUR MOUTH? (Vs. 27-30)  
SINCE WE ARE SAVED BY GRACE, THERE IS NOTHING TO BE PROUD ABOUT, NOTHING TO CAUSE DIVISIONS OVER.**

- A. NOT BY ACCOMPLISHMENTS (Vs. 27-28)
- B. NOT BY STATUS (Vs. 29-30)

**III. ARE YOU READY TO LIVE? (V. 31)  
WHEN WE FALL IN LOVE WITH OUR SAVIOR, OUR WORKS WILL FAR SURPASS THE LAW, BECAUSE NOT ONLY HAS HE PLANNED OUT GOOD WORKS FOR US IN ADVANCE, HE HAS PUT THE DESIRE IN OUR HEARTS TO DO THEM, AND HE GIVES US THE POWER TO DO THEM.**

## **ARE YOU READY TO LISTEN? ROMANS 3:21-31**

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Finally, we get to some good news in the book of Romans. We learned so far, that we are all born guilty, we are born with a bent towards evil, ... alienated from God in our natural state.

Further we said that all our attempts to be good and to be reconciled with God are useless. We cannot fix the problem by ignoring or scoffing at God's laws and then make our own rules to live by because that won't work. We said trying to live good decent lives won't work either and being really religious won't solve the problem.

Paul has made it clear that the whole human race is tainted and enslaved to sin, every part of our being has been affected by sin, the physical, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual. So we find ourselves enslaved to sin, enemies of God, with no way to fix the problem. That truly is bad news. Paul has forced us to examine our lives and invited us to examine how we have tried to remedy the sin problem, we have been humbled, and we are left with no pride whatsoever. We are lost, ... in need of salvation.

This morning, Paul is going to give us the gospel, which means good news in Greek. However, this is not just good news, it is excellent news. This is probably the most important passage in the book of Romans, perhaps in the whole Bible. If you ever learn anything about what it means to be a Christian, this is it.

Since there is nothing we can do to solve the sin problem in our lives, God devised a way in which He would take care of the problem for us. Jesus came to die in the most painful and horrible way possible in our place, Jesus took on the full punishment due us, when He died on the cross on our behalf.

Through Jesus, God offers us forgiveness of sin, freedom from sin, and a restored relationship with Himself all we have to do is receive it in faith and here is where we miss the boat as Christians. We don't take time to ponder how good the good news really is. What human being could ever come up with this answer to sin? This news is so good it almost seems unbelievable yet, that is exactly what we are called to do. We are called to believe it and we are called to accept it by faith. I would invite you to examine the wonder of God's plan of salvation with me this morning.

I know some things are hard to believe and some things are hard to accept in faith. Let me give you an example; you remember that church I used to pastor? The one that was so tough. (How tough was it?) It was so tough, that even the kids used to torment me. All of you, who know me, know that I am scared to death to get up in front of people and preach, that's why I carefully prepare everything and stick to the script and usually I am pretty brain dead as I preach. One Sunday, a couple of ornery teenagers noticed something interesting about the placement of the story of the Flood in my bible. They slipped into my office and glued two pages of the text together. When I started to preach, I opened the bible and started to read, "Noah took for himself a wife, and she was 450 feet long, 75 feet wide, and 45 feet high." I was kind of shocked, so I read it again. I looked at the congregation since I was confused and said, "I've been reading this bible for a long time now, but there are some things that are just plain hard to believe."

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Well in today's text, the concepts are hard to believe, but I want to assure you, they are completely true.

If we don't understand and accept God's plan of salvation, then we cannot be saved. I think this is perhaps the most important information that we can ever grasp in our lives. That is not hyperbole and I am not exaggerating in any way.

This is the point of this morning's text: **IT IS BOTH HUMBLING AND EXHILARATING TO FINALLY UNDERSTAND AND RECEIVE SALVATION BY FAITH.** You see, coming to the point where we can acknowledge that there is nothing good in us at all, is a humbling experience. Whatever human measurements, whether they be economic, intellectual, religious, community status or any other, to compare ourselves with others, is a false measure. The fact is that all of us are in the same boat; we are all hopelessly lost and in need of a Savior. That is humbling and there is nothing I can do.

But once I come to the place in my life where I can accept God's grace, it is exhilarating, it is freeing, it enables me to live and enjoy life without fear and it permits me to enjoy God for Who He really is, a loving and gracious Father.

Paul has hammered home that all man-made solutions to fix the problem of sin and alienation to God, are all failures. I know this will not be a popular statement in our day of tolerance, but all other religions are human attempts to fix the sin problem and to win the favor of God they are all false, because their premise is false.

I. **ARE YOU READY TO LISTEN TO GOD'S WAY? (Vs. 21-26)**  
**WE ARE SAVED BY GRACE THROUGH FAITH. THERE IS NO OTHER WAY AND NO OTHER ADDITIONS. WE WERE BOUGHT AT A HIGH PRICE.**

Christianity is distinct from all other religions in that it says we cannot fix the sin problem, nor can we win the favor and affections of God. So Paul now asks us in verses 21-26, "Are you ready to listen to God's way?" I don't know about you, but studying through these first three chapters of Romans has been discouraging and disheartening for me. I can see that on

my own, I am hopelessly lost and enslaved to sin. I am ready to hear the gospel, ... the good news and here it is: **WE ARE SAVED BY GRACE THROUGH FAITH THERE IS NO OTHER WAY AND NO OTHER ADDITIONS. WE WERE BOUGHT AT A VERY HIGH PRICE.** I want you to let those words sink in. We are saved by grace through faith, ... plus or minus nothing we can't add to it and we can't take away from it.

A. GOD'S PLAN (Vs. 21-22a)

It is God's plan and it is described in verses 21 through the first half of verse 22. Look at the first two words in this passage, "But now"! These are beautiful words which I think convey two meanings. First, they contrast what has been described before with what Paul is about to describe, since he has painted this bleak picture of the state we find ourselves in and the dilemma we face. 'BUT NOW,' he is going to paint a wonderful picture of the solution God has made for us.

Second, I think the 'but now' has a temporal meaning. In other words, like Paul and the Roman church, we find ourselves on the other side of the Incarnation, Death, and Resurrection of Jesus. We are post resurrection people.

In today's passage, if you quickly scan through the passage, you would notice two major themes; namely faith and righteousness. Now again, I have to remind us English readers, that in the Greek, Righteousness, Righteous, Justify, Justification, Right and Just all come from the same root word. Righteousness has to do with being right, doing the right thing, being good, being perfect, being holy, the meaning points to justice, goodness, and holiness.

In the first three chapters we saw that God is holy and He is perfectly righteous and just, therefore, He cannot tolerate any sin or imperfection and since we are not perfect, and since we sin, we find ourselves alienated from God.

The Hebrews had come to believe that they could be reconciled with God by keeping the law. Here we will have to stop and define how Paul uses the word law, otherwise, our study through Romans could get confusing. For the most part, Paul uses the word law in describing the religious laws found in the first five books of the Bible, they have been referred to as the Law of Moses, the Torah, or the Pentateuch so for the most part, Paul uses the word law to describe these religious, ceremonial laws. But Paul also uses the word law to describe the whole Old Testament. Here he will often add the words, “and the prophets,” like he does here in verse 21. Paul also uses the word law to describe the whole Hebrew experience, to include the whole Old Testament, along with the Rabbis interpretations and other writings like the Mishnah and Talmud.

There are times for our purposes that we could legitimately include the moral law and the natural law found in the world order and creation. For example, Paul is definitely using the first instance of law to describe the religious, ceremonial laws found in the Torah, as practiced by the Jews of his day but again, in light of what we have been studying so far in the book of Romans, I think we can include all law. So apart from the Hebrew religious law, apart from moral law and apart from the natural law, a different type of righteousness has been made known to us. This righteousness, this perfection, this reconciliation with God comes from God, it is different from the others in that God has made a way for us to be freed from the bondage of sin, death, and fear, and has provided a way in which we can be reconciled with Him.

This righteousness is different from the other laws in that they were unable to save us because we didn't have the ability to live up to them. However, Paul makes it very clear that they all testified to this type of righteousness, if properly understood, the whole Hebrew Scriptures, point to the person and work of Jesus Christ. In fact, the priesthood, the ancestry of

kings, the prophets, the sacrificial system, and the entire history of the Hebrew people are predictive and pointing to Jesus. All of these things point to the ultimate gospel message. That is, that since God is perfect and holy, and even though God loves us, His righteousness and justice demands that sin, rebellion, and evil must be punished. Since it would take an eternity in hell for us to pay for all our sins, God devised a plan in which Jesus would suffer, die, and pay the penalty for all our sins.

The way we appropriate His salvation is through faith, we are called to believe in, trust, and place our faith in the finished work of Jesus, that as God, He took on human form, lived, taught, suffered, died, and rose from the dead, all for each one of us personally. So the way I am saved is to place my faith in the finished work of Jesus Christ for me personally.

#### B. GOD'S REASON (Vs. 22b-23)

The second half of verse 22 and verse 23 give us some insight into God's reason for such a plan. If we have honestly been doing some self-reflection through these first three chapters, we would have to come to the same conclusion as Paul, there is no difference between any of us, we have all sinned and fallen short of God's glory. Paul must have been a sport's fanatic because he uses so many sports metaphors in his letters. Here he uses archery because the word he uses for sin here means to miss the mark, to miss the bull's eye. The target is the glory of God, the word glory in common Greek means reputation, power, person-hood, character, or nature. A good example of the richness of this meaning is found when Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead. Jesus claimed to be the resurrection and the life, Jesus claimed to be the Messiah, the answer to the sin problem, then Jesus said "Now you will see God's glory manifested," and brought a man, who was dead four days, back to life.

Do you see how the word glory is used? Well when we were created, we were created in the image of God we were to be the beings in which God would manifest His glory on earth. In fact, as Christians, we are supposed to be in the process of being conformed to the image of Christ, thereby manifesting God's glory.

When Adam and Eve sinned, they fell short of fulfilling these destinies. Since we are all children of Adam and Eve, we miss this target of manifesting God's glory, righteousness, and justice. Falling short is how we miss the target, we don't miss it to the right or left, we miss it by falling short. We can't even reach the target area. Again, let me say this one more time; all other religions try to hit the mark by being good and doing good works but Christianity makes it clear that we don't have enough gas to reach the target area and that's why we need God's plan of righteousness, the finished work of Jesus on our behalf.

#### C. GOD'S METHOD (Vs. 24-26)

Now in verses 24-26, Paul will describe God's method. One metaphor, one example is not enough to describe what Jesus did for us on the cross, Paul is going to use several, but be aware, even these are not enough.

##### 1. FROM THE COURTROOM (V. 24)

In verse 24, he uses an example from the courtroom. He says that when we put our faith, and our trust in the finished work of Jesus, on our behalf, we are justified freely by His grace. Remember, the word justify comes from the same root word as righteousness but the word justify comes to us from legal proceedings. It is a legal pronouncement of "Not guilty", it is a pronouncement made by God the Father concerning our status with Him. When we receive Jesus, the Father declares us to be not guilty, he looks at us through Jesus. Jesus is perfect, Jesus took the penalty for our sin. The Father declares us to be perfect, fit for heaven and through

Jesus, our eternal destinies have been changed from guilty with a penalty of eternity in hell, to not guilty with a reward of spending eternity in heaven with Him. It was free to us, but not to God.

## 2. FROM THE MARKET PLACE (V. 24)

Again, in verse 24 the work of Jesus is explained in an example from the market place. He redeemed us; slaves were bought and sold in the market place, when one was bought or when one's freedom was bought, the slave was redeemed. In the first example, we stood eternally condemned in a court of law in this example, we are pictured as hopelessly in bondage to sin and death but Jesus bought our redemption with His blood, ... His incarnation, ... His suffering, ... His death, ... that is a pretty high price to pay for my freedom, ... and for your freedom, ... don't you think? We are declared not guilty and we are set free.

## 3. FROM THE TEMPLE (V. 25a)

In the first half of verse 25 we get an example from the temple so look carefully at the first phrase in verse 25 since there is a lot of debate concerning the words, "sacrifice of atonement." The NLT says it is punishment. The NASB translates it propitiation. The word in Greek is most commonly translated as propitiation. In pagan religions, propitiation is a sacrifice or an offering given to a god in order to appease the god of his or her anger and wrath. Many commentators throughout the centuries have trouble translating this word as such. However, if we go back to chapter 1 verse 18, Paul says that is exactly what is being revealed from heaven, "God's wrath." In this section, God's solution to His wrath is being revealed so I think it is good to translate it as propitiation. Sin, unrighteousness, rebellion, all anger God and that anger is rightly aimed at us. Jesus became our substitutionary sacrifice.

Which brings us to the second possible interpretation of the word. It is elsewhere translated in Hebrews as the mercy seat, which was the cover of the Ark of the Covenant, it was where two angels faced each other with their wings spread out. The ark was in the Holy of Holies in the temple it was behind a curtain and only the high priest was allowed to enter once a year to make atonement for the sins of Israel. This event happened on the Day of Atonement. Two goats were selected, then one goat was slaughtered and its blood was carried into the Holy of Holies and sprinkled on the mercy seat then the other goat was presented to the high priest. The high priest would lay his hands on the goat's head, laying on the goat all the sins of the people of Israel, the goat then was led far out into the desert and released in a lonely, desolate place, bearing the sins of Israel.

a. THE PURPOSE

So the purpose of the sacrifice was to bear the sins of Israel, but in Jesus' case, the sins of the world, your sins, and mine, He was the scapegoat and the sacrifice that restored God's favor to His people. So the purpose of Jesus' death is to pay the penalty for our sins and to bring us into a right relationship with God.

b. THE PLACE

Jesus is not only the sacrifice He is the place where reconciliation takes place. Jesus Himself becomes the mercy seat, where once it was hidden behind the curtain in the temple, but Jesus was crucified and made atonement for our sins in public. Jesus is the place where God and human beings become reconciled. The payment was the precious blood of Jesus.

c. THE PAYMENT

Passover, The Day of Atonement, and other religious ceremonies were bloody, nasty, dirty things, and there was blood everywhere, animals were slaughtered and there was the stench

of blood and burning flesh. The cross of Jesus Christ was a nasty, bloody, dirty thing. There was nothing kind or humane about it. Your sin, my rebellion, unrighteousness is filthy and horrible. If any of us ever get to the point that we think our sin is not so bad, we would do well to revisit the horror of the cross, in all its pain, suffering, humiliation, and all its filth. That was for your sin and for mine. To miss the horror of the cross is to miss the magnificence of salvation.

#### 4. GOD'S CHARACTER (Vs. 25b-26)

The second half of verse 25 and 26 describe how the God's character is revealed through the death and resurrection of Jesus.

##### a. GOD'S HOLINESS (V. 25b)

Look at the second phrase in verse 25. Jesus suffered and died in order that God's justice would be demonstrated. This is something that we must not overlook. God cannot leave sin unpunished without compromising His own standards of righteousness and holiness all sin must be punished. Now some of us may say, "Why couldn't God just forgive us for our sins without killing Jesus?" Try to follow this line of reasoning we would want him to punish someone like Hitler or other mass murderer, wouldn't we? But then how would God make the decision? We would say, we are relatively good compared to Hitler but again, that brings us back to our own good works, where we were all declared guilty, where we all fall short of the target. No! If God is righteous and holy, He cannot overlook sin He must punish all sin.

##### b. DEALS WITH SIN IN THE PAST (V. 25c)

The third portion of verse 25 explains how God dealt with sin in the past, before Christ actually came and died. The Old Testament saints were also saved by grace through faith they followed and obeyed God because they believed in Him. The sacrificial system in the Old

Testament was meant to deal with sin temporarily until Jesus came to take care of the sin problem once and for all. Their sins were covered until Jesus took them away God was just and fair with Old Testament saints. They were saved by faith, as the next chapter in Romans will demonstrate, but, they were also covered in the blood of Jesus.

c. DEALS WITH SIN IN THE PRESENT (V. 26)

In verse 26 we see that God deals with sin in the present through Jesus. Sin must be punished and dealt with since the punishment of sin is death, eternal separation from God, but since God loves us so much, He came up with this plan that Jesus should die for us. Salvation is available to all who are willing to receive it in faith. When God substitutes Jesus on our behalf, His justice, His righteousness, and His love are all preserved. God is the One Who justifies, God is the One Who is the means of justification. God is just.

This is the basic concept of Christianity. It is not a religion. It is the wonderful truth that **WE ARE SAVED BY GRACE THROUGH FAITH. THERE IS NO OTHER WAY AND NO OTHER ADDITIONS. WE WERE BOUGHT AT A VERY HIGH PRICE.**

II. ARE YOU READY TO SHUT YOUR MOUTH? (Vs. 27-30)  
**SINCE WE ARE SAVED BY GRACE, THERE IS NOTHING TO BE PROUD ABOUT, NOTHING TO CAUSE DIVISIONS OVER.**

We are a proud and arrogant people, but after these first three chapters Paul wants to ask us in verses 27-30, “Are you ready to shut your mouth?” Again, let me say that no human being could come up with this plan of salvation since it goes against everything that we hold dear. Listen to this message. **SINCE ALL OF US ARE SAVED BY GRACE THERE IS NOTHING TO BE PROUD OF, AND NOTHING TO CAUSE DIVISIONS OVER.** In other words, we all fell into condemnation the same way, we all faced the prospect of eternal damnation in hell and we were all saved the same way, ... by grace through faith.

#### A. NOT BY ACCOMPLISHMENTS (Vs. 27-28)

Paul reminds us in verses 27-28 that we are not saved by our accomplishments, religious or otherwise. Here he is going to recap what he has been saying all along. We can't be saved by doing religious stuff and we won't be sitting around heaven sharing stories of the great things we did to get there. We won't be sitting there sharing our accomplishments. Why, because there is only one story to tell. That is that God the Son, Jesus, agreed to leave heaven, take on human flesh, suffer and die for each one of us. That's the way we'll all get there that's the only story to tell.

You see, if we could get to heaven somehow on our own, or somehow earning or deserving it, there would be plenty of stories to tell, but it is only faith in the finished work of Jesus that will get us there so there is nothing to brag about. We are simply a bunch of pathetic sinners who accepted God's gracious offer of salvation. When we placed our faith in Christ, God changed our eternal destinies from death to life, from guilty to not guilty. Jesus set us free from sin and death. He took our sin and punishment on himself. Where in all of that do you hear that we did anything? Nowhere! God the Father, God the Son, God the Holy Spirit did it all. We are merely recipients of God's love and righteousness.

#### B. NOT BY STATUS (Vs. 29-30)

Well in addition to not being able to earn our salvation, we are also reminded in verses 29-30 that we don't get to heaven by our status. The Jews were God's chosen people yet Paul makes it clear that they must enter like everyone else, by faith. "God has demonstrated His love for us in this, that while we were yet sinners, He sent Jesus to die for us." It doesn't matter what your ethnic background, your religious status, or your economic level we all must enter through

faith. It is Jesus Who accomplished it all for us. There will be no boasting of any kind. That's why divisions are so sinful in church.

The fact is, **WE ARE SAVED BY GRACE THROUGH FAITH SINCE WE ARE SAVED BY GRACE THERE IS NOTHING TO BE PROUD OF, NOTHING TO CAUSE DIVISIONS.**

III. ARE YOU READY TO LIVE? (V. 31)

**WHEN WE FALL IN LOVE WITH OUR SAVIOR, OUR WORKS WILL FAR SURPASS THE LAW, BECAUSE NOT ONLY HAS HE PLANNED OUT GOOD WORKS FOR US IN ADVANCE, HE HAS PUT THE DESIRE IN OUR HEARTS TO DO THEM, AND HE GIVES US THE POWER TO DO THEM.**

Paul is going to revisit all these topics again in different ways, especially the topic he just summarizes in verse 31, namely, "Are you ready to live?" In other words, **WHEN WE FALL IN LOVE WITH OUR SAVIOR, OUR WORKS WILL FAR SURPASS THE LAW, BECAUSE NOT ONLY HAS HE PLANNED OUT GOOD WORKS FOR US IN ADVANCE, HE HAS PUT THE DESIRE IN OUR HEARTS TO DO THEM, AND HE GIVES US THE POWER TO DO THEM.**

The law had become very precious to the Hebrews. It was a sign of God's blessing on them. We too are left with the laws as spelled out in the Bible we are commanded not to steal, or lie, etc. Because we are saved by grace through faith, does that mean the laws are now meaningless? The answer is kind of tricky in one sense the answer is yes, in another it is no, Paul says that when we place our faith in Jesus, our lives will actually uphold the law.

The Bible makes it clear that when we receive Christ, the Holy Spirit indwells us. The Spirit places all these wonderful desires to love God, serve God, love others and serve others, the Holy Spirit then empowers us with gifts, abilities, and resources to accomplish all of these desires and gifts. And then God provides us with all sorts of opportunities to serve.

Now here is the deal with the law which says, don't kill, don't steal, don't lie, etc. If I love my neighbor, stealing from him, lying to him, or killing him would never cross my mind. I would be living far beyond the law. Do you get it? Living in Christ puts us so far above the law that these laws should be almost meaningless to us as far as behavior goes. You see, **WHEN WE FALL IN LOVE WITH OUR SAVIOR, OUR WORKS WILL FAR SURPASS THE LAW, BECAUSE NOT ONLY HAS HE PLANNED OUT GOOD WORKS FOR US IN ADVANCE, HE HAS PUT THE DESIRE IN OUR HEARTS TO DO THEM, AND HE GIVES US THE POWER TO DO THEM.**

I really hope we have a deep understanding of salvation. There is only one way to be saved, one way to be forgiven of our sin, and one way of being reconciled with God, which is to place our faith in the finished work that Jesus Christ did on our behalf. If we confess our sins to Jesus, He'll forgive them. If we ask Him into our heart, He'll come. If we confess that Jesus is Lord and believe that He rose from the dead on our behalf, we will be saved. We are saved by grace through faith. **IT IS BOTH HUMBLING AND EXHILARATING TO FINALLY UNDERSTAND AND RECEIVE SALVATION IN FAITH.**

I love Stu Briscoe's description of this truth.

**“Try to imagine a heaven full of people who had earned their right to be there rather like a political dinner where supporters pay \$1,000 a plate. What arrogance and boasting – what cliques and class distinctions – what arguments and suspicious! Heaven would be no heaven at all! Through God's grace this cannot happen. There will not be a trace of boasting for the simple reason that entrance is limited strictly to those who have been justified by faith.**

**The entrance to the church of the Nativity in Bethlehem is surprising low and for people my size decidedly inconvenient. Watching scores of visitors pass through one day, I inquired why such an impractical approach was retained. I was told that there used to be a large entrance but the nobility rode into the church on their horses. The authorities decided that church was no place for horseback heroics and that a low entrance that brought everyone down to the same level was far more appropriate. I agreed and gladly folded myself through the door.**

**Only those who will, by faith, accept justification from the hand of a just God who made it all possible will enjoy its eternal benefits. Receiving something you could never earn and do not deserve is grounds for humility, not arrogance. Gratitude, not boasting, is the language of the redeemed.**

There is no power by which we can save ourselves. The power is all in the blood. The blood of Jesus.