

## **The God who rescues**

### **Romans 3: 21–31**

*A sermon by Peter Budd*

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Here's a puzzle.

Three missionaries and three cannibals must cross a river using a boat which can carry no more than two people.

The missionaries left on either bank of the river must not be outnumbered by cannibals, or the cannibals will overpower and eat the missionaries.

The boat cannot cross the river by itself with no-one on board.

How do all the missionaries and the cannibals safely cross the river?

This problem goes back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century in this form, but variants of it date back to at least the 800s.

I'll leave you to think about a solution later.

Now here's another puzzle.

There's a God who is absolutely perfect.

Everything He does is right.

And there are creatures He's made that He wants to be in a right relationship with Him.

Which means, they need to be perfect too.

But they are far from perfect.

However hard they try to be right, they go wrong.

God has done everything to help them be right.

He's given them rules to guide them.

But they still keep going wrong. Very wrong.

Now if God is perfect, He has to deal with the imperfect.

Get rid of all the wrong.

If He doesn't, He's not doing right.

He's not just.

But God loves His creatures.

And He really, really wants them to be in a right relationship with Him.

So, how can He deal with the wrong, so as to do right.

Yet somehow make right, those who are wrong?

There's a real puzzle.

The creatures, of course, are us.

The problem is the problem of human sin.

And the solution is in Romans ch. 3.

The Old Testament – what Jews called “The Law and the Prophets” – demonstrates the problem.

In the Old Testament we see, time and time again, how people go wrong.

Even when God takes a particular people and makes a special agreement – a covenant – with them.

Even when he tells them how best to live and they promise to obey Him.

They go wrong. They keep going wrong.

In the Old Testament we see how God keeps warning His people that justice must come.

And we see how incredibly much He loves them, though they deserve it not at all.

And there’s the dilemma.

How can God hate sin yet still show love to sinners?

How can He be both just and merciful?

The Old Testament – “The Law and the Prophets” – demonstrates the problem.

And it points towards the solution.

But it’s in the New Testament that the solution becomes clear.

But now, it says in Romans 3:21.

But now a righteousness from God ... has been made known.

A righteousness – right-ness.

A right-ness from God; or of God – different versions of the Bible translate it differently – has been made known.

Now we see how God can be absolutely right, and can also make us right with Him.

And it’s not all about us trying to obey lots of rules.

That’s already been shown not to work.

We can try to be good by our own efforts.

But we’ll never be good enough.

“For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (v. 23)

If we want to escape the damaging, destructive, devastating effects of sin.

We need rescuing.

And only God is able to rescue us.

So how can God rescue us from all our wrongdoing,

yet still deal justly with all our nastiness?

It’s through Jesus.

We know the story from the Gospels.

How Jesus lived on Earth.

Travelled with his followers.

Taught people and healed people.

How Jesus was arrested, subjected to a mock trial and condemned to an agonizing death.

And how He rose from the dead.

But how exactly does all that deal with sin and rescue us from sin?

How does faith in Jesus actually work?

In one sense, of course, it doesn't matter how it works.

All that matters is that it works.

Just like you don't need to understand all about electrons,  
to know that if you flick a switch by the door, a light comes on.

And in any case, our finite human minds are not capable of fully comprehending the details.  
But here in Romans ch. 3 there are images – word pictures – that go some way towards  
helping us understand what Jesus did.

Although some of the words are difficult, and people argue about exactly how they should be  
interpreted.

In v. 24, we read of being "justified".

The image here is the image of the courtroom.

It's the image of a judge declaring someone "not guilty".

Imagine ourselves in the dock.

What a relief to hear that pronouncement: "Not guilty".

And what a surprise.

Because we know we are guilty.

"All have sinned". (v. 23)

So how has that "not guilty" verdict come about?

It's not to do with what we've done or what we are.

It's something that's given "freely". (v. 24)

It's something that comes about entirely because of God's "grace". (v. 24)

The altogether undeserved, yet awesomely deep, love God has for us.

But there's the problem.

God can't just pretend sin isn't there.

It wouldn't be right.

It wouldn't be just.

It would go against God's perfect character.

Sin must be dealt with.

And sin bears a price.

That's why there's a need for "redemption". (v. 24)

Redemption is "buying back".

Paying the price.

Most probably, the image the Apostle Paul had in mind when he wrote this was that of the  
manumission of slaves – "buying out of slavery".

There were lots of slaves in the Roman Empire.

But some slaves were able to save up money and buy their freedom.

In our natural state we are slaves to sin.

"All have sinned". (v. 23)

But God has paid the price to buy us out of that slavery to sin.

And how has that price been paid?

It "came by Christ Jesus.

God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement..." (v. 24-25)

The image here comes from ancient Jewish ritual worship.  
It refers, most probably, to the “atonement cover” or “mercy seat” in the holiest place, where blood was sprinkled on the Day of Atonement, on *Yom Kippur*.

You can read all about the ritual in Leviticus ch. 16.

Atonement is at-one-ment.

To be made at-one with God; to be reconciled with God.

In ancient ritual it was symbolised by sacrifice and the sprinkling of blood.

Now we see Jesus as the ultimate sacrifice.

The one, final sacrifice that actually, completely, deals with sin.

The blood of Jesus makes us at-one with God.

And in order to do that it must have two effects.

Firstly, in some sense sin needs to be wiped away; guilt removed.

A word for this used in some versions of the Bible is “expiation”.

The blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin. (1 John 1:7)

It’s the ultimate disinfectant.

Secondly, God’s anger against sin must be appeased.

A word for this used in some versions of the Bible is “propitiation”.

In the NIV, it’s expressed as an alternative reading in a footnote to Romans 3:25:

“as the one who would turn aside his wrath, taking away sin”.

Some people don’t like the idea of a God of wrath. An angry God.

But there are things it’s right to be angry about.

Not blind rage, but an appropriate sort of anger.

We should be angry when we consider the Nazi gas chambers.

Or the Cambodian killing fields.

Or the Rwandan genocide.

Or the Sebrenican massacre.

Or the violence in Darfur.

And the thing is, there’s nowhere we can draw a line.

We can’t say, that sin is big enough to matter, but this one isn’t.

We may not have wielded a machete or a gun.

But we all exhibit the petty prejudices and hates that overflow in extreme situations.

And if God is not angry with all sin, then he is not just.

So God’s anger must be appeased.

And God himself does it, in Jesus.

A sacrifice of atonement.

Expiation and propitiation.

Before Jesus, it was a puzzle.

How God could be right, when there’s so much wrong.

How God could be merciful, yet still be just.

But now God’s justice is demonstrated.

Now we see how God is just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus. (v. 26)

Now we have the solution to the puzzle.

Three images. Three word pictures.

The image of the courtroom. *[Justification]*  
We're declared "not guilty".

The image of buying out of slavery. *[Redemption]*  
The price of our freedom is paid.

The image of sacrifice and the sprinkling of blood. *[Atonement]*  
We're purified from our sin.  
And God's righteous anger is turned aside.

And all this come freely by God's grace.

We can't earn it.

But it comes through faith in – or of – Jesus Christ.

To all who believe. (v. 22)

For us this means trusting the God who rescues.

Responding to God's love expressed in Jesus.

Sometimes, religious people can be very proud and arrogant.

That was true in the apostle Paul's time.

There were those who were overly proud of their Jewish heritage.

Who boasted about how God had given His law to them.

And it's true today.

Even as Christians, we can appear arrogant in the way we handle truth.

But the fact is, none of us has anything to boast about. (v. 27)

We all go wrong.

"All have sinned". (v. 23)

It's only because of God's love and mercy that we can be made right with Him.

Only because of what Jesus did on the cross.

It's all about faith and it's all about Jesus.

So, if we're amongst those who believe; who have faith in Jesus.

We have everything, absolutely everything, to thank and praise God for.

Humbly to thank and praise God for.

And if we don't yet believe.

But recognise that we keep going wrong.

Realise we need rescuing.

Then now is the time.

Now is the time to take hold of what God freely offers.

Now is the time to give ourselves over to Jesus.

That we can be assured of that "not guilty" verdict.

That we can know the price has been paid.

That we can be at-one with God.

Now is the time to repent of our past and let God's Spirit control our future.

Now is the time to respond.

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