

# **THE DOCTRINES OF GRACE**

## **(LESSON TWENTY)**

### **THE ATONEMENT**

#### **(PART THREE)**

The classical passage with reference to the Atonement is **Romans 3:23-26**: *“For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God; Being justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus: Whom God hath set forth to be a propitiation through faith in his blood, to declare his righteousness for the remission of sins that are past, through the forbearance of God; To declare, I say, at this time his righteousness: that he might be just, and the justifier of him which believeth in Jesus.”*

The **New Living Translation** renders the passage as follows: *“For everyone has sinned; we all fall short of God’s glorious standard. Yet God, with undeserved kindness, declares that we are righteous. He did this through Christ Jesus when he freed us from the penalty for our sins. For God presented Jesus as the sacrifice for sin. People are made right with God when they believe that Jesus sacrificed his life, shedding his blood. This sacrifice shows that God was being fair when he held back and did not punish those who sinned in times past, for he was looking ahead and including them in what he would do in this present time. God did this to demonstrate his righteousness, for he himself is fair and just, and he declares sinners to be right in his sight when they believe in Jesus.”*

In verse **23** Paul says, *“For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God.”* This verse is a continuation of a statement that Paul had begun to make in the last clause of verse **22**: *“For there is no difference.”* Paul’s thought is as follows: *“There is no difference between Jew and Gentile, for all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God.”* As far as the matter of sin and the judgment of God against sin is concerned, there is no difference between the Jews and the Gentiles. They are in the same predicament because *“all have sinned.”* The words *“have sinned”* are in a construction in the Greek which presents a panoramic view of the entire human race as doing nothing except committing sin.

Not only have all sinned but all “*come short of the glory of God*” as well. The Greek word translated “*come short*” is in the present tense. Paul is indicating that this is the present condition of the human race. The word means “to be left behind, to fail to reach the goal, to lack something.” Paul is saying that human beings lack the glory of God. The human race lacks the original glory of God that they had, being created in the image of God. The status that humanity enjoyed, having been created in the image of God, was marred by sin to such an extent that all humanity falls short of that original, created glory. Since “*there is no difference*” because all, every single individual, have sinned and falls short of God’s glory, no one should base his or her hope for God’s acceptance on his or her own goodness.

In the case of those who have been saved, however, God is in the process of restoring them to the status that they originally enjoyed. We are being transformed from one degree of glory to another according to **2 Corinthians 3:12-18**. We will use the **New English Translation**’s rendering.

*12 Therefore, since we have such a hope, we behave with great boldness,*

*13 and not like Moses who used to put a veil over his face to keep the Israelites from staring at the result of the glory that was made ineffective.*

*14 But their minds were closed. For to this very day, the same veil remains when they hear the old covenant read. It has not been removed because only in Christ is it taken away.*

*15 But until this very day whenever Moses is read, a veil lies over their minds,*

*16 but when one turns to the Lord, the veil is removed.*

*17 Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is present, there is freedom.*

*18 And we all, with unveiled faces reflecting the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another, which is from the Lord, who is the Spirit.*

In verse **24**, Paul continues his thought. He says, “*Being justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.*” Having insisted that there is no difference between Jews and Gentiles as it relates to sin and God’s judgment against sin, Paul now adds

that there is likewise no difference between them as it relates to salvation. Both the Jews and the Gentiles are *“justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.”* This is the first time in Romans that Paul uses the verb to justify in a positive context. In verse **20**, he had come to the following conclusion: *“Therefore by the deeds of the law there shall no flesh be justified in his sight: for by the law is the knowledge of sin.”* But now he declares that a righteousness of God has been revealed, which is separate and apart from the Law. This righteousness of God has made it possible for all persons, both Jews and Gentiles, to be justified freely by the grace of God. In this verse, the word *“justified”* means “to render a favourable verdict.” It is upon the basis of His grace that God renders a favourable verdict for all who put their faith in Jesus Christ. Though justification is categorically denied by one means-the Law, it is now categorically affirmed by another means - the grace of God. When man first sinned, he came short of God’s glory, and God declared him to be dead in trespasses and sins and evicted him from His presence. But in the same way that God declared man to be a sinner, falling short of His glory, so God declares a person righteous, justifying him freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.

In **Romans 5:1-2** Paul writes, *“Therefore being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ: By whom also we have access by faith into this grace wherein we stand, and rejoice in hope of the glory of God.”*The late Scottish New Testament scholar, Ian Howard Marshall described what it means to be justified as being “put into a right relationship with God, in which the sins that persons have committed are no longer counted against them and consequently they can enter into a relationship with God characterized by peace and not by wrath.”

Paul declares that sinners who believe are justified. This means that they are forgiven, pardoned, and declared to be essentially righteous. This means far more than being declared innocent. God does not merely pronounce that the sinner is innocent.

It would have been wonderful if fallen humanity had been restored to the position of Adam before the fall, but when we are justified we are lifted much higher than Adam. We are made higher than the angels! We are counted as one in Christ and are given the position of sons with the Father and are destined to share the government of the universe with the Creator. Righteousness now belongs to the justified one even as it belongs to God, for we have been made partakers of the

divine nature according to **2 Peter 1:4** and are a new creation according to **2 Corinthians 5:17**. When a man is justified, he is accepted in his person and being in all of his life, past, present, and future. This does not mean that we are sinless, but it does mean that we have been declared righteous. This means that Christians can look away from themselves and look to the cross of the Lord Jesus Christ. Brothers and sisters, let us trust our feelings no longer, but let us trust in the Word of God about the Cross of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Paul states that believers are justified *“freely.”* He generally uses this word to mean *“without cost or without payment.”* In the context of **Romans 3:24** where He is emphasizing that a righteousness of God has been revealed separate and apart from the Law, to be justified freely means to be justified without the added demand to observe the Law of Moses. In **Galatians 5:1-4** Paul highlights this truth: *“So Christ has truly set us free. Now make sure that you stay free, and don’t get tied up again in slavery to the law. Listen! I, Paul, tell you this: If you are counting on circumcision to make you right with God, then Christ will be of no benefit to you. I’ll say it again. If you are trying to find favor with God by being circumcised, you must obey every regulation in the whole law of Moses. For if you are trying to make yourselves right with God by keeping the law, you have been cut off from Christ! You have fallen away from God’s grace”* (**New Living Translation**).

Paul says that believers are justified by God’s grace. The context makes it clear that he is speaking about the grace of God manifested *“through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.”* The grace of God which is manifested to the believing sinner is made possible through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus. The word *“Redemption”* is the translation of a Greek word which means *“to redeem by paying the price.”* The believer is set free from slavery to sin and from the effects of his or her sin, which is God’s condemnation. He or she is also set free to live a life pleasing to God in the power of the Holy Spirit. This is what Paul tells us in **Romans 8:1-2** *“There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the life-giving Spirit in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and death”* (**New English Translation**). The redemption price, the precious blood of Jesus, makes it possible for a righteous God to justify a believing sinner on the basis of justice satisfied. Paul proceeds to elaborate on this in the next two verses.

In verse **25** Paul, makes reference to our Lord, speaking of Him as the One *“Whom God hath set forth to be a propitiation through faith in his blood, to declare his righteousness for the remission of sins that are past, through the forbearance of God.”*

The **New Living Translation** renders the verse as follows: *“For God presented Jesus as the sacrifice for sin. People are made right with God when they believe that Jesus sacrificed his life, shedding his blood. This sacrifice shows that God was being fair when he held back and did not punish those who sinned in times past.”*

In verse **24** Paul states that redemption came through Jesus Christ. In verse **25** he tells us that the initiative for providing this redemption lay with God. It was God who presented Christ as a propitiation or a sacrifice for sin.

The words *“Set forth”* are the translation of a Greek word which means “to place before, to set forth to be looked at, expose to public view.” God brought Jesus Christ forth and put Him before the public. He exposed Him.

Paul says that it was necessary for God to set forth Jesus as a propitiation or an atoning sacrifice in order to *“declare his righteousness for the remission of sins that are past, through the forbearance of God.”* Presenting Jesus Christ as an atoning sacrifice was necessary in order for God to *“declare”* or demonstrate His righteousness. It was necessary for God to clearly show that He had not been unjust when He had passed over the sins that human beings had committed in the past, which had appeared to go unpunished. By passing over these sins God had seemed to compromise His righteousness because any judge who passes over a person’s crimes without punishment cannot be said to be a righteous judge.

Before our Lord died on the cross of Calvary, it seemed that God was passing by or overlooking sin in the sense that He saved believing sinners without having their sins paid for, thus, bestowing mercy upon them without having His justice satisfied. God had to do something to set this right, something that would demonstrate to the human race that He was indeed a just and righteous God. Of course, we need to understand that the matter was always right in God’s eyes, for He looked forward to the satisfaction of the broken law at the Cross. It makes no difference with God whether He saves sinners before or after the Cross. The Cross is an eternal fact in the reckoning of God. We must remember that in the purpose and plan of God, the Lamb

was slain *“from the foundation of the world”* (**Revelation 13:8**). In **1 Peter 1:18-20**, we read the following: *“Forasmuch as ye know that ye were not redeemed with corruptible things, as silver and gold, from your vain conversation received by tradition from your fathers; But with the precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot: Who verily was foreordained before the foundation of the world, but was manifest in these last times for you.”*

The Cross not only cleared God from the charge that He passed by the sins of human beings prior to the crucifixion, but it also demonstrated that when He declared a believing sinner righteous in the past, He had all the time maintained His righteousness. It was as well as a merciful act for God to save a sinner before Calvary, for mercy was bestowed upon the basis of justice satisfied. The demands of the broken law were satisfied. Sin was paid for, not condoned. It is important for us to understand that we are saved not only by the mercy of God, but by the righteousness of God, for our salvation rests upon the fact that our sins are paid for and justice has been maintained. Thus, God is just and at the same time the One who justifies the believing sinner. Paul emphasizes this point in verse **26**.

In verse **26** Paul says, *“To declare, I say, at this time his righteousness: that he might be just, and the justifier of him which believeth in Jesus.”* Paul is asserting that by presenting His Son as an atoning sacrifice for sin, God demonstrated His righteousness *“at this time”* or *“in this present time”* as the **New Living Translation** renders it. Paul is explaining to his readers that God presented Jesus Christ as a propitiation or an atoning sacrifice to demonstrate His righteousness, not only in light of having passed over sins committed before the Cross, but also to demonstrate His righteousness now whenever He justifies a sinner who believes. The death of Christ is not only a demonstration of God’s love for sinners but it is also a demonstration of God’s justice. A satisfactory atonement has been made, therefore, God can be both just and the One who justifies those who have faith in Jesus Christ.

Brothers and sisters, when God justifies those who have faith in Jesus, it does not mean that He sees in them some moral or ethical achievement or character that leads Him to do so. No, no, no! Paul uses the imagery of a court of law and explains that God, the just Judge, rules in favour of the defendant, the believing sinner only because He has presented His Son as a propitiation, an atoning sacrifice for our sins.

Brothers and sisters, the human race was in such a state of ruin as a result of the Fall, and in such a helpless condition that there was only one possible way by which it could be delivered. That one possible way was for a representative of the human race, a person of infinite value and dignity to take upon himself their human nature and suffer the penalty which was due to them. In order to accomplish that work, became incarnate, and, in the person of Jesus Christ, He united Deity and humanity. Jesus Christ our Lord offered Himself as the representative of the human race. He became a mediator between God and man. Only Jesus Christ as God manifest in the flesh was qualified to accept the penalty of our sins and discharge our obligation. No other person in all the universe was capable of assuming that role.

In the accomplishment of that work, Jesus Christ did not die an ordinary death. The kind of death that He died was particularly designed to demonstrate that satisfaction was being made to divine justice, that He was dying because the penalty of sin is death. He died a death that showed clearly that God was, by His death, declaring His righteousness *“for the remission of sins that are past, through the forbearance of God.”*

If our Lord had been unexpectedly assassinated, or died as a result of an accident, or disease, or old age, there would have been no appearance of an atonement having been made to satisfy the demands of divine justice. But when He was placed as a criminal before a tribunal; when He accused by the testimony of witnesses; when He was spat upon and ridiculed; when He was scourged at the whipping post; when He was officially condemned to death; when He was crucified and His life taken from Him in the very prime of His manhood, we are made to understand that on this righteous Person was inflicted the punishment due to criminals, the punishment due to us as sinners. Our Lord died a particular kind of death in which He experienced the severity of the divine vengeance against sin. What He suffered was not for any sin of His own, but for that of His people, in their name and on their account. Hence Paul could say, and we can say with him, *“I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me: and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me”* (**Galatians 2:20**).

Since the divine and human natures were united in the person of Jesus Christ, His suffering possessed a value greater than that which all of His people deserved, and His suffering was therefore more than sufficient for the redemption of all who put their trust in Him. His

suffering was not the same as ours would have been either in kind or in duration. Our Lord could suffer no remorse because He had no personal sin, and His suffering was terminated within a few hours whereas our suffering would have continued through all eternity.

It is only when we understand that the Cross of Calvary reveals eternal principles of the divine nature that we can appreciate how the sufferings of those few hours can be sufficient to save millions of human beings. The fundamental idea of our Lord's redeeming work as it is outlined in the Holy Scriptures is that through His substitutionary suffering and death He made full satisfaction to the justice of God and by His substitutionary obedience He has merited eternal life. Every person therefore, who accepts Him by faith as their Lord and Saviour receives deliverance from the guilt of sin, so that they are no longer under obligation to suffer for it. They receive emancipation from the power of sin, so that they are cleansed from it and enabled to live a holy life, and they receive the promise of eternal blessedness in heaven with Him.

Brothers and sisters, we must understand that a system of salvation by grace is radically different from what people see in the natural world where everything and everything is evaluated in terms of works and merit. Persons, therefore, have great difficulty in bringing themselves to believe that it can be true. Even Christians struggle to accept God's gracious salvation system. But as **C. H. Spurgeon** observed, "The doctrine of substitution must be true; it could not have been invented by human wit." In one way or another, all of the pagan religions, all of the philosophical systems, and even some so-called "Christian" systems of salvation, teach that human beings must earn their salvation. Biblical Christianity alone sets forth a system of salvation by grace alone. Time and again the Scriptures repeat the assertion that salvation is by grace, as if the Scriptures saw in advance the difficulty which we would have in coming to the conclusion that we could not earn our salvation or keep it by our own good works.