

- c. As faith is the *means* by which sinful men appropriate the righteousness of God, so the *mechanism* for “righteousness through faith” is given by Paul in the third sub-context consisting of verses 3:24-25a. For unless it be argued that personal faith itself satisfies God’s justice against personal unrighteousness, then it must be conceded that there is another mechanism present in the transaction by which faith secures the sinner’s righteous standing. That mechanism, according to Paul’s gospel, is the atoning work of Jesus Christ:

“...being justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus; whom God displayed publicly as a propitiation in His blood through faith.”

The connection between verses 3:23 and 3:24 is understood in various ways, but it seems evident that the latter serves to answer the predicament introduced by the former, which predicament itself proves out Paul’s previous contention in verse 3:22. Which is to say, all men stand alienated, condemned, and without remedy as sinners (3:23), so that the solution to their calamity must lie with God Himself. The remediation of sinners depends upon their gaining God’s own righteousness, which, given their condition, can only come to them through faith apart from any personal accomplishments or exertions (3:22). But because faith itself does not justify, the sinner’s justification depends upon a satisfaction derived from a divine provision other than his faith.

Furthermore, Paul’s grammar and syntax in 3:23-24 juxtapose the interrelated ideas of sin and justification: “*all sinned...being justified freely.*” In this way he established a sharp contrast between men and God: between human sin and divine righteousness; between the human predicament and the divine provision; between human desert and divine grace. All men are constituted sinners - alienated from God, subjected to sin’s bondage, and increasingly condemned through their pursuit of self-righteousness under the principle of law. By contrast, God has condescended to meet men in their alienation, redeem them from their slavery to sin, and justify them freely by giving to them His own righteousness.

This context is vital to the Roman epistle because it formally introduces and unfolds in a profound way the doctrine of *justification by grace through faith*. From this point forward this theme dominates Paul’s instruction in the letter, even as it is foundational and essential to his gospel. For this reason it is important at the outset to correctly understand what he meant by it.

- First and foremost, justification does not speak of a person being *made righteous in himself*. This understanding is central to Roman Catholic soteriology, and is actually a comprehensive denial of the biblical gospel.
- Neither does it refer to God’s determination to *regard a person as if he were righteous* when in fact he is not. This amounts to a denial of what is objectively true, and is therefore an impossibility with God.

- Finally, and related to the former two, justification is not a *promissory concept*. That is, it does not address a future condition to be possessed by a person. Justification is not a present reckoning of a future reality.

Douglas Moo provides a clear and succinct insight into Paul's meaning:

*“No ‘legal fiction,’ but a legal **reality** of the utmost significance, ‘to be justified’ means to be acquitted by God from all ‘charges’ that could be brought against a person because of his or her sins”* (emphasis in original).

When Paul spoke of a person's justification he was not addressing a legal reckoning, but a legal reality; he was speaking of an objective, personal status of full and uncompromised righteousness that alone is acceptable to an impeccable God. More precisely, the reason this human righteous is fully acceptable to God is that it is *His own*. This reality is central to the biblical gospel, and is essential to the Christian's sense of his own identity and relationship with God.

- 1) In unfolding the doctrine of justification Paul began with the proper foundation and emphasis, namely its *gratuitous* nature: God justifies men freely *“as a gift by His grace”* (3:24a). In this regard three observations are important to note:

- a) The first is the meaning of the concept of *grace*. Although this noun and its cognates permeate the New Testament and are crucial to its doctrine of salvation, they are very commonly misunderstood. Grace is usually defined as *unmerited favor*, and, while this is not incorrect, it is incomplete. For this definition introduces another concept that must be defined, namely *favor*. Furthermore, by itself the term “favor” tends to connote a passive disposition or regard for something, and so misses the active, transformational nature of grace in its New Testament usage.

Grace as an operative principle is essential to Paul's theology of salvation, for it speaks of God's willful, effectual exertion of Himself toward the objects of His saving power. The graciousness of God that is a more general concept in the Old Testament becomes in the New Testament *particular* and *salvific*.

- b) Second, the gracious nature of justification localizes it in the *good pleasure* of God, apart from anything present or anticipated in the person who obtains it. This is why Paul's theology of justification leaves no place for personal merit or works; salvation is of the Lord from first to last. The sanctification of men, as much as their justification, is a sovereign work solely in accordance with His good pleasure (cf. 1 Corinthians 1:26-30; 2 Corinthians 3:1-18; Galatians 3:1-3; Ephesians 1:3-2:7; etc.).

- c) The third thing to note is that, if justification is an act of God's grace, then the human component of justification can only be *faith*. For the principle of grace places all "activity" with God, leaving men simply to believe what God has done and so place their entire trust in Him, His purpose, good pleasure, and power.
- 2) The active nature of divine grace is made evident by Paul's further statement that God's gracious justification is "*through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus*" (3:24b). Again, in its New Testament usage grace is not so much indicative of God's *character* as it is of His saving *activity* in Christ: grace speaks more of what God has done than who He is. And at the center of God's saving activity is His work of *redemption*.

As the present sub-context introduces the principle of justification by grace through faith, so also it introduces redemption as the transaction that secures justification. And, while the former is predominately a New Testament concept, redemption is a foundational theme throughout the Old Testament scriptures.

- God's relationship with Israel was founded upon His role as Redeemer (Exodus 20:1-2), and the centrality of redemption to Israel's covenant life with God was constantly reinforced in a myriad of ways. All of an Israelite's individual and national life was touched by the principle of redemption - from the obligation to redeem the first-born to the annual celebration of the Passover; from the law of the redeemer-kinsman to the Jubilee.
- Moreover, God's interaction with Israel was always focused on His redeeming acts. This began with the Exodus and proceeded through the multiple acts of deliverance by Israel's judges. Later, redemption became a key theme with respect to recovery from the Babylonian captivity, with that event serving in turn as a prophetic platform for the great and final redemption to come when Yahweh established His everlasting kingdom through His Servant and Davidic Branch. Although this prophetic structure is found throughout the writing prophets, it is particularly pronounced in Isaiah's prophecy. There God's first self-presentation as Redeemer conspicuously weaves and binds together His future national and eschatological acts of redemption (ref. 41:1-49:26).

Thus, in generation after generation God continued to show Himself to be Israel's Redeemer. In this way He progressively and methodically prepared for and portrayed His culminating act of redemption that would encompass the whole of the created order. This is the "redemption in Christ Jesus" of which Paul was speaking; the redemption that stands as the fulfillment of all the Scripture and all of God's providence in history.