

Lesson 37 at StudyRomans.org

Romans 3:24, Continued

Romans 3:24 — and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus,

Last week we looked at the word “gift” in verse 24, and we looked at the six Greek words from two word families that are translated as “gift,” “gifts,” or “free gift” in Romans. Those six Greek words for “gift” are all shown on the Handout for Lesson 37.

As we said last week, and as we can see on the Handout, the word “gift” in verse 24 corresponds to the adverb *dorean*, which means freely, gratuitously, for nothing, or as a gift. This gift of grace is not something we earn or something we are owed or something we merit. It is a free gift from God — it is a gift freely given by God.

So then that means there is nothing we must do to receive that gift, right? No! That is not at all what it means! That cannot possibly be what it means! Why not? Because if that is what it meant, then we would be left with only two possible options, both of which violate the word of God.

- **Option 1:** If there is nothing we must do to receive this gift of grace, then God could just give it to everyone without regard to what they do, and so everyone would be saved. But we know that is not right. “For the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many.” (Matthew 7:13)

- **Option 2:** If there is nothing we must do to receive this gift of grace, then God could just pick and choose, giving that gift only to those he wants to be saved. But we know that is also not right. It is not God's will that any should perish. (2 Peter 3:9) "For God shows no partiality." (Romans 2:11)

So, with those two options ruled out, where are we? Where we are is precisely where the Bible is — there are in fact things we must do to be saved. There are things we must do to receive this free gift of God's grace. Do we earn that gift by doing those things? Are those things meritorious works? Can we demand that gift after we do those things? No, no, and no. The gift is freely given.

But if the gift is freely given, then how can we know for sure that we have been given the gift? And we know that we can, in fact, be certain that we have been given the gift of God's grace because John tells us that.

1 John 5:13 — I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, **that you may know that you have eternal life.**

But how? How can we know with certainty that we have been given the freely given gift of God's grace? We don't earn it. We are not owed it. We do nothing to merit it. So how can we be certain that we have it?

- We do not know that we have that gift because we know we are owed that gift because we are not owed that gift.
- And we do not know that we have that gift because we know we have earned that gift because we have not earned that gift.

- We do not know that we have that gift because we have done something to merit that gift because we know we could never merit that gift.
- We know that we have received the gift of God's grace because we know God. That is how we know with certainty that we have been given that gift — because we know God.

We know that God is faithful to his promises. That is how we can be certain that God has given us that free gift of grace — because God has promised that gift to those who obey the gospel of Christ. And if God has promised us that gift, then we know that we have that gift. We know that we have that gift because we know that God is faithful to his promises.

And that observation leads us to the final phrase in verse 24 — “and are justified by his grace as a gift, **through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.**”

This verse is telling us the same thing that Jesus told us in John 14.

John 14:6 — Jesus said to him, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.”

The world tells us that there are many ways to God. Buddhists are on one path; Hindus are on another path; Muslims are on a third path; and Jews are on a fourth path. **That is the devil's lie!**

There is only **one way** to God the Father, and that is through God the Son. There is no other way. And anyone who says there is some other

way to God is calling Jesus a liar and is saying that God sent Jesus to die on that cross for no reason (Galatians 2:21).

That is what verse 24 is also telling us. This inexpressible gift of God's grace justifies us through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus. That is how this gift of grace works. That is how this gift of grace justifies.

And, again, that is something Paul has already told us — it is the gospel of Christ that is the power of God for salvation (Romans 1:16). It is only by the cross of Christ that we are redeemed — “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us.” (Galatians 3:13) “In him we have redemption through his blood.” (Ephesians 1:7)

This word “redemption” in verse 24 is certainly another key word in Romans, even though it is found only twice in the letter (here and in 8:23). The Greek word refers to the payment of a ransom in full. It refers to our deliverance from the bondage of sin and death. We read about that ransom elsewhere:

Matthew 20:28 — Even as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a **ransom** for many.

1 Peter 1:18-19 — Knowing that you were **ransomed** from the futile ways inherited from your forefathers, not with perishable things such as silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot.

1 Timothy 2:5-6 — For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus,

who gave himself as a **ransom** for all, which is the testimony given at the proper time.

And so what have we seen in this one short verse 24? We have seen justification. We have seen grace. We have seen the free gift. And we have seen redemption. In short, we could spend the next four weeks on just this one verse! But we must move on, knowing that we will come back to these topics when Paul comes back to these topics.

And another reason to move on from verse 24 is so that we can get to verse 25!

Romans 3:25

Romans 3:25 — 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.

More keywords! Here are the seven keywords we see in just verses 24 and 25:

- Justification
- Grace
- Gift
- Redemption
- Propitiation
- Faith

- Righteousness

We have already looked at six of those words, so let's focus on the one remaining word — **propitiation**.

In simple terms, that word means doing something to calm anger or to gain favor. The **English** word appears four times in the New Testament, here in verse 25, once in Hebrews, and twice in 1 John:

Hebrews 2:17 — 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.

1 John 2:2 — He is the **propitiation** for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world.

1 John 4:10 — 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.

There are three different Greek words that are translated “propitiation,” although those three words are all from a single word family. Those three words are all shown on the Handout for Lesson 37.

- Here in Romans 3:25, the Greek word is the noun *hilasterion* (Strong's # 2435). It refers to the place, instrument, or means of atonement.
- In Hebrews 2:17, the Greek word is the verb *hilaskomai* (Strong's # 2433). It refers to the act of dealing with sin so that mercy can be shown.

- In 1 John 2:2 and 4:10, the Greek word is the noun *hilasmos* (Strong's # 2434). It refers to the atoning sacrifice itself that removes sin and restores favor.

While the English word “propitiation” appears in only those four verses, those Greek words appear a few places elsewhere in the New Testament. And we can learn a great deal about “propitiation” by looking at where else the underlying Greek words are used.

The verb (Strong's # 2433) found in Hebrews 2:17 (to make **propitiation** for the sins of the people) is also found in the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector.

Luke 18:13 — But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, ‘God, be **merciful** to me, a sinner!’

And the noun (Strong's # 2435) used here in Romans 3:25 (whom God put forward as a **propitiation** by his blood) is also found in Hebrews.

Hebrews 9:5 — Above it were the cherubim of glory overshadowing the **mercy seat**. Of these things we cannot now speak in detail.

When it comes to the meaning of “propitiation,” those two occurrences of the same Greek words are very instructive. Romans 3:25 is telling us that Jesus is the mercy seat, and Hebrews 2:17 is telling us that Jesus came to do the very thing for which that publican was pleading: “God, be merciful to me, a sinner!” Jesus was the answer to that publican's prayer — and not just for him, but for all of us.

We need to pause and take a much closer look at the mercy seat. And again, “mercy seat” in Hebrews 9:5 is a translation of the same Greek word that is translated “propitiation” here in Romans 3:25.

Everything about the mercy seat in the Old Testament points directly to the saving work of Christ. In fact, it is hard to think of any physical object in the Old Testament that provides a closer connection between the Old Testament and the New Testament than does the mercy seat.

What was the mercy seat?

The first thing to know about the mercy seat is that it was not a literal seat. Instead, it was a solid gold cover or lid for the ark of the covenant that also supported two gold Cherubim figures. You can see a depiction of the ark on the Handout for Lesson 37, showing the mercy seat at the top. That depiction comes from the description of the ark of the covenant in Exodus 25:

Exodus 25:17-21 — You shall make a mercy seat of pure gold. Two cubits and a half shall be its length, and a cubit and a half its breadth. And you shall make two cherubim of gold; of hammered work shall you make them, on the two ends of the mercy seat. Make one cherub on the one end, and one cherub on the other end. Of one piece with the mercy seat shall you make the cherubim on its two ends. The cherubim shall spread out their wings above, overshadowing the mercy seat with their wings, their faces one to another; toward the mercy seat shall the faces of the cherubim be. And you shall put the mercy seat on the top of the ark, and in the ark you shall put the testimony that I shall give you.

But why is the mercy seat called a seat if it was really a lid or a cover? The use of the English word “seat” seems to have come from Martin Luther’s translation of the Hebrew into German, but there is some Biblical evidence for the translation “seat.”

Psalm 99:1, 5 — The LORD reigns; let the peoples tremble! **He sits enthroned upon the cherubim**; let the earth quake! ... Exalt the LORD our God; **worship at his footstool!** Holy is he!

And so there is good reason to refer to that golden cover as a seat.

Another important fact about the mercy seat was that it was a cover over the law.

Exodus 25:21 — And you shall put the mercy seat on the top of the ark, and in the ark you shall put the testimony that I shall give you.

And the mercy seat was where God spoke with Moses about the law.

Exodus 25:22 — There I will meet with you, and from above the mercy seat, from between the two cherubim that are on the ark of the testimony, I will speak with you about all that I will give you in commandment for the people of Israel.

Numbers 7:89 — And when Moses went into the tent of meeting to speak with the LORD, he heard the voice speaking to him from above the mercy seat that was on the ark of the testimony, from between the two cherubim; and it spoke to him.

And the mercy seat was where blood was sprinkled on the Day of Atonement.

Leviticus 16:14-15 — And he shall take some of the blood of the bull and sprinkle it with his finger on the front of the mercy seat on the east side, and in front of the mercy seat he shall sprinkle some of the blood with his finger seven times. Then he shall kill the goat of the sin offering that is for the people and bring its blood inside the veil and do with its blood as he did with the blood of the bull, sprinkling it over the mercy seat and in front of the mercy seat.

And the mercy seat was hidden from view inside the veil within the Holy of Holies.

Leviticus 16:2 — And the LORD said to Moses, “Tell Aaron your brother not to come at any time into the Holy Place inside the veil, before the mercy seat that is on the ark, so that he may not die. For I will appear in the cloud over the mercy seat.”

That is what the Old Testament tells us about the mercy seat. What about the New Testament? How did Jesus fulfill the role of the mercy seat? Jesus did that by becoming both the place where we access the mercy of God and the means by which we obtain that mercy.

In the Old Testament, the High Priest would enter the Holy of Holies to sprinkle the blood of a sacrificial animal on the mercy seat so that God would continue to be merciful to Israel. Jesus replaced all of that by simultaneously becoming the priest, the sacrifice, and the place where atonement is secured. Jesus is now the location of the mercy seat — and that location is no longer hidden. And, like the mercy seat, Jesus covers the law by satisfying all of its demands through his perfect obedience to the law.

And we can see all of that here in verse 25. How? Because of that word “propitiation.” As we said, that is the same word translated “mercy seat” in Hebrews 9:5. In fact, here is how the Christian Standard Bible translates verse 25:

Romans 3:25 (CSB) — God presented him as **the mercy seat** by his blood, through faith, to demonstrate his righteousness, because in his restraint God passed over the sins previously committed.

And that is a good translation because that is what the word means. And while we may stumble over the word “propitiation,” the phrase “mercy seat” is easy to understand. Jesus is the place where we obtain the mercy of God, and Jesus is the means by which we obtain the mercy of God.

Another word we sometimes see in this context is the word “expiation.” That word is used in the New English Bible’s translation of verse 25:

Romans 3:25a (NEB) — For God designed him to be the means of **expiating** sin by his sacrificial death, effective through faith.

What is the difference between propitiation and expiation?

- **Propitiation** involves an action directed toward an offended party with the goal of appeasing the wrath of that offended party. That the death of Christ was a propitiation means that it was done to satisfy God, who required that sacrifice so that he could extend mercy without compromising his holiness and his justice.

- **Expiation** is different. Expiation is directed, not at the offended party, but rather at the action by which that party was offended. That the death of Christ was a propitiation tells us what that death did for God, but that the death of Christ was an expiation tells us what that death did for us. It is by the death of Christ that our sins are expiated or washed away. It is by the blood of Christ that we are cleansed. Expiation is to sin as bleach is to a stain.

One way to see the difference between propitiation and expiation is to understand that propitiation is a blessing for the entire world, while expiation is a blessing only for those who have obeyed the gospel. John tells us that:

1 John 2:2 — He is the propitiation for our sins, and *not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world.*

That is why Jesus is the worldwide blessing that was promised to Abraham — even though not everyone in the world will enjoy those blessings.

The death of God the Son opened the way to God the Father for everyone. The death of Christ was a blessing for the entire world, but not everyone enjoys that blessing. Why not? Those who fail to enjoy the blessing do so, not because of something God failed to do, but because of something they failed to do. They failed to obey the gospel. Expiation comes only through faith in Christ. As verse 25 tells us, it is something “to be received by faith.”

The word “**atonement**” ties all of this together. Atonement encompasses both propitiation (the appeasement of God’s wrath) and expiation (the cleansing of sin made possible by that appeasement and by

which we are reconciled to God). We will find that word “atonement” later when we get to Romans 5.

Romans 5:11 (KJV) — And not only so, but we also joy in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom we have now received the **atonement**.

Romans 5:11 (ESV) — More than that, we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received **reconciliation**.

And the important thing to note about atonement is that, as we said, it includes both propitiation and expiation. Some commentators stress one of those concepts over the other — usually expiation over propitiation. Why? Because they do not like the idea of God’s wrath being appeased.

But the Bible teaches that God’s wrath was, in fact, appeased by the death of Christ. In fact, that is what verse 25 teaches us right here. God put Christ forward as a propitiation by his blood. What that means is that the wrath of God was appeased by the blood of Christ.

And elsewhere, of course, we are told that the blood of Christ cleanses us from sin — that is, the blood of Christ expiates our sins. And so we must not elevate one over the other — or worse, we must not ignore one in favor of the other. The blood of Christ provides both propitiation and expiation — and we cannot be saved without both propitiation and expiation.

Now, let’s read the second half of verse 25:

Romans 3:25b — This was to show God’s righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had **passed over** former sins.

As we have seen, the death of Christ on the cross brought propitiation to God and brought expiation to us. The wrath of God was appeased, and our sins were forgiven. And verse 25 tells us that was to show God’s righteousness.

But we already knew that because Paul had already told us that. In fact, that is part of the theme of the letter that we saw back in the first chapter.

Romans 1:16-17 — For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. **For in it the righteousness of God is revealed** from faith for faith, as it is written, “The righteous shall live by faith.”

The gospel of Christ is centered around the cross of Christ, and the cross of Christ is the basis for both the propitiation and the expiation provided by the blood of Christ. Romans 1:17 said “in it the righteousness of God is revealed,” and verse 25 says “this was to show God’s righteousness.”

But the end of verse 25 tells us something more — “because in his divine forbearance he had **passed over** former sins.” What does that mean?

First, let’s figure out why Paul adds that phrase here. What point is Paul making? We have a contextual clue prior to verse 25, and we have a contextual clue after verse 25.

The clue prior to verse 25 is in verse 22 — “there is no distinction.” The explanation of that phrase has been continuing ever since verse 22, and that explanation is still going on here in verse 25. In fact, in the ESV, you will notice that the sentence that started at the end of verse 22 continues all the way into verse 25.

But there is also a contextual clue after verse 25, and we see that clue in the very next verse: “It was to show his righteousness **at the present time.**” I think that temporal clue “present time” in verse 26 will help us understand what is meant by the temporal word “former” here in verse 25.

And so what is Paul’s point here at the end of verse 25? I think Paul is concerned about something that happened prior to the death of Christ that might have been used by some as an argument against everything Paul was saying here about the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.

And what was that potential counterargument? Simple. **If God had forgiven people prior to the death of Christ, then how can Paul now say that our forgiveness depends on the blood of Christ?** Why instead couldn’t God just forgive people in the present time the same way that God forgave people in the former time? After all, we are told that there was forgiveness under the old covenant.

Leviticus 19:22 — **And the priest shall make atonement for him with the ram of the guilt offering before the LORD for his sin that he has committed, and he shall be forgiven for the sin that he has committed.**

Numbers 14:19 — Please pardon the iniquity of this people, according to the greatness of your steadfast love, **just as you have forgiven this people, from Egypt until now.**

So why can't God just continue forgiving people that way? Why did Jesus need to come at all? I think those are the questions that Paul is dealing with here in verse 25.

In answering those questions, Paul uses a Greek word that is found only here in the Bible. In choosing that word, the Holy Spirit uses a very precise word for a very precise purpose. Specifically, Paul says that God “had **passed over** former sins.” Not “forgiven” or “remitted” but “passed over.” We must not pass over that phrase “pass over”!

That phrase “passed over” is a translation of the Greek word *paresis* (Strong's #3929), which is found only here in the New Testament. That Greek word does not mean that these former sins were forgiven, but instead it means that these former sins were allowed to go unpunished. Paul does not use the Greek word *aphesis* (Strong's #859), which means remitted or forgiven, but instead Paul uses this unusual word that means those sins were allowed to go unpunished.

Were those former sins ever forgiven? Yes, they were — and that, in fact, is why they were allowed to go unpunished. But **when** were they forgiven? And **how** were they forgiven?

The answer is that those former sins were forgiven by the blood of Christ, just as our sins today are forgiven by the blood of Christ. The answer is that it is only through Christ that any sins are ever forgiven, no matter when those sins were committed.

Yes, the Old Testament frequently talks about sins being forgiven, but that forgiveness was a two-step process. Step one was that those sins were allowed to go unpunished (the word Paul uses here), and Step two was that those sins were later forgiven by the blood of Christ. How do we know that for sure? We know that for sure because of what Hebrews teaches us.

Hebrews 9:13-15 — For if the blood of goats and bulls, and the sprinkling of defiled persons with the ashes of a heifer, sanctify for the purification of the flesh, **how much more will the blood of Christ**, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify our conscience from dead works to serve the living God. Therefore he is the mediator of a new covenant, so that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance, **since a death has occurred that redeems them from the transgressions committed under the first covenant.**

Hebrews 10:3-4 — But in these sacrifices there is a reminder of sins every year. For **it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins.**

And so, yes, those transgressions committed under the first covenant were forgiven — but they were not forgiven by the blood of bulls and goats. Instead, people were redeemed from those transgressions committed under the first covenant by the blood of Christ. We just read that from Hebrews.

And so, when the Old Testament uses the word “forgiveness,” it must have that two-step process in mind — one step that occurred prior to the cross, and a second step that occurred at the time of the cross.

And the crucial thing for us to see here in verse 25 is that Paul uses a very precise and unusual word that applies only to the first of those two steps — those former sins were allowed to go unpunished. That is what Paul tells us here in verse 25.

And why did God do that? Why did God allow those former sins to go unpunished? God did that because he knew that Christ was coming to this world to die for those faithful people of God whose sins were going unpunished under the first covenant.

As we often say, the blood of Christ on the cross flowed forwards and backwards in time. And we say that because that is what Hebrews 9 tells us — “a death has occurred that redeems them from the transgressions committed under the first covenant.”

And so there was not a different path to forgiveness under the first covenant. There is no path to forgiveness apart from Christ — and that was as true under the old covenant as it is under the new covenant.

God’s faithful people under the old covenant were saved by the blood of Christ just as we are today saved by the blood of Christ under the new covenant. “No one comes to the Father except through me.” Jesus said that to people under the old covenant, and it is true for all people at all times under either covenant. Jesus is the only path to the Father, there is no other path, and there has never been any other path for sinners to be welcomed into the presence of God the Father.

Paul will soon explain this using Abraham as an example, but we can also see that same example in another of Paul’s letters.

Galatians 3:8 — And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, **preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham**, saying, “In you shall all the nations be blessed.”

What that verse tells us is that God proclaimed the gospel of Christ to Abraham in Genesis 22:18. Abraham was saved by the blood of Christ just as surely as we are saved by the blood of Christ today. It is only by the perfect sacrifice of Christ that anyone at any time is saved from their sin. Abraham needed to hear the good news just as surely as we need to hear the good news, and Galatians 3:8 tells us that Abraham heard that good news.

So, with all of that in mind, let’s reread the end of verse 25: “This was to show God’s righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins.”

Paul says that this (the death of Christ) was to show God’s righteousness. Why? Because God had previously allowed sins to go unpunished — and the death of Christ explains why God did that. God did that because God was planning to forgive those sins when Christ died and shed his blood on that cross. But absent that death, there would have been no reason to allow those sins to go unpunished.

And, in fact, absent that death, some could have argued that God was unrighteous for allowing those former sins to go unpunished. But the death of Christ put an end to that objection — the death of Christ showed the righteousness of God in allowing those former sins to go unpunished.

But when and how did God allow those sins to go unpunished? I think we will find some help with that question in the next verse.