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## Prayers

### **To God**

*Pray in words which give God glory*

*Pray in words which give God praise*

*Pray in words which give God honour and majesty*

*Pray in words which give God your own personal devotion*

### **For Self**

**The beauty of Your world astounds us, Lord God, but the cruelty of humanity also shocks us. Help us therefore to live according to Your Word, as the world's only truth, the yardstick of honesty, the arbiter of integrity and the deliverer of compassion and redeeming love. Shine Your light into our disillusioned and malfunctioning world, and make Your salvation known to all. We ask this through Jesus Christ our Lord: AMEN**

### **For others**

*Pray for those who are suffering persecution, and pray that God will grow new churches out of the terrors they experience. Pray for those who are persecuting the church that like Saul, they may be met by the presence of the living God*

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## Meditation

Was there no one brave enough or powerful enough  
To stand for fallen people before the throne of grace,  
But You, Lord Jesus, God's Son?

Was there no one humble enough or gracious enough  
To understand the depths of human sin and misery,  
But You, Lord Jesus, our Advocate?

Was there no one good enough or strong enough  
To deal with all the sin and sickness in the world,  
But You, Lord Jesus, God's Anointed?

Was there no one wise enough or sincere enough  
To speak the truth about everything with total honesty,  
But You, Lord Jesus, Light of the World?

Was there no one human enough and divine enough  
To forge a righteous way for people to find their God,  
But You, Lord Jesus, Our Saviour?

Glory be to You! For You have done all things well!

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## Bible Passage

### **Romans 3:21-26**

<sup>21</sup> For the righteousness of God has now been revealed apart from the Law, and the law and the prophets bear witness to it; <sup>22</sup> that is, the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. Look, there is no difference; <sup>23</sup> all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, <sup>24</sup> and are freely justified by His grace, through the redemption that is found in Christ Jesus.

<sup>25</sup> God intended that through faith, His blood should be the means of the forgiveness of sins. This shows His righteousness, for in His tolerance, He overlooks those sins committed previously. <sup>26</sup> It also shows His righteousness at the present time, that He Himself is just and that He justifies those who have faith in Jesus Christ.

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## Bible study Review

This is a remarkable passage of Scripture. It is an incredibly important description of the saving work of Jesus Christ, and it is a text that has illuminated Christian faith for thousands of years. Here, Paul extricates the saving purposes of God from the legal snare of the Law, in which it had been trapped by Judaism (3:21), and declares that just as the prophets said, it is found in Jesus Christ, the Son of God (3:22,24). In a mysterious way that is almost hidden within the way Paul explains it, God's grace (3:24) and Christ's sacrificial death (3:25) suffice for the sins of all people. Previous sins are set aside and all who have faith in Jesus are saved!

This conclusion demonstrates an astonishing and sudden turnaround from the long pathway Paul has journeyed. Suddenly, the problem of human sin is swept away, and the solution is revealed; faith in Jesus Christ is what God requires if people are to be judged 'right' before God. Sinful humanity cannot just presume that God will be kind and gracious, God has provided a route for people to travel by which they may gain this grace, and it is through the sacrifice of Jesus, through His blood, which is a '*means for the forgiveness of sins*' (3:25).

Preachers have declared this message for centuries, and Paul's method of explaining salvation here has remained at the heart of Christian teaching. But although most Christians know this passage and treasure it, most of us still find it very hard to try and work out the details of what Paul is saying. For example, the phrase '*the righteousness of God*' (3:22,25,26) appears a number of times, but what exactly does it mean? The same question could be asked about other important phrases such as, '*justified by grace*' (3:24) or '*the means of the forgiveness of sins*' (3:25), or God's '*tolerance*' (3:25). Christian people from converts to scholars have spent long hours trying to work through the logic of this passage, and found that although their conclusion may be clear, the route Paul travels to it is almost as mysterious as the God whose work we are trying to fathom!

Some of this will only become clearer as we go deeper into the text, but it is possible to grasp some of the issues raised by this passage, and each of them sheds fascinating light on the nature of salvation. Firstly, it is best to think of Paul's phrase '*God's righteousness*' as meaning '*God's righteous judgement of people*'. So when Paul says '*the righteousness of God has now*

*been revealed apart from the Law'* (3:21), he is saying that God has provided a way of making people right in His eyes quite apart from the strict moral laws of the Old Testament. In the next verse, we discover that this way is found *'though faith in Jesus Christ'* (3:22). Paul then describes being right with God as *'redemption'*, he adds that it is *'free'*, and that it comes from God's *'grace'* alone (3:23). Now you may well know the famous words and phrases of these verses, but when we study them, we must be careful to know what these words mean and how they fit together.

The last two verses of this text say more about God's plan of redemption. Firstly, Paul says that Jesus' sacrificial death on the Cross, that is, His *'blood'* (3:25) is the means whereby sins are forgiven; moreover, this is only effective through faith. So it is clear that our redemption is not something we can work out philosophically or logically, we must either accept it at face value or leave it, this is God's deal. If we do accept this, then He is willing to overlook previous sins (3:25). In summary, the last verse of our passage describes the redemption of God in an intriguingly different way but meaning the same thing; *'He justifies those who have faith in Christ Jesus'* (3:25).

In writing this, Paul set out what the Spirit said to Him by revelation and what He had preached as the Gospel throughout His ministry. This is what all the fuss is about. This is the Gospel of God; despite all our sinfulness, through faith in Jesus Christ, we are saved! Alleluia!

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## Going Deeper

### ***The righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ***

The glory of God is the true destiny of all men and women. By that I mean that we were made in God's image (Gen 1:26,27, 2:7) and made human by the breath of His Spirit; and we are fulfilled only when we return to the God who made us. That destiny is, of course, beyond this world and the life we lead in it, so we have no knowledge of it except that the God who made this world has promised to re-make it as a new entity in which we all find our true home (Rev 21:1f. John 14:2f;). The world in which we live in marked by sin, which, in all its many forms, is a rebellion against God both personally and also against the moral nature of the world God has created. Sin's power is everywhere; the description of how it works to entrap all people is given in Genesis 3, and the whole 'salvation history' of the Bible describes how God has worked through the centuries to make Himself known and gradually establish the means whereby He could overcome the consequences of sin. Because of our sin, we cannot claw our way back to find our true destiny; only God can do this. The heart and purpose of Paul's letter to the Romans is to explain how God has done this through the Gospel, which at its heart, calls all people without exception to believe that Jesus Christ is both God's Son and also the means whereby God has done this work of salvation for all of us.

Throughout his explanation of salvation by faith within this passage, Paul talks about the 'righteousness of God'. By this he does not merely mean some property or characteristic of God; he means the work that God does to establish a relationship with the people He has made. The word 'righteousness', normally means 'being in a right relationship with', but when used of God it refers to His pursuit of a genuine relationship with men and women, the creatures He made who have rebelled against Him since the beginning. He has to act alone to deal with this sin, because we cannot, and this work is described as His 'righteousness' because it is the direct consequence of His pursuit of what is 'right', according to His nature and being.

As a Jew, Paul knew full well that God revealed 'His righteousness' through the Law given to Moses on Mount Sinai. But Paul has finished with arguing that all people fail to measure up to being 'righteous' whether as Jews as measured against the revealed Law of God, or Gentiles as measured against the natural moral laws of the world. He now declares that God has revealed His righteousness 'apart from the Law' (3:21), and significantly tells us that now, the 'Law and the Prophets' (3:21) are 'witnesses' to God's righteousness, they tell us about it, but they cannot do it. The real action in achieving God's will is found in Jesus Christ, and Paul explains this with the famous phrase 'the righteousness of God is through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe.' (3:22) Paul knew full well when he wrote this that there would be a great deal more to explain about how this works, and why it works to achieve God's purpose, but this, he says categorically, is the heart of the matter.

### ***How our salvation works!***

Although the rest of the letter to the Romans goes on to explain this Gospel, Paul does begin some of the explanation immediately. The point of verses 23 and 24 is not to go over the whole matter of Jews and Gentiles again (Paul's phrase 'look, there is no difference' at the end of verse 22 has the feeling of a tired expression, as if he is saying 'I'm not going there again!'). Because everyone in the world is under the grip of sin (3:23) the only way that we can be released from this grip is by the free work of God. Paul says 'they are freely justified by His grace, through the redemption that is found in Christ Jesus.' (3:24). People often become concerned about the meaning of the word 'redemption' which has the meaning of a price that was paid as if in some kind of transaction. Elsewhere in Scripture, the price paid for our redemption is identified as the death of Jesus (Hebrews 9:12f. etc.), which is a very difficult subject to fully understand, but this text is not the right Scripture to explore the issue, for the reference to 'redemption' is secondary to what Paul is saying. His point is that God's work is gracious (which means 'favourable' to us) and more importantly, FREE. In one brief verse, Paul established that our salvation and our restoration with God is undeserved and free, and found in Christ Jesus.

The next verse of Scripture is the subject of boundless speculation. The translation I have given clearly states my own belief about how God intends this salvation to work, but you will notice that it is different from many other versions of the Bible. There is one word in the Greek of this verse which lies at the heart of Paul's description of what Jesus does 'through his blood' which achieves God's purpose. It is a rare word which does not appear anywhere else in the Bible, and as I quote the old Authorised version of verse 25 you will immediately recognise the word I refer to, because it is almost as incomprehensible in English as it is in Greek! 'Whom God has set for to be a propitiation through faith in His blood.' Many other versions today read 'God has presented Him as a sacrifice of atonement, through faith in his blood' which attempts to explain what the word 'propitiation' (in Greek, 'lutrosis') means. Strictly, it means 'something that is done to deal with a problem'. When two people have a kiss in order to 'make up' after having had an argument, the kiss could be described as the 'propitiation' because it was needed to re-establish the relationship. Therefore, my translation makes verse 25 rather long, but when I write 'His blood should be the means of the forgiveness of sins', it explains clearly the meaning of the text, which is that the blood of Jesus (i.e. His death) is the means whereby our sins are forgiven. I have no doubt that this is what Paul intended, because it makes sense with the rest of the passage.

Again, there is much more that Paul could say about this, but he goes on to talk about how this amazing work of Jesus means that God has therefore 'overlooked' previous sins. It is obvious

that if God did this great work for all people when Jesus died, people should ask about what would therefore happen to all the people who had already died and not had a chance to know anything about this wonderful grace? In common with all those who have faith in Christ now, or at any time, God is prepared to 'overlook' their sin as well, but only through Jesus. It is an amazing gift, quite beyond our powers of comprehension or our ability to respond, and when we truly grasp this amazing truth, then we know in our own spirits that we can never 'match' such generosity or kindness. We can only respond by offering ourselves in total gratitude, giving ourselves back to God Almighty who made us and in thanks for His grace.

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## **Application**

### ***Discipleship issues***

#### ***Dealing with the truth about God and us***

Whilst reading what I have to say about this passage, it is imperative that you understand what I now say. What is written in this passage of Scripture about God and Jesus Christ is either as true for all people today as Newton's or Einstein's 'laws' in Physics, or it is meaningless. One thing it is not, and that is a religious system. If people wish to reject this spiritual assessment of the truth of the world, then God allows them this privilege, but it is a rejection of Him as Creator. Whether individual people reject this does not make it more or less true or untrue, just as rejecting 'science' does not make Newton or Einstein more or less correct in their contribution to Physics. The Christian 'Faith', or the Church, as it is observed by the world at large, consists of the life of those people who have found that what Paul says about God and Jesus Christ in this Scripture to be true. It makes sense to them and they believe that God has touched their lives and led them to accept this truth. It is His work that makes the difference, not our ability to organise a religious system.

I write this because some Christians find it hard to understand what Paul writes; perhaps understandably, but some go on to reject his explanation of the Gospel. As we go deeper into Paul's letter, we will explore the way in which what he says is consistent with the rest of Scripture, Old and New Testament. At this point, I simply argue that Scripture is consistent with itself, and there is nothing in this famous passage that is contrary to the full Gospel as found in the four 'Gospels' written by Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. The Jesus we come to know through the wonderful stories told in these Gospels is, in His death and all that happened as a consequence, including the resurrection, the means whereby God in His great wisdom re-establishes His relationship with men and women, His creation. It is a deep mystery, but it is explainable, and the letters of Paul are essential to our full understanding of what this means.

#### ***Ideas for exploring discipleship***

It is a good exercise to take this text, and attempt to write it out again in your own words; simplifying it wherever possible. If you can come out with a shorter version than Paul's, then you are either brilliant, or you have left something out! Exercises like this may seem trivial to some, but the doing of them teaches us a great deal about ourselves, and our beliefs.

Pray for those who read this text and find it confusing; and pray for preachers and teachers within the church whose job it is to explain this text.

### ***Questions for groups***

When you read through this passage, is there any part of it that you do not understand. Discuss this with your group and help each other.

Discuss how you believe Jesus achieves God's will for reconciliation with people despite their sin, using this passage.

Is it fair or unfair of God to 'overlook' the sins of people because of their faith in Jesus?

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## **Final Prayer**

Speak to me, Lord Jesus, when I do not know where to turn, and need Your help. Send Your Holy Spirit and fill me with Your love and peace so that I may find my way to true faith; and in that confidence, deal with all my problems in Your strength. Thank You Lord Jesus, my Saviour; AMEN