



# JUSTIFIED

All who accept the gospel by faith are justified before the Father.

## ROMANS 3:21–4:3

Most of us want to avoid the embarrassment that comes with having our debit card denied or realizing we are a dollar short and unable to pay for the meal we just ordered. When those things happen, it feels like the eyes of everyone are suddenly on us. Paul reminded the Roman believers they all fell short when it came to God's righteousness. He also explained that through faith in Jesus, we find God's grace and His willingness to cover our shortcomings.

***Which would be a greater embarrassment: having your card denied at a restaurant or realizing you are a dollar short at a cash-only restaurant? Explain.***

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# UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

## ROMANS 3:21–4:25

Paul spent the first portion of his letter to the Romans explaining the dire spiritual situation of both Gentiles and Jews. The Gentiles ignored the truth of God by worshiping the creation instead of the Creator (Rom. 1:18-32). The Jews considered themselves superior to the Gentiles but were just as separated from God by their sin (2:17-29). No one—Jew or Gentile—could claim a righteous standing before God. It would seem the human race was trapped in a hopeless dilemma. We are all separated from God and incapable of restoring our relationship with Him on our own. Our actions could never be enough to pay for our offenses against Him.

Paul turned an important corner in Romans 3. While all have sinned and are separated from God, God has provided a way of salvation (3:21-31). The way is by acknowledging God's grace and coming to Him through faith in Christ. Instead of relying on our own efforts, we need to look toward the finished work of Jesus on the cross.

This means two things. First, humans have no reason to brag about our own spirituality. Jesus is our only hope. Second, God's offer is open to anyone who is willing to accept it by faith alone. If the Jews would look back at their history, this would be evident. Their patriarch Abraham was redeemed by faith long before Moses received the law on Mount Sinai (4:1-3).

David also recognized the importance of faith, as Paul emphasized with a quote from Psalms (Rom. 4:6-8). But Abraham understood what was truly needed. Instead of trusting in circumcision or some other legal restraint, faith remains the only option. His faith in God was what made him righteous, and it was what would make his descendants (and the Gentiles) righteous as well (4:13-24).

***Read Romans 3:21–4:3 in your Bible, circling each time Paul used the word faith. How would you describe the importance of faith based on this passage?***

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# EXPLORE THE TEXT

## THROUGH FAITH (ROM. 3:21-24)

**<sup>21</sup> But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it— <sup>22</sup> the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction: <sup>23</sup> for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, <sup>24</sup> and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus,**

### VERSES 21-23

People tend to be legalistic and compare themselves to others based on external standards and rules. But God has revealed His plan for salvation outside the law.

Paul introduced this passage with *but now*, one of his favorite transitional phrases. He used it to prepare readers for a coming contrast. While both Jews and Gentiles had a sin problem, God had a solution for both. Those who disputed Paul on this needed to take a closer look at the Scriptures. Both the Law and the Prophets affirmed this truth, pointing to God's plan of salvation through faith alone.

The way to a right relationship with God is *through faith in Jesus Christ*. The Old Testament pointed to God's righteousness coming through faith. For Jews, this meant moving away from their spiritual scorecards. Meanwhile, Gentiles coming out of a pagan environment would have struggled with the idea of a personal, loving God.

God saw *no distinction* between Jews and Gentiles. They all have the same need. They all receive the same benefit. They all receive it the same way. They are all sinners granted salvation through the work of Jesus alone.

There is a universal need for a Savior because *all have sinned*. Paul made this same point earlier by quoting passages from the Psalms and Isaiah (Rom. 3:10-18).

### KEY DOCTRINE: *Man*

By his free choice man sinned against God and brought sin into the human race (1 John 1:8-10).

God's standard of righteousness is His own perfection. Humanity cannot live up to that standard. Every person misses the mark. Some may come closer than others, but that's a hollow claim—like measuring how close one comes to jumping the Grand Canyon. No one comes close to reaching the other side.

#### VERSE 24

Faith in Jesus does not require perfection; it only requires God's **grace**. While God's gift is free to us, it cost Him dearly. Because of Christ's sacrifice, we can have a relationship with God we don't deserve—and avoid His wrath that we do deserve. This is grace.

As Paul noted later in the passage, any attempt at earning salvation or taking credit for God's work is futile. Anything we might bring to the equation—other than childlike faith—comes up lacking. We need Him.

Just as there is no distinction in who sins, there is no distinction in who can be **justified**. Anyone who places his or her trust in Christ can be saved. Paul's wording may have reminded Roman readers of slaves being redeemed from captivity. Through the free gift of God's grace, we are rescued from slavery to sin and restored to a right standing with God.

**What word or phrase in verse 24 stands out the most? How does that word or phrase counter the reality of verse 23?**

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#### IN JESUS (ROM. 3:25-26)

**<sup>25</sup> whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God's righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins. <sup>26</sup> It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.**

#### VERSES 25-26

The Jews understood sacrifices. Even before the law, they slaughtered animals to make things right with God. Paul said that God was actually the One who offered the ultimate sacrifice. God initiated our salvation.

Verses 25-26 emphasize God's work through Christ. Jesus was the **propitiation** or atoning sacrifice that makes all other sacrifices



obsolete. Making atonement means paying the penalty that restores a relationship.

God's motive for this incredible act was **to show** His **righteousness** and grace. Obviously, God owes us nothing. However, He loves us, and His gift of salvation proves that love.

God's timing is always perfect. He had chosen **the present time** to reveal Jesus to the world. In a sense, Christ's death was God's announcement that redemption was now available. But the cross wasn't just an announcement; it is also an invitation. God will declare righteous anyone who accepts Jesus' sacrifice in faith. His righteousness becomes our righteousness.

This salvation is not something added to what we were already doing. It is based on Jesus' finished work alone. Our good works mean nothing; His death means everything. Through accepting His free gift through faith, we are made right with God.

***How would you explain Jesus' atoning sacrifice for our sins to a person who is not a believer? What illustrations or analogies could you use to explain unfamiliar words like sacrifice?***

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### **BIBLE SKILL:** *Use a Bible dictionary.*

Look up the words "expiation" and "propitiation" in a Bible dictionary (either print or online). Read the following verses: Luke 18:13; Hebrews 2:17; 9:15; 1 John 2:2; 4:10. Read Exodus 25:17-22; 30:10. Compare the Old Testament description of sacrifice with the New Testament passages. Summarize the insights you gained about Jesus' sacrifice for our sins.

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## FOR ALL PEOPLE (ROM. 3:27-31)

<sup>27</sup> Then what becomes of our boasting? It is excluded. By what kind of law? By a law of works? No, but by the law of faith. <sup>28</sup> For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law. <sup>29</sup> Or is God the God of Jews only? Is he not the God of Gentiles also? Yes, of Gentiles also, <sup>30</sup> since God is one—who will justify the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through faith. <sup>31</sup> Do we then overthrow the law by this faith? By no means! On the contrary, we uphold the law.

### VERSES 27-28

Jesus did everything necessary for our salvation. All that is left is to accept His gift by faith. Since He has done all the work, we have no room to brag about our own goodness.

Paul told the Romans that Jesus' death and resurrection leaves no room for **boasting**. The wording points toward Israel's pride as God's chosen people. Paul used a series of rhetorical questions to show how such spiritual pride is empty. It is inappropriate to brag about a gift that is given, not earned. Plus, this gift is available to everyone. The **law of faith**—total dependence on Jesus—stands in contrast to **works of the law**—dependence on ourselves. Thus, bragging on Jesus and His free gift should replace boasting in our feeble efforts.

**Justified** is a legal term that describes one who has been declared not guilty of a crime. Despite being accused of violating a standard, a judge's decision cleans the wrongdoer's record and frees him or her from the consequences of guilt.

Spiritual justification works the same way. We stand accused before a perfect Judge. Because we put our faith in His Son, the Judge declares us not guilty. Our record is cleared, and we escape the sentence we deserve.

### VERSES 29-30

Salvation by faith underscores the breadth of God's offer. Under the law, it was easy to assume salvation was a "Jewish thing." But this salvation offered to all required a fresh understanding of the wideness of God's love and grace.

Again, Paul laid out the logic through rhetorical questions. Every Jew would have understood that God is the Creator of



all people, but Jews were basically trying to keep God to themselves. Instead, God is the Lord over all, and His Son came to be the Savior of all. So the invitation represented by the cross and the empty tomb is open to anyone who has faith.

God is not concerned whether an individual is a Jew or a Gentile. He doesn't see people as circumcised or uncircumcised. Instead, He is interested in our faith.

### VERSE 31

A pious Jew would have considered Paul's teaching scandalous. But he was already ahead of them. With one final rhetorical question Paul addressed the Jews' primary objection—that faith makes the law worthless. In response, he stated that instead of diminishing the law, faith actually fulfills its purpose. The law focused on convicting people of sin, showing them how far short of God's standard they were falling. But it never had the power to fix the problem.

As Paul would affirm later in the letter, faith in Jesus is able to accomplish what the law could not (Rom. 8:3-4). God offers salvation to anyone willing to believe.

***How does salvation being offered to all impact how believers should relate to other people? How might it impact how believers pray?***

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### INCLUDING ABRAHAM (ROM. 4:1-3)

**<sup>1</sup> What then shall we say was gained by Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh? <sup>2</sup> For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. <sup>3</sup> For what does the Scripture say? "Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness."**

### VERSES 1-3

Paul's next rhetorical question took Israelites back to the very origin of their identity. **Abraham** was the father of the Jewish nation. The patriarch's name provided a clue to the direction Paul was heading.

Abraham had been known as Abram, which meant “exalted father.” But God changed his name to Abraham, which meant “father of a multitude.” Physically, that certainly meant the Jewish nation. But God also promised that this multitude would include people from every corner of the world who would be blessed by Abraham’s life (Gen. 12:1-3).

Paul’s question was pretty simple: How was Abraham justified? The answer probably surprised many of Paul’s Jewish readers. Most devout Jews would have assumed that Abraham earned God’s favor by obeying God’s laws. This would have given him room to **boast about** his good works—which would have given them room to brag about their special standing with God. However, the historical timeline would not support their claim. Since Abraham lived hundreds of years before Moses, his obedience could not have been tied to observing the law.

### **Abraham chose to believe what God said, even when it didn’t make sense to him.**

Paul affirmed that God justified Abraham by faith. To support that claim, he quoted Genesis 15:6. The apostle made it clear that Abraham chose to believe what God said, even when it didn’t make sense to him. That decision to believe—to live by faith—is what saved Abraham.

Using business terminology, Paul described the spiritual transaction that took place in Abraham’s heart. He deposited his trust in God’s words, as demonstrated by his willingness to obey. God recorded that faith as a credit to his account. Abraham’s debt was paid in full by his faith in God—just as ours is paid through our faith in Christ.

***How does the faith of Abraham compare to the faith required of believers today?***

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# IN MY CONTEXT

- God gives salvation freely to anyone who places their faith in Jesus.
- God declares those who place faith in Jesus to be righteous.
- Since all are saved through faith in Jesus, boasting is excluded.
- Faith is the only path to God.

***What sins do you tend to categorize as requiring God’s immediate judgment? Based on this passage, what adjustments do you need to make in your attitude toward people who commit the sins you identified?***

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***What can you and the members of your Bible study do to intentionally show love to people who are different from you? When will you start?***

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***Write about how you accepted God’s offer of salvation through faith. Take time to thank Him for providing you salvation. If you haven’t made that choice, what’s holding you back? Who can you talk to about it?***

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## Prayer Needs

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