

THE HEART OF THE LETTER
AN EXEGESIS OF ROMANS 3:21-26

Carla L. Jones

NT6206 Romans

July 20, 2025

Student: Carla Jones

Course: NT6206 | Romans

Paper Title: The Heart of the Letter | An Exegesis of Romans 3:21-26

Thesis Statement: *Consequently, the Apostle Paul successfully defends the faith against his critics in the heart of his Epistle to the Romans by carefully decrypting a divinely-inspired revelation of righteousness, faith, shortcoming, justification, atonement and demonstration.*

Outline

I. INTRODUCTION

II. CONTEXT

A. AUTHORSHIP, DATE, PROVENANCE & DESTINATION

B. HISTORICAL-CULTURAL CONTEXT

C. LITERARY CONTEXT

III. CONTENT

A. REVELATION THROUGH RIGHTEOUSNESS | Romans 3:21

B. REVELATION THROUGH FAITH | Romans 3:22

C. REVELATION THROUGH SHORTCOMING | Romans 3:23

D. REVELATION THROUGH JUSTIFICATION | Romans 3:24

E. REVELATION THROUGH ATONEMENT | Romans 3:25

F. REVELATION THROUGH DEMONSTRATION | Romans 3:26

IV. CONCLUSION

V. BIBLIOGRAPHY

INTRODUCTION

There is little left to be criticized of the one who is challenged by his or her critics and successfully becomes the victor after fearlessly contending and defending their cause for the faith and the gospel of Jesus Christ. Though there were many contenders for the faith in times past, no contender compares to the apostolical and ecclesiastical giant in that of the Apostle Paul. Remembered for his epistles, and warm handwritten penned letters to his friends, the Apostle Paul's voice has been heard throughout the ages as he endeavored to carry the power of the gospel of Jesus Christ throughout all nations.

Often met with controversy, dispute, contention and criticism, the Apostle Paul remained steadfast as he earnestly strove to teach, preach and proclaim the good news of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Taunted and challenged by Jews who deemed themselves righteous under the elements of the law, the Apostle Paul worked tirelessly to restore truth and divine revelation as it pertained to the understanding of righteousness. Working relentlessly to remind the Jew and the Gentile that the law was abolished when Christ died and rose again, the Apostle Paul exudes patience as he pens the heart of the letter to the Romans through doctrinal education and revelation.

Refusing to allow any to perish, the Apostle Paul dedicates his life to the challenge of reminding the self-righteous that there is no deed done under the auspice of the law that will or can make anyone righteous. Furthermore, in Romans 3:21-26 the Apostle Paul indicates that it is only because of Christ that justification and righteousness can be obtained. ***Consequently, the Apostle Paul successfully defends the faith against his critics in the heart of his Epistle to the Romans by carefully decrypting a divinely-inspired revelation of righteousness, faith, shortcoming, justification, atonement and demonstration.***

CONTEXT | AUTHORSHIP, DATE, PROVENANCE & DESTINATION

Before developing the requested exegesis of the Romans 3:21-26 passage of biblical text, it is imperative that a thorough survey of the Epistle of Romans be taken so as to develop a firm establishment of its historical background for a clear understanding. Perhaps there is no better way to begin the survey than to begin with the discussion of the supposed author of the text. While few dispute the authorship of the book of Romans, in times past authorship has been a contentious topic amongst theologians. According to Köstenberger, Kellum and Quarles in *The Cradle, the Cross and the Crown*, “in the late nineteenth century, some scholars disputed Paul’s authorship, but the large majority of scholars deemed their arguments unconvincing.”¹ Furthermore, the internal evidence of the Epistle to the Romans presents a strong argument that the Apostle Paul is indeed the author, thus leaving no doubts that he personally penned the letter.

Just as equally important as the designated authorship is the date and the provenance of which this letter was written. Through careful surveying of the entire letter of Romans it is found that the Apostle Paul was most likely located in Corinth. Once again, according to Köstenberger, Kellum and Quarles in *The Cradle, the Cross and the Crown*, “[the Apostle Paul] likely stayed in Corinth during most of this period during which he wrote the letter to the Romans [in the winter of AD 54–55].”² However, while this date AD 54-55 date range may be an assumption, Garland concedes that “the proposals for when Paul wrote Romans vary [and that] dates are difficult to pin down precisely.”³ Furthermore, few questions are left to prevail about the letter’s destination

¹Andreas J. Köstenberger, L. Scott Kellum, and Charles L. Quarles. *The Cradle, the Cross, and the Crown : An Introduction to the New Testament*. Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2016. Pg. 498. <https://research.ebsco.com/linkprocessor/plink?id=d0666945-f97c-3772-b794-368e8af72b74>.

²Andreas J. Köstenberger, L. Scott Kellum, and Charles L. Quarles. *The Cradle, the Cross, and the Crown : An Introduction to the New Testament*. Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2016. Pg. 498. <https://research.ebsco.com/linkprocessor/plink?id=d0666945-f97c-3772-b794-368e8af72b74>.

³David E. Garland, and Nicholas Perrin. *Romans : An Introduction and Commentary*. Westmont: IVP Academic, 2021. Pg. 30. <https://research.ebsco.com/linkprocessor/plink?id=dea07917-e6ee-329e-b318-146687660769>.

in the Apostle Paul's epistle to the Romans as the title of his letter leaves little to the imagination. Internal evidence provides keen insight as to who the Apostle Paul was writing to and where his letter was being directed. Further, Köstenberger, Kellum and Quarles support this notion in *The Cradle, the Cross and the Crown* by stating, "the address of the letter in Romans 1:7, "To all who are in Rome, loved by God, called as saints," and in Romans 1:15, "who are in Rome," clearly identifies the addressees as believers living in Rome."⁴

CONTEXT | HISTORICAL-CULTURAL CONTEXT

When understanding the problem at hand in the historical-cultural context, it is important to first visit the Jewish-Christian culture and their beliefs that they are God's chosen people, pardoned from the necessity to believe in Jesus for freedom from sin due to their cultural relationship to Israel. According to Longenecker, "Paul speaks in a distinctly Jewish Christian manner, for his addressees at Rome had evidently been extensively influenced by the theology, ways of thinking, and religious language of the mother church at Jerusalem."⁵ The inability of Jewish-Christians to understand that they are not dismissed from the wrath of God places them in danger of consequences that allude to an eternal spiritual death. Further, the inability of the Jewish-Christian culture to understand that the wrath of God is not just for some, but all who reject Jesus as Lord and Savior. There is no absolute escape or exception to this consequence. According to Donald Carson, "[the problem which requires resolution herein lies in] the wrath of God, directed against every human being, Jew and Gentile alike—a wrath elicited by universal

⁴Andreas J. Köstenberger, L. Scott Kellum, and Charles L. Quarles. *The Cradle, the Cross, and the Crown : An Introduction to the New Testament*. Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2016. Pg. 499.
<https://research.ebsco.com/linkprocessor/plink?id=d0666945-f97c-3772-b794-368e8af72b74>.

⁵ Richard N. Longenecker. *The Epistle to the Romans*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2016. Pg. 296.
<https://research.ebsco.com/linkprocessor/plink?id=75dd6bfd-debf-38f9-9d59-57be923ae6c6>.

human wickedness.”⁶ This, is both the problem set and foundation of the historicity of cultural context found in this passage of text. Romans 3:23 states, “*For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.*” However, Jewish-Christians believed that because they are God’s chosen people who obey the law, they do not need anything or anyone else to be considered righteous, thus causing them to believe that it is inherently impossible to fall short of God’s glory being that they are set apart by God. Therefore, it is beliefs such as these that formed the basis for the Apostle Paul’s Epistle to the Romans.

LITERARY CONTEXT

Through the literary context of a penned letter, The Apostle Paul’s defense and apologetics for the Christian faith, salvation and the imputation of righteousness lasted throughout ages. To reach even the commoner, the Apostle Paul carefully penned his letters with compassion to ensure that his letter was not only legible, but also read with clear understanding. According to Keener, “Romans is no ordinary letter; it is a sophisticated argument.”⁷ It is clear that the Apostle Paul utilizes his pen to defend the salvation of the gospel while pointing back to Jesus Christ as the focal point and conduit of righteousness, justification, liberty and grace. With further proof that the Epistle to the Romans is not a conventional letter, Keener suggests that “the extant letters attributed to Paul average 2495 words, while Romans, his longest, has 7114 words.”⁸ It is clear that the Epistle to the Romans is perhaps one of Paul’s most powerful and

⁶ Donald A. Carson. “Why Trust a Cross?: Reflections on Romans 3:21-26.” *Evangelical Review of Theology* 28, no. 4 (January 1, 2004): 346. <https://research.ebsco.com/linkprocessor/plink?id=8ef0cd09-2a4d-3918-b967-4bdd51495c16>.

⁷ Craig S. Keener. *Romans : A New Covenant Commentary*. Cambridge: The Lutterworth Press, 2009. Pg. 1. <https://research.ebsco.com/linkprocessor/plink?id=5e76d8c2-39b5-3a79-a4c4-491cfe76a117>.

⁸ Craig S. Keener. *Romans : A New Covenant Commentary*. Cambridge: The Lutterworth Press, 2009. Pg. 1. <https://research.ebsco.com/linkprocessor/plink?id=5e76d8c2-39b5-3a79-a4c4-491cfe76a117>.

memorable letters as he penned what would inevitably become heartbeat of the gospel of Jesus Christ amongst their grandiloquence in Romans 3:21-26.

CONTENT | REVELATION THROUGH RIGHTEOUSNESS | Romans 3:21

Romans 3:21 can almost be considered the turning point for Romans. According to Moo, “We must consider 1:18–3:20 as a preparation for, rather than as part of, Paul’s exposition of the gospel of God’s righteousness.”⁹ Up until Romans 3:21, the focus was on the law. The focus was on the Jews and their belief that they were simply above any consequences of the wrath of God due to their connection to Israel as a nation. After all, Jewish-Christians believed that because they were Jewish, the salvation of the gospel of Jesus Christ did not apply to them.

According to Keener, “what is striking about Paul is the conclusion he draws: those who sin are lost, even if they belong to the chosen people.”¹⁰ Further, the Apostle Paul reminds everyone that there is no distinction between those who sin. Those who sin are all in desperate need of Jesus Christ no matter what their background or nationality may be. Refusing to depart from this vein, the Apostle Paul remains steadfast as his letter continues to persuade the lost in Romans 3:21. Additionally, the Apostle Paul maintains that the righteousness of God is not given as a result of nationality and culture, but it is more so an attribute of God, a gift that is perhaps given and imputed through unmerited favor, grace and faith in Jesus Christ. To further prove this point,

⁹ Douglas J. Moo. *The Letter to the Romans*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2018. Pg. 162.
<https://research.ebsco.com/linkprocessor/plink?id=9c70f615-845e-32c6-afab-e39ac63403a8>.

¹⁰ Craig S. Keener. *Romans : A New Covenant Commentary*. Cambridge: The Lutterworth Press, 2009. Pg. 53-54.
<https://research.ebsco.com/linkprocessor/plink?id=5e76d8c2-39b5-3a79-a4c4-491cfe76a117>.

Thomas Schreiner states, “when Paul uses the word “righteousness” and “righteousness of God” in theologically weighty texts he refers to the gift of God granted to believers.”¹¹

With further promotion of the truth of the gospel, the Apostle Paul moves forward with his argument in Romans 3:21 by stating, “*but now apart from the law the righteousness of God has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify.*” It is here that the Apostle Paul provides revelation about the righteousness of God standing on its own apart from the law, thus pertaining to the imputation of righteousness through God alone in the abolition and absence of the law as a result of the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus Christ. This, even testified by the Law and the Prophets per Romans 3:21, is a reminder that knowledge of the coming of Christ was foreknew and already known and prophesied, thus further justifying the righteousness of God.

CONTENT | REVELATION THROUGH FAITH | Romans 3:22

The Apostle Paul continues the conversation about the righteousness of God in Romans 3:22 by stating, “This righteousness is given through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference between Jew and Gentile.” By stating this, the Apostle Paul provides the revelation that righteousness is not imputed or given to those who do or follow the law, but it is given through faith in Jesus. The Apostle Paul further supports his claim that there is no difference between the Jew or the Gentile or anyone who believes that is found to have fallen short of God’s glory. The Apostle Paul stands firm on the fact that the righteousness is a gift from God to all who believe and that it does not belong only to those who follow the law. Further

¹¹ Thomas R. Schreiner. “Another Look at the New Perspective.” *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 14, no. 3 (Fall 2010): Pg. 6.

supporting this notion, Keener states “humanity has sinned and merited judgment, but God remains faithful and righteous, so that people can also be set right with Him through faith.”¹²

CONTENT | REVELATION THROUGH SHORTCOMING | Romans 3:23

According to Moo, “Paul indicts all humans: all are under sin’s power to such a degree that only God’s power, unleashed in the good news of Jesus Christ, can rescue them.”¹³ The Apostle Paul continues to prove validation of the fact that no one is to be counted righteous or worthy through his declaration in Romans 3:23 in which he stated, “*all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.*” The Apostle Paul’s continuous efforts to remind the body of believers that they do and will continue to fall short of the glory of God remain in the focal point of his letter. Not wishing any to perish, the Apostle Paul continues to preach justification through faith in Jesus Christ alone and thus reminding believers as so eloquently stated by Kruse, “that apart from the gospel all humanity is under the power of sin and exposed to the wrath of God.”¹⁴ The understanding that there is no one righteous is a pivotal point in this passage and of note, the most important point. It is the Apostle Paul’s desire that an argument be made for the sinfulness of humanity in the absence of the gospel and salvation of Jesus Christ.

CONTENT | REVELATION THROUGH JUSTIFICATION | Romans 3:24

Therefore, if none are righteous and continuously fall short of God’s glory, then there is no doubt that justification is not warranted to anyone. Justification therefore must then be a gift

¹² Craig S. Keener. *Romans : A New Covenant Commentary*. Cambridge: The Lutterworth Press, 2009. Pg. 56. <https://research.ebsco.com/linkprocessor/plink?id=5e76d8c2-39b5-3a79-a4c4-491cfe76a117>.

¹³ Douglas J. Moo. *The Letter to the Romans*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2018. Pg. 162. <https://research.ebsco.com/linkprocessor/plink?id=9c70f615-845e-32c6-afab-e39ac63403a8>.

¹⁴ Colin G. Kruse. *Paul’s Letter to the Romans*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2012. Pg. 82. <https://research.ebsco.com/linkprocessor/plink?id=be87ab4a-c2d5-3d37-a7ad-71bb4d49fa04>.

given freely to all if it cannot be obtained by works or through merit. Justification is unmerited and truly designated as favor by God given to all who believe through faith in Jesus Christ.

Romans 3:24 states, “*and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.*” Furthermore, the Apostle Paul provides revelation through justification through the indication that it is indeed the redemption of Jesus that freely justifies all and not the works of anyone, be it Jew or Gentile. As Grant Osborne so eloquently states, “salvation is given to everyone who believes, that is each one who comes to God in faith and accepts His offer of salvation.”¹⁵

CONTENT | REVELATION THROUGH ATONEMENT | Romans 3:25

Additionally, if justification is to be reached through faith in Jesus Christ, then it is only received through the work of the cross, Jesus’ atonement for sin through his death, burial and resurrection. The Apostle Paul references this atonement in Romans 3:25 by stating, “*God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement, through the shedding of his blood—to be received by faith. He did this to demonstrate his righteousness, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished.*” Furthermore, the atonement referenced by the Apostle Paul is the death and resurrection of Christ. God sent His son as a sacrifice as an atonement for the propitiation of our sins. 1 John 2:2 states, “*He is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world.*” For it is Jesus’ death in place of the sinner that reconciled the sinner with God through the sacrifice of the atonement. Robert Mounce

¹⁵ Grant R. Osborne. *Romans*. Vol. 00006. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2004. Pg. 40.
<https://research.ebsco.com/linkprocessor/plink?id=664d5c9e-a8b6-3b42-8371-b689523cbc46>.

further explains this atonement in detail in *Romans: An Exegetical and Theological Exposition of Holy Scripture in the New American Commentary* vol 27:

“The term hilastrion (translated “sacrifice of atonement”) has been understood either in the sense of “propitiation” (in which the righteous anger of God is satisfied) or “expiation” (a covering of the sins of humans). In the Greek Old Testament it translates a Hebrew term for the lid of the ark (the mercy seat). In Jewish practice the high priest entered the holy of holies once a year and sprinkled blood above the ark for the atonement of Israel's sins. Paul was saying that Jesus is that “mercy seat”—that meeting place between God and humans where the great and final sacrifice has been made.”¹⁶

CONTENT | REVELATION THROUGH DEMONSTRATION | Romans 3:26

According to the Apostle Paul, Romans 3:26 states God’s reasoning for the atonement and sacrifice of His Son Jesus Christ by stating, “*he did it to demonstrate his righteousness at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus.*” Therefore, the Apostle Paul maintains that the righteousness of God is an attribute of God imputed to humanity as a result of their faith in Jesus Christ. The righteousness of God is yet but a demonstration of His justification to all those who choose to believe.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the Apostle Paul’s argument maintains that justification and righteousness are hereby given through faith in Christ alone and not through works or simply by belonging to the Jewish community or nation. As Mounce so eloquently states, this was “a decisive blow against the cherished idea that God’s blessings came automatically to the Jew.”¹⁷ The Apostle Paul maintains that there is no one righteous, neither Jew or Gentile, nor is there any deed

¹⁶ Robert Mounce. *Romans : An Exegetical and Theological Exposition of Holy Scripture*. Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 1995. Pg. 33-36. Accessed July 21, 2025. ProQuest Ebook Central.

¹⁷ Robert Mounce. *Romans : An Exegetical and Theological Exposition of Holy Scripture*. Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 1995. Pg. 36-39. Accessed July 21, 2025. ProQuest Ebook Central.

righteous enough to excuse someone of the need for salvation. The fallen nature and depravity of humanity makes it void of anything good or righteous, therefore leaving it in a sinful state relying upon the desperate need of the saving power of Jesus Christ. It is perhaps these revelations about the Doctrine of God through His attributes and Christology through the life, death and burial of Jesus Christ that deliver the theological message of salvation. In the absence of Jesus Christ is the absence of salvation. In the absence of righteousness, evil and every wicked work lurks in the darkness of unrighteousness. In the absence of the saving power of the atonement and sacrifice of Jesus Christ, is the absence of the gift of justification. For without the atonement, not one can be deemed righteous in word or deed. Furthermore, in Romans 3:21-26 the Apostle Paul indicates that it is only because of Christ that justification and righteousness can be obtained. *Consequently, the Apostle Paul successfully defends the faith against his critics in the heart of his Epistle to the Romans by carefully decrypting a divinely-inspired revelation of righteousness, faith, shortcoming, justification, atonement and demonstration.*

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Andreas J. Köstenberger, L. Scott Kellum, and Charles L. Quarles. *The Cradle, the Cross, and the Crown : An Introduction to the New Testament*. Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2016. Pg. 498. <https://research.ebsco.com/linkprocessor/plink?id=d0666945-f97c-3772-b794-368e8af72b74>.

Andreas J. Köstenberger, L. Scott Kellum, and Charles L. Quarles. *The Cradle, the Cross, and the Crown : An Introduction to the New Testament*. Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2016. Pg. 499. <https://research.ebsco.com/linkprocessor/plink?id=d0666945-f97c-3772-b794-368e8af72b74>.

Colin G. Kruse. *Paul's Letter to the Romans*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2012. Pg. 82. <https://research.ebsco.com/linkprocessor/plink?id=be87ab4a-c2d5-3d37-a7ad-71bb4d49fa04>.

Craig S. Keener. *Romans : A New Covenant Commentary*. Cambridge: The Lutterworth Press, 2009. Pg. 1. <https://research.ebsco.com/linkprocessor/plink?id=5e76d8c2-39b5-3a79-a4c4-491cfe76a117>.

Craig S. Keener. *Romans : A New Covenant Commentary*. Cambridge: The Lutterworth Press, 2009. Pg. 53-54. <https://research.ebsco.com/linkprocessor/plink?id=5e76d8c2-39b5-3a79-a4c4-491cfe76a117>.

David E. Garland, and Nicholas Perrin. *Romans : An Introduction and Commentary*. Westmont: IVP Academic, 2021. Pg. 30. <https://research.ebsco.com/linkprocessor/plink?id=dea07917-e6ee-329e-b318-146687660769>.

Donald A. Carson. "Why Trust a Cross?: Reflections on Romans 3:21-26." *Evangelical Review of Theology* 28, no. 4 (January 1, 2004): 346. <https://research.ebsco.com/linkprocessor/plink?id=8ef0cd09-2a4d-3918-b967-4bdd51495c16>.

Douglas J. Moo. *The Letter to the Romans*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2018. Pg. 162. <https://research.ebsco.com/linkprocessor/plink?id=9c70f615-845e-32c6-afab-e39ac63403a8>.

Grant R. Osborne. *Romans*. Vol. 00006. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2004. Pg. 40. <https://research.ebsco.com/linkprocessor/plink?id=664d5c9e-a8b6-3b42-8371-b689523cbc46>.

Richard N. Longenecker. *The Epistle to the Romans*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2016. Pg. 296. <https://research.ebsco.com/linkprocessor/plink?id=75dd6bfd-debf-38f9-9d59-57be923ae6c6>.

Robert Mounce. *Romans : An Exegetical and Theological Exposition of Holy Scripture*. Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 1995. Pg. 33-36. Accessed July 21, 2025. ProQuest Ebook Central.

Robert Mounce. *Romans : An Exegetical and Theological Exposition of Holy Scripture*. Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 1995. Pg. 36-39. Accessed July 21, 2025. ProQuest Ebook Central.

Thomas R. Schreiner. "Another Look at the New Perspective." *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 14, no. 3 (Fall 2010): Pg. 6.