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### **The Vocabulary of Salvation Romans 3:21-26**

If you were to ask me who, in my opinion, was the most frustrated and pathetic man ever to appear on TV, I would immediately point the finger at Hamilton Burger. Many of you are too young to know anything of Hamilton Burger, as he appeared regularly as the District Attorney on the TV show, Perry Mason, which ran from 1957 to 1966. I refer to Burger as frustrated and somewhat pathetic because he never won a single case against Mason, the defense attorney. He suffered one crushing defeat after another. It certainly wasn't for lack of effort or skill. Burger would amass before the court what he believed was irrefutable and convincing evidence against Mason's client, the accused.

At the end of his argument, with a confident smile on his face, Burger would say, "Your Honor, the state rests its case." It was then that the Judge would turn to Perry Mason and say, "The defense may now call its first witness." And as was invariably the case, Perry Mason would proceed to discredit and dismantle everything Hamilton Burger thought he had proven. However, Mason's success wasn't altogether owing to his skills as a defense attorney. The fact of the matter is that Mason won every case because all his clients were innocent! And Mason demonstrated for the court to see that someone else had committed the crime for which his client was currently on trial.

In my efforts to explain the development of the argument in Romans 1-3, I have portrayed the Apostle Paul as if he, like Hamilton Burger, was a prosecuting attorney. Much in the style of Burger, Paul has himself amassed the evidence against the defendants who have been accused and indicted of sin against their Creator. Like Burger, Paul, as it were, declares: "Your Honor, the state rests."

There is, however, one major difference. This time, when the Judge turns and says, "The defense may now call its first witness," there is absolute and utter silence! For unlike the clients whom Perry Mason defended, these whom Paul prosecutes are all guilty. They are not only guilty as sin, they are guilty of sin! And thus we read in Romans 3:9 that "we have already charged that all, both Jews and Greeks, are under sin." And again, in Romans 3:19, an airtight case has been made such that "every mouth" is "stopped" and "the whole world" is found "accountable to God."

The evidence against the accused in this case is so overwhelming, so utterly irreproachable, that even Hamilton Burger could have secured the verdict of guilty as charged. The scene that Paul asks us to envision is one in which the whole world, Jew and Gentile, stands accused before God, their mouths sealed and shut in deafening silence, incapable of uttering so much as a whisper in their own defense. There is no possibility that any shall ever gain the approval of the court through works of righteousness. And the sentence is eternal death.

What a tragedy it would be, what utter despair would flood our souls, were the story to end there. Sentence has been passed. All that awaits the defendants in this case is their execution. But what indescribable joy erupts in our hearts when we read in v. 21, "**But now . . .**" But now the righteousness of God that alone will avail to secure for us a declaration of innocence has been manifested and made available to those who will believe in Jesus Christ!

Although we stand condemned, another suddenly appears to be executed in our place. Although we stand under the sentence of death, guilty as charged, another steps forward to appease and satisfy the demands of justice against us. Praise be to God that Paul does not end his message with human sin and depravity and guilt; but here begins his glorious declaration that there is forgiveness and redemption and justification by God's grace through faith in Jesus Christ!

Many would prefer that Paul not have adopted this approach. They would have preferred that he skip over Romans 1:18-3:20 and go directly to the good news of the gospel of salvation in 3:21-26. But there can be no knowledge of God, no understanding of grace or appreciation and gratitude for his mercy until we first come to grips with our moral and spiritual depravity and our guilt in the presence of God. ***Only he who knows what it is to be lost, knows what it is to be saved!***

Today we will not cover everything in this paragraph, but will return to it yet again. So, if I fail to explain something in the text or choose not to answer a question you have, don't despair, we'll get to it in a subsequent sermon.

### *Our Great Need (v. 23)*

Before we look at the provision of God's grace to save us from our sins, we need to understand why there is any need of salvation in the first place. Paul tells us why in v. 23 – “for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.”

This has been misunderstood by many. Paul isn't saying that we are supposed to be as glorious as God and we have failed to display it. By falling short of the glory of God he doesn't mean we came up short in our efforts to be glorious. The answer is found back in Romans 1.

There we were told that mankind “did not honor him as God or give thanks to him” (Rom. 1:21). Instead, men “exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things” (Rom. 1:23). They “exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever. Amen” (Rom. 1:25).

Sin is the rejection of God and his glory as the supreme value in our lives. Sinful man looks at God's incomparable and immeasurably great glory and says, “No thanks. I prefer something else. I prefer idols and money and fame and sex.” The great sin of mankind is the refusal to treasure God, the refusal to trust God, the refusal to thank God and worship God and enjoy him above all else. We fall short of the glory of God when we give our allegiance to anything or anyone else, when we fail to make him the foundation and center of our existence. Piper sums it up:

“All have sinned and are lacking the glory of God. We have traded it away. We have loved other things more. And so we have treated God and his glory with indifference and periodic, weekend, lukewarm attention. There is, therefore, a massive problem for every one of us: How shall we get right with God, and be saved from this God-dishonoring condition of sin? How shall we ever be accepted in eternity by God when all of us have scorned his infinite worth so deeply by treating him as if he had less worth than a weekend hobby?”

Such is why we stand in great need of God's saving mercy.

### *Three Glorious Words of Salvation*

Our approach to unpacking the truth of salvation will first address the meaning of three of the most important words in the Bible: justification, redemption, and propitiation.

**(1) Justification** – Paul tells us in v. 24 that we are “justified by his grace as a gift.” Although we’ve talked about justification before, let me unpack its meaning in a bit more detail.

First, justification means we are declared righteous in God’s sight, not that we are made righteous. It is through the process of progressive sanctification that we are made righteous. But justification is a legal declaration by God, not an experiential transformation in us. In other words, justification is not something you can feel. It is something that is done outside of us and consists of a legal change in how we are perceived by God.

Second, justification is both acquittal and acceptance. In saying it is acquittal, we must remember that it is more than merely receiving the verdict of “not guilty.” The declaration that we are now righteous in God’s sight is because he has mercifully imputed or reckoned to us the righteousness of Jesus. If the only thing we experienced was pardon, we might be saved from hell. But we would have no right to heaven. So, yes, we are acquitted in the court of heaven, but we are also accepted by the Judge because he sees in us the righteousness of his Son, Jesus Christ.

Third, justification is both exclusive and extensive. By exclusive, I mean that there is no middle ground. You either are or are not justified. You can’t be partially justified. By extensive, I mean that all our sins are dealt with and blotted out, whether past, present, or future. No sin remains to condemn us.

Fourth, justification is instantaneous and irreversible. It is a position, a status to which we are elevated. It is not a process. It happens in a moment of time whenever a person puts their faith in Jesus. It is also irreversible. It cannot be lost. God’s verdict will never be appealed to a higher court. God’s verdict will never be overturned. Not all the accusations that Satan can muster will avail to reverse our standing in God’s sight.

Fifth, justification is received by faith alone. As Paul says in v. 24, it flows from God’s “grace as a gift.” That is why there can never be any such thing as justification by works.

**(2) Redemption** – On what basis is justification possible? After all, our sins are real and deep-seated. What has become of them that we should be declared righteous in God’s sight? The answer is redemption! Notice that Paul says we are “justified by his grace as a gift, *through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus*” (v. 24b).

The word “redemption” means *deliverance or release by the payment of a price*. Whenever redemption occurs, a ransom has been paid. You and I were enslaved to sin. We were in bondage to its power and condemnation. We were held hostage to the world, the flesh, and the devil. But Jesus graciously offered up the only price that could effectively set us free: his precious blood, shed on the cross. Jesus himself made this clear in Mark 10:45,

“For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mark 10:45).

The life of Jesus Christ, given up by the shedding of his blood, was sufficient to secure our release from the slave market of sin.

There is no better illustration of the truth of “redemption” than that which we find in the experience of Hosea and his wife Gomer.

I read the Old Testament story of Hosea with shock and amazement. Hosea may have lived 2,700 years ago, but his idea of marriage wouldn't have differed greatly from mine. Like most other men, he wanted a wife who was faithful and pure and gentle and loving. He didn't get one.

Hosea married a whore. Sorry, but there's no reason to tone down the language. Hosea's wife, Gomer (I've often wondered if she had a brother named Goober!), was a whore, a prostitute. She was unfaithful, ungrateful, unbelieving, and unloving. Why, then, did he marry her? Because God told him to.

“Go, take to yourself a wife of whoredom and have children of whoredom, for the land commits great whoredom by forsaking the Lord” (Hosea 1:2).

Hosea was to represent God. Gomer, his wife, was to play the part of Israel. Instead of simply telling his people how sinful they were and how he was determined to love them anyway, God brought Hosea and Gomer center-stage to dramatically act it out.

So Hosea married a harlot. He adopted the children she had conceived because of her immoral trysts (cf. Hosea 1:2). She then bore Hosea three children whom God also used to illustrate the depth of Israel's sin.

I'm fascinated with the reasons people give for naming their children the way they do. Often names are selected which they hope will instill confidence in their child. Others pick whatever is fashionable at the time. I happen to be named after my grandfather.

My father once told me of a family in his hometown who named their six children Victor, Vada, Vida, Velda, Vester, and Vernon! A friend of mine, less concerned with alliteration, opted for biblical names for his seven kids.

When God named the offspring of Hosea and Gomer, his decision was shaped by the lesson he wanted to teach Israel. Thus, the firstborn, a son, was named Jezreel, which means “God scatters.” This clearly pointed to the judgment that would befall Israel. The second child was a daughter, Lo-Ruhamah, which means “not pitied.” And the third child, another son, was called Lo-Ammi, “not my people.”

Marriage and motherhood did nothing to temper Gomer's promiscuous passions. She cheated on Hosea. She turned her back on him, spurned his love, and committed adultery. She lived with one man after another. One day Hosea approached one of her lovers and said, “You obviously don't have the money to support her or provide her with what she needs. Here, take this money and buy her food and clothing and put a roof over her head.” The man did precisely that, but never told Gomer that it was Hosea who had

made this possible with his generous gift (Hos. 2:5-8). Perhaps Hosea lurked closely behind and watched as Gomer embraced her adulterous lover and thanked him for the gifts which Hosea had provided.

Love, so we are told, like most everything else, surely has its limits. So who would dare speak ill of Hosea should he decide to divorce Gomer? But he didn't. God's love, symbolically expressed in the action of Hosea, *unlike* everything else, shatters the mold. Indeed, it stretches the limits of credulity.

Eventually, Gomer sank so low that she became a slave and was put on the block to be sold like so many other animals. How can I even begin to describe a love so deep that it would pursue a chronic fornicator even as she seeks illicit pleasures in the arms of her paramour? Yet that is precisely what God told Hosea to do!

And the LORD said to me, "Go again, love a woman who is loved by another man and is an adulteress, even as the LORD loves the children of Israel, though they turn to other gods and love cakes of raisins." So I bought her for fifteen shekels of silver and a homer and a lethech of barley" (Hosea 3:1-2).

Hosea, playing the part of God, was to purchase back to himself his wayward and wanton wife. Try to visualize the auction in the slave market. One man bids five shekels of silver. Hosea bids eight. "Ten shekels of silver," shouts a voice from the crowd. "Fifteen shekels of silver," says Hosea. "Fifteen shekels of silver and five bushels of barley," responds another man. "Fifteen shekels of silver and a homer and lethech of barley," shouts Hosea. The auctioneer pauses and then declares: "Sold to Hosea, for fifteen shekels of silver and a homer and lethech of barley."

As Hosea led her away, he said:

"You must dwell as mine for many days. You shall not play the whore, or belong to another man; so will I also be to you" (Hos. 3:3).

Gomer, playing the part of unfaithful Israel, is *redeemed* by the relentless love of her husband. Moreover, the threats implied in the names of their children are graciously transformed into blessings. Such is the power of God's love that Jezreel no longer means "God scatters" but "God plants" (Hosea 2:22). Lo-Ruhamah becomes Ruhamah, "pitied." And Lo-Ammi becomes Ammi, "my people."

Make no mistake. The redemptive love of Hosea for Gomer, that is, of God for Israel, was a foreshadowing of God's love for the church, for *you* and *me*. Let me be blunt: *you and I are spiritual fornicators*. We are worthy of eternal divorce in the depths of hell. But God chooses to love us and redeem us from our sin. How?

Gomer was redeemed by Hosea for fifteen shekels of silver and a homer and a lethech of barley. But the purchase price for our redemption was immeasurably more costly and precious. As the Apostle Peter says, "you were redeemed from the futile ways inherited from your forefathers, not with perishable things such

as silver or gold [or bushels of barley!], but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot” (1 Peter 1:18-29).

Merely sending Jesus into the world could hardly be construed as an act of unparalleled love. But sending him to die as the ransom price for the souls of scurrilous spiritual adulterers like you and me is love beyond degree. That is redemption!

**(3) Propitiation** – Our third and final word is one that most Christians can’t define. Yet it may be the most important word of all: propitiation.<sup>1</sup> There are three other places in the NT where this word or a related form appears:

“Therefore he had to be made like his brothers in every respect, so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people” (Heb. 2:17).

“He [Jesus Christ] is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world” (1 John 2:2).

“In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins” (1 John 4:10).

In dying for us Jesus made propitiation for our sins, which is to say that in his death he suffered and endured and satisfied in himself the wrath and judgment that was due unto sinful men and women. “Very simply stated the doctrine of propitiation means that Christ propitiated the wrath of God and rendered God propitious to his people” (John Murray, 30).

Sadly, if you are reading an English translation such as the RSV or the NEB you will find that the word “propitiation” is not found. In its place is the word “expiation.” Much to my disappointment, even the NIV translation falters at this point. They render the Greek word as, “a sacrifice of atonement.” Why? There is only one reason. Many scholars and left-leaning theologians became increasingly uncomfortable talking about the wrath of God. Wrath, so they said, is beneath God’s dignity. God is love, and wrath has no place in his character or disposition. But if God is not angry at sin, if his justice does not require satisfaction, can he truly be holy and righteous? No.

The word “expiation” was chosen because it has sin as its object. To “expiate” is to cover or put away or blot out sin so that it no longer constitutes a barrier between us and God. And that is wonderful. Praise God for expiation! But sin cannot be expiated or wiped out unless the wrath of God against sin is first pacified and appeased.

The reason why our sin has been removed is because Jesus, in his suffering, has quenched the wrath of God and satisfied the demands of divine justice.

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<sup>1</sup> On propitiation, see John Stott, *The Epistles of John* (IVP, 1988), pp. 89-93; Leon Morris, *The Apostolic Preaching of the Cross* (Eerdmans, 1972), pp. 125-185; John Murray, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied* (Eerdmans, 1973), pp. 29-33; Roger Nicole, “C. H. Dodd and the Doctrine of Propitiation,” *Westminster Theological Journal*, May 1955, Vol. XVII, pp. 117-57. The relevant NT texts are Romans 3:25; 1 John 2:2; 4:10; Hebrews 2:17.

In pagan religions, man propitiates the gods. He offers a sacrifice, be it human or animal, to mollify the anger of the gods. But in Christianity it is God himself who propitiates his own wrath by his own action of sending his own Son to endure what we deserve. Don't ever think that the Son, Jesus Christ, acted alone to turn his Father's wrath away from us. The Father and the Son in perfect unity and oneness of will determined to make a way for us to be reconciled to him. And that way was by means of the Father sending the Son in love, and the Son freely embracing the call to die for sinners, and in doing so to answer the demands of divine justice.

So, when Paul says here in Romans 3 that God put forward Jesus "as a propitiation by his blood," he means for us to know that it wasn't the life of Jesus that saved us, or his teaching, or his faithfulness, or his good moral example, or his wisdom, but the shedding of his blood in death on the cross.

### *By What Means?*

And how does this glorious reality become ours? By faith! Paul couldn't have been more explicit, as he repeats himself over and over again.

The righteousness of God that we lack but must somehow obtain "has been manifested apart from the law" (Rom. 3:21). Keeping the law by good works doesn't get it.

Instead, the righteousness of God comes "through faith in Jesus Christ" (Rom. 3:22).

This righteousness is "for all who believe" (Rom. 3:22).

The blessings of propitiation are "to be received by faith" (Rom. 3:25).

God is shown to be just and the justifier "of the one who has faith in Jesus" (Rom. 3:26).

"For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law" (Rom. 3:28).

### *Is this the Most Important and Precious Paragraph in the Bible?*

I don't think one could find a more important and life-giving and precious paragraph in the entire Bible than what we have here in Romans 3:21-26. I wonder if it is precious to you. I ask you to ask yourself today if your heart is filled to overflowing when you hear these incredible words: justified, redeemed, propitiation. Do you realize what Paul is saying? Do you hear the voice of your heavenly Father through the language of the apostle? Have you meditated long and deeply on the eternal implications of what we've just seen?

When you lie awake at night and the painful memory of sin and failure and selfish conduct flood your conscience, do you turn instinctively to the truth found in Romans 3? Or do you weep hopelessly, knowing all too well that you have nothing to offer in payment for your sin and, apart from God's empowering grace, no hope that you will be able to resist the same temptations again tomorrow?

Or when those stinging thoughts of condemnation and guilt and shame hit hard on your heart, do you lift your voice in praise and gratitude that Jesus has suffered loss in your place, that Jesus has satisfied all the demands of divine justice in your place, that Jesus has paid the ransom price to set you free forevermore?

One more word of application. What do you say to the unbeliever when you find the opportunity to share the gospel? Do you stop with your own testimony? Do you speak only of the blessings that come with salvation, such as peace of mind and purpose and value? Or do you proceed to explain the basis on which the forgiveness of sins is available, namely, that God's wrath has been propitiated, that divine justice has been satisfied, through the shed blood of Jesus Christ who has redeemed sinners from sin and made it possible for them to be declared righteous in the sight of God?

That is the gospel, the good news that we must take to the lost and dying of our world.