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THE CONCEPT OF PROPITIATION IN OUR UNDERSTANDING OF THE DEATH OF CHRIST

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ABSTRACT: The English word “propitiation” (Greek *hilastērion*) is not in common theological use today. Modern theology has generally become uneasy with it. The aversion to it is because the idea is associated with the sense of appeasing an angry deity brought in from pagan use and practice. This has resulted in the removal of the traditional translation “propitiation” with many modern English Bible translations preferring “expiation,” or “atoning sacrifice,” or some other general phrase. Thus, for example, while the New King James Version of Romans 3:25 is translated, “whom God set forth as a propitiation,” and the English Standard Version, “whom God put forward as a propitiation,” other modern translations are different. The New International Version is rather, “sacrifice of atonement;” Revised Standard Version has “an expiation by his blood;” Common English Bible, “place of sacrifice;” The Bible in Basic English, “the sign of his mercy.” This article insists that we must not just reject the use of the word propitiation simply because it was wrongly understood in pagan quarters. It conveys something vital when we come to consider what God has done for us in Christ. Until recently, many understood by this word that the death of Christ has effected the removal of the wrath of God and made us the recipients of his mercy. The cross brought satisfaction to violated justice.

KEY WORDS: Propitiation, expiation, wrath of God, love of God, penal substitution.

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As far as the blessings that His death has brought to us, it is clear that the work of Christ for sinful man is so great that all the benefits of Christ's death cannot be conveyed in one single word or phrase. It takes many precious terms in order to fully present what the Lord has done for us. So, we have: Redemption, Propitiation, Remission, Reconciliation, Justification, Adoption and Sanctification. All these words convey something of the infinite value of Jesus' sacrifice. We need now to focus upon Propitiation. Consider:

The Word.

Note the use of the word "propitiation" in the ESV² in Romans 3:25, "Whom God put forward as a propitiation (*hilastērion*) by his blood" and in 1 John 2:2, "He is the propitiation for our sins," using *hilasmos*; 1 John 4:10, "He (God) sent his Son to be the propitiation (*hilasmon*) for our sins"; again in Hebrews 2:17 concerning our High Priest, He had to be "made like his brothers ... to make propitiation (*hilaskesthai*) for the sins of the people."³

As we noted in the Abstract, the word propitiation is not in common theological use today, with other translations preferred. This unease is because its pagan use, i.e., the idea of appeasing an angry deity. But should we reject the whole idea of propitiation because of how it is understood outside of Christianity? It conveys something vital when we come to consider what God has done for us in Christ. Here we consider how the death of Christ has removed the wrath of God, bringing us rather, into peace with God, (Romans 5:1).

As far as modern theology's unhappiness with this traditional interpretation, part of this problem can be traced back to the classic statement

² All quotations in this article will be from the ESV, except where specified.

³ We also should note the related or cognate words in Luke 18:13, where the tax collector can cry to God for mercy with the words "be merciful" or "be propitiated, because of the sacrifice, to me a sinner," using *hilasthēti*; in Hebrews 8:12 God promises in the new covenant to be "merciful" *hileōs* toward their iniquities.

that is found in C.H. Dodd, *The Bible and the Greeks* (1935). Here the Hebrew terminology for atonement and the Greek equivalent in the LXX are analysed. He argued that practically no trace of the idea propitiation or appeasement attaches to *hilastērion* and the related words as used in the LXX.

Dodd⁴ pointed out that usually God is not the object of the verbs that describe the act of atonement. Linguistically it is not God who is appeased nor his wrath assuaged but sin is atoned for. Of Romans 3:25 he concluded, “the meaning conveyed (in accordance with the LXX usage which is constantly determinative for Paul) is that of expiation, not that of propitiation.” Dodd’s view was widely accepted at the time, reflected in the fact that the Revised Standard Version preferred to translate *hilastērion* as expiation rather than propitiation.

More recently Morris⁵ has shown that in many, if not all, of the passages in which *hilastērion* or related words occur in the LXX the idea of God’s wrath is present. Dodd in fact failed to pay sufficient attention to the context in which the words occurred. Morris acknowledged that it may well be that on occasions, the best word with which to render *hilastērion* is “forgive” or “purge” but that the particular forgiveness as a necessary feature involves the putting away of the divine wrath. Therefore, it is idle to maintain that the word should be excised of all idea of propitiation. We might also add Ladd’s⁶ comment, “If the verb in the Septuagint is infrequently used with God as its object, it is equally true that the verb is never followed by an accusative of sin in the canonical scriptures of the Old Testament.”

Considering Paul’s statement in Romans 3:25 about propitiation, we can maintain that the idea of God’s wrath is clearly prominent in the

4 C.H. Dodd, *The Bible and the Greeks*, (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1935), 94.

5 L. Morris, *The Apostolic Preaching of the Cross*, (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1965), Ch. v and vi; see particularly p.155ff.

6 G.E. Ladd, *Theology of the New Testament*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans, 1974), 430.

preceding section, Romans 1:18; 2:5-8; 3:5. The main thrust of Paul's argument in 1:18-3:20 is to demonstrate the universality of sinfulness and guilt before God and therefore men and women are presented as deserving objects of God's holy wrath. As Morris⁷ has claimed regarding the word propitiation, "Unless the present term means removal of wrath, he (Paul) has left them there, still under God's wrath." As Morris⁸ also earlier stated, "There is a divine wrath against every form of sin (cf. Romans 1:18), and forgiveness does not mean ignoring this wrath." So, however we look at Christ's saving work, we must not leave out seeing it as involving propitiation. It is true that the term is not a well-known or often used word today and therefore translators like to employ something better known. But we must not lose sight of what Paul wanted to convey by the term. However we translate, it is most important that we bring out the thought that what God did in Christ averted the divine wrath from sinners.⁹

The Greek word used in Romans 3:25, *hilastērion*, is used of the mercy seat in twenty-one instances of its twenty-seven occurrences in the LXX and in its only other occurrence in the New Testament, Hebrews 9:5. Some want it to be interpreted here in Romans in a similar way. But the definite article is not here and so Cranfield¹⁰ prefers to translate the word as "propitiatory sacrifice." The idea of propitiation must be expressed. The word is important.

7 L. Morris, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co. 1988), 180.

8 L. Morris, "1 John" in *The New Bible Commentary; Revised*, Eds. D Guthrie, J. A. Motyer, (Leicester, Inter-Varsity Press, 1970), 1263.

9 In the Old Testament God's wrath against sin is referred to 585 times. God's wrath is also a very important reality in the New Testament e.g., John 3:36; Romans 1:18; 9:22; Ephesians 2:3; 5:6; Colossians 3:6-7.

10 C.E.B. Cranfield, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* Vol 1, (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1975), 215. Note his discussion of *hilastērion* in 214-18.

The source

Unlike all human wrath, God's wrath is perfectly righteous and therefore free from every trace of irrationality or vindictiveness. A second fact to remember is that in the process of averting His righteous wrath from man, *God Himself* is the one who takes the initiative. As we will shortly see, when we as sinners could do nothing to commend ourselves to God, but remained under His wrath, Paul explains in Romans 3:25 that He Himself sent His Son; He was "put forward as a propitiation."

Many scholars have difficulty with the idea of God propitiating Himself. Morris¹¹ admits the difficulty and acknowledges that there is certainly a paradox here; but it does account for the facts. God's wrath is directed towards sinners and the removal of that wrath is due to God Himself. The idea of man placating an angry deity is not how the cross should be viewed, since in this case God Himself provided the propitiation. Again, propitiation did not persuade God to start loving us. Rather, we can say that God in love has provided the propitiation.

Consider 1 John 4:8-10. Here we read "God is love." John does not write here, "God loves..." but "God is love" i.e., in His essence, in His being. Nor does he say that love is God. Rather, God is revealed in Scripture as a living, personal and active being who expresses Himself in dynamic and practical ways. We see this here. "In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him," (4:9). Stott¹² pointed out, "While the origin of love is in the being of God, the manifestation of love is in the coming of Christ." John writes, "not that we have loved God but that he loved us." He is affirming that from us there was only independence, rebellion, a hostile attitude, while with Him there was love. This love led to Him sending His Son to be "the propitiation for our sins." Stott¹³ observed,

11 Morris, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 180, n.127.

12 J. R. W. Stott, *The Epistles of John: An Introduction and Commentary*, Vol. 19 (Downers Grove, IL.: Inter-Varsity Press; Nottingham: Inter-Varsity Press, 2009), 162.

13 Stott, *The Epistles of John: An Introduction and Commentary*, 163.

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“God loves sinners who are unworthy of his love, and indeed subject to his wrath.” John presents Jesus as the one who took that wrath and paid the price to deliver us. We should note that the fact that God was all-loving, (4:8,10) meant He *provided* the propitiation, while the fact that, as John earlier stated, He was all-holy, (1 John:1:5), necessitated it. Morris¹⁴ comments, “It is one of the NT’s resounding paradoxes that it is God’s love that averts God’s wrath from us, and that indeed it is precisely in the averting of this wrath that we see what real love is.”

It has been suggested that propitiation supposedly represents the Son winning over the incensed Father to clemency and love. Not so. The love of God is the very fount from which this propitiation comes. Propitiation changed a loving God’s treatment of us and relationship to us. The propitiation of the divine wrath is the provision of eternal love.

We recollect in 2 Corinthians 5:19 there is such a unity of purpose that “in Christ God was reconciling the world to Himself.” Moo¹⁵ makes the point concerning the persons of God the Father and God the Son with regard to the process of redemption:

it is a serious error to sever the two with respect to the will for redemption, as if the loving Christ had to take the initiative in placating the angry Father. God’s love and wrath meet in the atonement, and neither can be denied or compromised if the full meaning of that event is to be properly appreciated. Our own justification before God rests on the solid reality that the fulfilling of God’s justice in Christ was at the same time the fulfilling of this love for us.

Fundamentally connected to this concept of propitiation is that of penal substitution, the teaching which reveals that Jesus was punished or penalized in the place of sinners, becoming our substitute, thus satisfying the demands of God’s justice. Or to put it another way, the doctrine of penal substitution states that God gave Himself in the person of His

14 Morris, “1 John” in *The New Bible Commentary Revised*, 1267.

15 D. J. Moo, *The Epistles to the Romans* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co. Cambridge, UK, 1996), 55.

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Son to suffer instead of us the death, punishment and curse due to sinners. But some scholars have gone so far as to characterize penal substitution as some sort of cosmic child abuse, accusing Biblical commentators of producing a caricature of God!¹⁶

Among the many who have questioned this Biblical truth, Joel Green and Mark Baker¹⁷ argue that “any atonement theology that assumes, against Paul, that in the cross God did something ‘to’ Jesus is...an affront to the Christian doctrine of the triune God.” Gary Williams¹⁸ however, can make the point that penal substitution relies on a careful grounding in Augustine’s principle found in *De Trinitate*, I. iv. 7 that since the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are inseparable, so they work inseparably. He reminds us that in the Reformed conception of the covenant of redemption between the Persons of the Trinity they covenanted with each other in eternity to act together in all of their purposes. Williams also explains the argument against penal substitution claiming that there must be a

16 E.g., Steve Chalke and Alan Mann, *The Lost Message of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 192; Brian D. McLaren, *The Story We Find Ourselves In: Further Adventures of a New Kind of Christian* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2003), 102-4; Colin Greene, “Is the Message of the Cross Good News for the Twentieth Century?” in *Atonement Today*, ed. by John Goldingay, (London: SPCK, 1995), 232. From a Feminist perspective, e.g., Joanne Carlson Brown and Rebecca Parker, “For God So Loved the World?” in *Christianity, Patriarchy, and Abuse: A Feminist Critique*, eds. Joanne Carlson Brown and Carole R. Bohn, (New York: Pilgrim, 1989), 26-27. Chalke answers the outcry he created by accusing the penal substitution scholars of holding to some form of cosmic child abuse by replying, “Though the sheer bluntness of my imagery shocked some, I contend that, in truth, it represents nothing more than a stark unmasking of what I understand to be the violent, pre-Christian thinking behind the popular theory of penal substitutionary atonement...I believe it to be biblically, culturally and pastorally deficient and even dangerous,” Chalke, “The Redemption of the Cross,” 34-35.

17 Joel B. Green and Mark D. Baker, *Recovering the Scandal of the Cross*, (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2000), 57.

18 Gary J. Williams “Penal Substitution: A Response to Recent Criticisms, 71-86 in *JETS* 50/1 (March 2007): 77.

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fundamental continuity between the way God acts and the way He commands us to act. He mentions Steve Chalke¹⁹ who claims that this kind of continuity is disrupted by the penal substitutionary atonement because it depicts a God who Himself exacts punishment, yet at the same time commands His people not to do so. This becomes a divine case of “do as I say, not as I do.” But Williams²⁰ makes the point:

that individuals must not take revenge precisely because God is going to do so: “Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God; for it is written, ‘Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord’” (Rom 12:19, quoting Deuteronomy 32:35). From here Paul moves to argue in Rom 13:1–7 that God has given a limited remit to the governing authorities to implement this final justice in the present time by the power of the sword. Thus, Paul denies vengeance in the sphere of relationships between individual people, and at the same time ascribes it to God, who shares it in limited part with the ruling authorities. Where Chalke infers that God would never do what he tells us not to do, Paul argues exactly the opposite. God tells us not to do what he does precisely because he does it.

The problem specifically with these scholars is with the activity of the Father causing the Son to suffer. Williams²¹ affirms that the difficulty here is that there is plain biblical testimony to the Father acting on the Son at the cross, in the suffering of the cross, and specifically in the penal suffering of the cross. Isaiah 53, the suffering of the “Servant of the Lord,” is understood in the New Testament as a description of the suffering of Christ, e.g., 1 Peter 2:21–24. He also quotes the following English texts. Isaiah 53:6 says that “the LORD has laid on Him the iniquity of us all,” and v10 that “it pleased the LORD to bruise Him ...” In Mark 14:27 and Matthew 26:31 Jesus quotes Zechariah 13:7: “All of you will be made to stumble because of Me this night, for it is written, ‘I will strike the Shepherd, And the

19 Steve Chalke, “Cross Purposes,” 44–48, in *Christianity* (September 2004) 47.

20 Williams, “Penal Substitution: A Response to Recent Criticisms,” 73.

21 Williams, “Penal Substitution: A Response to Recent Criticisms,” 78.

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sheep of the flock will be scattered.' But after I have been raised, I will go before you to Galilee." Williams explains, "Interestingly, the Hebrew and the LXX have a second person imperative here, addressed to Yahweh's sword: 'Awake, O sword . . . Strike.' But in the Gospels this is changed to the first person future...(pataxō) thus actually emphasising the personal involvement of Yahweh rather than the more impersonal image of the sword: 'I will strike.'"

Williams²² sees the whole context of the suffering in Isaiah 52–53 as specifically penal. This emerges at the end of chapter 53 with the use of two expressions: "For he shall bear their iniquities," v11, and "yet he bore the sin of many," v12. The verb-noun combinations in these phrases are used widely in the Old Testament to describe bearing sin, guilt, and punishment, e.g., Genesis 4:13; Leviticus 5:17; Numbers 5:31; 14:34; Lamentations 5:7. Here, in Isaiah 53, it is evident from the connection with sin and the suffering of the Servant that they have a penal connotation. Likewise, in the New Testament we read that the Father "condemned sin in the flesh" (Romans 8:3) of His Son. There is therefore biblical testimony to the action of the Father toward the Son, specifically in laying iniquity on Him and condemning it in Him... Ultimately, the logical implication of the denial that one Person of the Trinity can act on another is the denial of the distinction between them, namely modalism.

In this discussion we can also make reference to *Pierced for our Transgressions: Rediscovering the Glory of Penal Substitution* written by Steve Jeffery, Mike Ovey and Andrew Sach, which is an explanation and defense of the doctrine of penal substitution. They refer to John Goldingay, the OT scholar, who denies that the sacrificial system outlined in Leviticus was concerned with averting God's anger with regard to sin; in fact, he surprisingly claims that the question of propitiating God's wrath finds little place in Leviticus itself and the word anger hardly appears. To accept this view is surely to weaken seriously the biblical basis for penal substitution which NT scholars say is fulfilment of these OT sacrifices.

22 Williams, "Penal Substitution: A Response to Recent Criticisms," 79.

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It is true that the language of “atonement,” so prominent throughout Leviticus, *by itself* does not imply the removal of God’s wrath: although the underlying Hebrew verb *kipper* can refer to propitiation, several other meanings such as “forgive” and “cleanse” are possible depending on the context. But as the Banner of Truth article on this theme²³ points out:

Goldingay has missed the point that Leviticus reveals the propitiatory significance of the OT sacrifices not by explaining their significance when they are performed correctly, but by describing what happens when they are misused. In Leviticus 10, Aaron’s sons Nadab and Abihu approached the Lord in an inappropriate way “they offered unauthorised fire before the Lord, contrary to his command. So fire came out from the presence of the Lord and consumed them, and they died before the Lord” (vv. 1-2). A few verses later, it becomes clear that these deaths were a manifestation of God’s wrath, as Moses warns Aaron and his stunned family about their conduct, lest something similar should happen again, “and *the Lord will be angry* with the whole community” (v. 6). The fiery deaths of Nadab and Abihu contrast markedly with the fire that “consumed the burnt offering and the fat portions on the altar” (Leviticus 9:24) during the successful sacrifice recorded a few moments earlier. Significantly, these events are referred to again in Leviticus 16:1, at the beginning of the instructions concerning the Day of Atonement. This deliberate allusion serves to juxtapose the danger of God’s wrath with the prescription for atonement that follows: God’s anger at sin must be overcome in order to draw near to him, and only by performing the sacrifices in the correct manner is this possible. Within this context, the propitiatory overtones of *kipper* (a word found sixteen times in Leviticus 16) are unmistakable.

Richard Mayhue²⁴ outlines also Isaiah 53, as the *textus classicus*, where on no less than nine occasions the declaration of penal substitution appears. He quotes these English translations.

23 See banneroftruth.org “Pierced for our Transgressions” accessed March 2020.

24 Richard Mayhue, “The Scriptural Necessity of Christ’s Penal Substitution,” TMSJ 20/2 (Fall, 2009): 139-148, 144.

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1. v4 – “our griefs He...bore”
2. v4 – “our sorrows He carried”
3. v5 – “He was pierced...for our transgressions”
4. v5 – “He was crushed for our iniquities”
5. v5 – “by His scourging we are healed”
6. v6 – “caused the iniquity of us all to fall on Him”
7. v8 – “He was cut off...for the transgression of my people”
8. v11 – “He will bear their iniquities”
9. v12 – “He Himself bore the sin of many”

Finally, note how William Barrack²⁵ has pointed out the fact that several Old Testament texts and passages reveal penal substitutionary sacrifices:

The first is the Passover of Exodus 12 in which God graciously spared guilty Israelites through the deaths of animals substituted for the firstborn in each household. Another OT text to illustrate penal substitution is Leviticus 16, the institution of the Day of Atonement. The scapegoat symbolized the removal of Israel's sin to allow people to enter the presence of a holy God. The Day of

25 W. D. Barrack, “Penal Substitution in the Old Testament,” TMSJ 20/2 (Fall 2009) 149-169, 149. This particular edition of the Master's Journal has been focused on the same theme of penal substitution. All of the essays were first prepared and delivered as part of the 2009 Faculty Lecture Series in January-February. This first article presents an overview of the subject from the perspective of biblical revelation, lexical evidence, and theological necessity. The second article, “Penal Substitution in the Old Testament,” explores the OT concept of “sacrifice” and interprets Exodus 12 (Passover), Leviticus 16 (Atonement), and Isaiah 53 (Substitutionary Saviour). The third, “Penal Substitution in the New Testament,” carefully examines 1 Pet 1:2, 1:18-19, 2:24, and 3:18. The fourth article, “Penal Substitution in Church History” recounts the overwhelming evidence of belief in penal substitution throughout church history. The final article discusses the implications of penal substitution as a necessary element of true worship. In addition, see D.A. Carson, *Becoming Conversant with the Emergent Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 185-87 for a rebuttal of Chalk's position.

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Atonement expiated the nation's sins, cleansed the sanctuary from sin's pollution, and removed sins from the community. Isaiah 52:13–53:12 is a third text to illustrate penal substitution. The suffering servant of the LORD in this section clearly anticipates the Messiah's coming substitutionary death as penalty for His people's sins. The OT sacrificial system clearly laid the basis for penal substitution in awaiting Israel's coming Messiah.

The means.

As far as propitiation is concerned, we can maintain that Jesus and His cross is at its heart. Focusing upon Romans 3:25–31 we find this fact emphasised:

In v25 Paul writes of Jesus Christ “whom God put forward as a propitiation by His blood through faith ...” But what is the significance of the word meaning “put forward”? It is used in 4 Macc. 8:12 of the display of Syrian instruments of torture, intended to intimidate faithful Jews. Consequently, the idea of a public act should not be ruled out. Christ is presented openly on the cross as the answer to man's sin and to the wrath of God.

Jesus is presented as “a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith.” There should be a substitutional sense understood by this reference to blood; He gives His life for others, (cf. Leviticus 17:11). He is the sacrifice in our place. The reference to faith involves believing that his death was for us and that a response of faith is definitely required. In fact, the whole section affirms it, v26, 27, 28, 30, 31.

The “propitiatory sacrifice” provided “was to show God's righteousness ...” Some suggest that the meaning here will be the same as Romans 1:17, 3:21, i.e., “righteous status.” Paul was speaking about offering the gift to us of God's righteousness. But others as Morris,²⁶ suggest that it is more likely the word suggests “to demonstrate his justice.” This appears in the context to be a better understanding, considering what follows i.e., “because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins,” 3:25b.

26 Morris, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 182.

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Note that “forbearance” has the idea of God patiently holding back his just wrath, which had a familiar use in Judaism.

The reference by Paul to how God passed over the sins that were previously committed, might give the impression that God did not care about sin. But this is not the case. God purposed from eternity that Christ should be the propitiation in order that the reality of God’s righteousness (His justice), which would be called into question by His passing over sins committed up to this time, might be established. The fact was that only the cross could provide the answer for man’s sin, as Paul now affirms. The death of His Son provided by God as the propitiation not only revealed His love, as we noted in 1 John 4:8-10, but demonstrated His righteousness or holiness.

The fact that God could “show his righteousness at the present time ...” repeats the thought of 25b regarding His righteousness and adds “at the present time,” - not just a moment in time, or the passage of time, but a time pregnant with significance i.e. the appointed time, in the purpose of God. This was the time when He might not just show that He is righteous, but in order that He might actually be righteous. The cross was essential to His being righteous. The purpose of Christ being the propitiation was to achieve a divine forgiveness which is worthy of God, consonant with His righteousness, not by condoning evil or implying that it is of little consequence, but by the fact that God’s Son had to bear it, showing at the same time the fullness of God’s hatred of it and its complete forgiveness – “so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus,” (3:26).

So, in v26 God’s righteousness is seen in giving a new standing through the cross to the person²⁷ who has faith in Jesus. He is just, but also acts justly in justifying because the price was paid, the throne of God was satisfied and the sinner can be accepted. Therefore, God is not show-

27 The word is *anthrōpos* literally the “man” which ESV translates the “one” who has faith in Jesus. Here we have Jew or Gentile, without distinction of gender or race as Paul will now explain, (v29-30).

ing mercy at the expense of his righteousness; because Jesus became the “propitiation” it is something God can righteously do!

Paul affirms that all glorying or boasting, i.e., considering that one can establish a claim on God on the ground of one’s works, has been ruled out. This statement about boasting being excluded is a conclusion that must be drawn from what has gone before - through what God has done in Christ. All that needed to be done for a sinner’s deliverance from wrath and acceptance with God, has been done; we must trust Him, not anything we might consider that we could bring to God. Our redemption is by pure grace and mercy, when all we deserved was wrath. Or as Paul says, not through “a law of works” but “by the law of faith,” (3:27). Note that this “law of faith” is focusing upon the principle by which God operates in saving sinners. If it is by faith alone, then we had nothing to do with earning or meriting somehow a position of acceptance with God. It is all on the basis of someone else’s works, Jesus’ work.

The phrase in 3:28 “works of the law” makes the point that no one can boast acceptance through anything they can do. The next verse, v28, is included as a conclusion, in support of v27 and even of v24- 27 as a whole. Three times in the passage Paul underlines that the way of salvation is through faith or trust in Jesus, v22, v25 and v26. As Stephen Lawson²⁸ has pointed out:

There is nothing good in their lives except what God has supplied, and that began with the gift of saving faith. God was at work in their life, imparting to them the faith to believe in Jesus Christ. Even the faith to believe was bestowed by God. It was not that God contributed the grace, and they contributed the faith. Even their ability to believe in Jesus Christ was a gift from God, “not a result of works, so that no one may boast” (Ephesians 2:9).

28 Stephen J. Lawson in <http://www.onepassionministries.org/transcripts/2017/10/19/three-great-implications-romans-327-31> Accessed March 2024.

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Now in v28 he reaches the conclusion - we are justified by faith “alone” and “apart from works of the law.” We should note that the word “alone” was added by Luther in the German translation to bring out the true sense. “Alone” is not in the original text, but the truth of it is obviously clear. Paul continued by saying “apart from works of the law,” making the point that if justification is apart from the works of the law, it must be by faith alone.

This blessing is something which both Jews and Gentiles share. Jews are reminded that their belief in monotheism means that God is not the property of only one people, (3:29-30). Paul affirms that God’s way of delivering men and women from His wrath applies equally to Jew and Gentile. There is only one way of recovery for ruined man, faith in Christ who has redeemed us through the cross. God has a heart for the world; God is not only the God of the Jews, but also the God of Gentiles. Paul in v30 states, “Since there is one God,”²⁹ a God “who will justify the circumcised by faith,” referring to Jews who have been circumcised, then, “the uncircumcised through faith, a reference to non-Jews, which are the Gentiles or the rest of the world, they also are justified by faith alone in Christ alone.

If salvation is through faith, this does not mean that the law has no place. In 3:31 Paul claims that the law is recognized, not overthrown i.e., we “uphold the law.” In Romans 3, “the law” is actually used in four different ways which should be distinguished. In v19, the law refers to the entire Old Testament i.e., “whatever the law says ...” In v21, the reference will be to the first five books of the Old Testament, the Pentateuch, because it is distinguished from the Prophets. Again, we saw that the law in v 27-28 is an operating principle. Finally, law is used to refer to the moral or ethical law, which is summarized in the Ten Commandments. That is how it is used in verses 20, 27, 28, and 31.

29 This is a restatement of Deuteronomy 6:4, “Hear, O Israel! The Lord our God, the LORD is one.” The point Paul is making is that because there is only one God over Jew and Gentile, there is only one way by which this one God is justifying sinners.

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To continue, the *ceremonial* law was fulfilled in the death of Jesus Christ and has passed away, Hebrews 10:1-14 makes clear that we are no longer bringing animal sacrifices to a priest to offer on our behalf on the Day of Atonement. That sacrificial system is over. When Christ had offered “for all time a single sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God.” The *civil* law was uniquely to govern Israel in the Promised Land. But the *moral* or *ethical* law of God is still in effect. This is the law which shows up our sinfulness, as we cannot keep it, and so are under the wrath of God, (Romans 3:19-20). Although condemned by the law, God’s Son took our accountability and paid our debt. Therefore here, when Paul says, “we uphold the law,” he is referring to the moral law. Its claims against us were upheld and met by Christ’s death for us as the propitiation. Therefore, for believing sinners there is “no condemnation,” (Romans 8:1).

To conclude, one way of looking at Christ’s saving work is to see it as propitiation. The wrath of God which was justly against us is removed; this is through His blood and as we saw, by faith in Jesus alone. It is true that the term propitiation is not a well-known or often used word today and therefore translators like to employ something better known. But we must not lose sight of what Paul wanted to convey by the term. However we translate it is most important that we bring out the thought that what God did in Christ averted the divine wrath from sinners.

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