

A Sermon on The Death of Christ
Reverend Max Osborne
October 19, 2011

Romans 3:23-26

New International Version (NIV)

23 for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, **24** and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. **25** God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement,[a] 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— **26** 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.

Romans 3:23-26

The Message (MSG)

God Has Set Things Right

21-24But in our time something new has been added. What Moses and the prophets witnessed to all those years has happened. The God-setting-things-right that we read about has become Jesus-setting-things-right for us. And not only for us, but for everyone who believes in him. For there is no difference between us and them in this. Since we've compiled this long and sorry record as sinners (both us and them) and proved that we are utterly incapable of living the glorious lives God wills for us, God did it for us. Out of sheer generosity he put us in right standing with himself. A pure gift. He got us out of the mess we're in and restored us to where he always wanted us to be. And he did it by means of Jesus Christ.

25-26God sacrificed Jesus on the altar of the world to clear that world of sin. Having faith in him sets us in the clear. God decided on this course of action in full view of the public—to set the world in the clear with himself through the sacrifice of Jesus, finally taking care of the sins he had so patiently endured. This is not only clear, but it's now—this is current history! God sets things right. He also makes it possible for us to live in his rightness.

Romans 3:23-26

Revised English Bible

For all alike have sinned, and are deprived of the divine glory; and all are justified by God's free grace alone, through his act of liberation in the person of Christ Jesus. For God designed him to be the means of expiating sin by his death, effective through faith. God meant by this to demonstrate his justice, because in his forbearance he had over looked the sins of the past- to demonstrate his justice now in the present, showing that he is himself just and also justifies anyone who puts his faith in Jesus.

Within the body of Christ there are certain truths that are for most Christians non negotiable. Things we believe that form the foundation of what it means to be a believer and follower of Christ. It is for every Christian undeniably true that Christ was born of Mary, lived a pure and sinless life; walked among us as very God incarnate; was crucified, died and risen; and has promised us that He will come again. Those statements we own for ourselves as baptized believers and full members of his kingdom. We are called and commissioned to take his gospel and declare salvation in Christ alone to all the world! There is no other name by which any man can be saved. But, there are differing views as to the way people understand the nature of Jesus' dying on the Cross. Theologians, preachers and Christians of all ages and wisdom have taken their own position on this.

Those who declare themselves as Evangelical and see their calling in Christ first and foremost to win sinners back to God, have through history, largely chosen to preach upon the cause and consequences of sin, so that on hearing the good news of Christ and his call to repentance; sinners will turn from their evil ways and follow Him.

The great Evangelical preachers of old adopted a certain way of doing that. Let me quote for you, from a sermon by the revivalist Jonathan Edwards in 1741

"The God that holds you over the pit of hell, much as one holds a loathsome insect over the fire, abhors you and is dreadfully provoked; his wrath towards you burns like fire; he looks upon you as worthy of nothing else, but to be cast into the fire; his eyes are so pure, he cannot bear to have you in his sight, you are ten thousand times more an abomination than the most hateful venomous serpent is in ours...and yet, his hand that holds you from falling into the fire holds you up even now...he is the reason why you do not at this very moment drop into hell!"

There were many such preachers and many like sermons declaring the wrath of God upon the poor sinner and on hearing this message many thousands were won for Christ and churches were established upon godly living and the fear of the consequences of sin. Other preachers chose to emphasize less the wrath of God and to speak and teach more of his grace and love, generously poured out through the willing death of The Son who came to bring healing to a broken world. They would not deny God's anger toward sin but their first conversation was to engage sinners with grace and would not describe Jesus' atoning sacrifice as Christ being punished in our place.

Those who study the history of world mission will notice both protestant and catholic communities built on God's sober and sovereign rule where preaching salvation may have been enforced by a rigorous self-discipline and the beating of children and slaves. But there were other communities that established themselves simply to be a presence in a certain place and to model Christ by the message preached and his presence evident through the generous and gentle actions of their every day lives. An example being the early 18th century protestant communities of France Switzerland and Germany that relocated to many places across the world. (See Count Zinzendorf and the Moravians)

The theology behind these differing ways of redemption came down to whether you understood Jesus death on the Cross as either Jesus satisfying the wrath of God and thus God outpouring his anger upon his Son in our place or, alternatively saying that God was in Christ, on the cross and (therefore satisfaction being unnecessary) dealt with all the consequences of sin and evil by his total self-giving for us. One theory propitiates or satisfies an angry Father, the other theory expiates or cleanses people from the stain of sin and evil through the cleansing blood of the Son.

One of the theologians who has inspired my own thinking about the death of Jesus on the Cross-, was C.F.D. Moule, once Lady Margaret professor of Divinity at Cambridge University. Moule was one of the New Testament theologians behind the Revision of the New English Bible, which became the Revised English Bible under the direction of the then Archbishop of Canterbury, Donald Coggan.

As a young man, I attended the launch of the Revised English Bible at the University of East Anglia and spoke with Lord Coggan. I suspect 'Charlie' Moule was present but then wouldn't have known of him.

On the subject of Jesus and the Cross, the REB translates Romans 25 and verse 3, differently to NIV, NRSV and some other versions of the Bible, for whereas the common word is *propitiation*, the REB translates *expiation*.

The good news about freedom in Christ is that we are free to think differently. If your starting point is that you are a loathsome miserable sinner only deserving of punishment then that is your right, in some cases, I may even agree with you! But not everybody starts there or is able to make sense of God in that way.

The New Testament and particularly John's Gospel from our text this morning was originally written in the Greek. The Greek world had a particular understanding of a good death. For a man a good death was achieved by either dying in battle, which was certainly honorable or on behalf of somebody else in which case it was considered noble. Isocrates (a notable teacher 436-338.BC) urged young Greeks to "*strive by all means to live in security, but if it falls to you, to face the dangers of battle, seek to preserve your life but with honor and not with disgrace. For death comes to us all, but to die nobly is the special honor that nature has reserved for the good.*"

The Gospel of John, written in Greek, takes up the theme of Jesus as the noble shepherd in chapter 10. A theme also taken up by the renowned Jewish historian Josephus who was born just 37 years after Jesus' death and who at one time counted among his friends Agrippa 11, ruler of Palestine and Vespasian, who following Josephus's prophecies became Emperor of Rome.

This is what Josephus wrote about Jesus:

Now there was about this time Jesus, a wise man, if it be lawful to call him a man, for he was a doer of wonderful works, a teacher of such men as receive the truth with pleasure. He drew over to him both many of the Jews, and many of the Gentiles. He was the Christ, and when Pilate, at the suggestion of the principal men among us, had condemned him to the cross, those that loved him at the first did not forsake him; for he appeared to them alive again the third day; as the divine prophets had foretold these and ten thousand other wonderful things concerning him. And the tribe of Christians so named from him are not extinct at this day. [Jewish Antiquities 18.3.3](#)

Josephus' writings are so valuable because although he lived within 30 years or so, of Christ's death he was not a Christian and yet testified to the truth that Jesus lived, died on the cross and appeared alive again! And did ten thousand wonderful things!

So then, with these different ways of understanding Jesus's noble sacrifice for us, where do we go from here?

It used to be the case, though not so much now, that a harassed Mother would chide her errant child with the words, "Just you wait till your Father gets home" or, "Your Dad will hear about this!" Fortunately, parenting today is on a much more equal footing and Dad is not necessarily called upon to be the disciplinarian. Just imagine any way the strange logic of a Father, who had been at work all day, coming home to the Wife and children he adores; and having to discipline his offspring when all he really wanted to do was embrace them in his love. Some Christians apply that logic to God in his dealings with humankind. There is a whole doctrine of Jesus on the Cross, built around punishment and justification. The theological term is penal substitution. Or Christ bearing the wrathful Father's punishment and paying the penalty for us!

One of the places where this doctrine is particularly strong is in Christian Worship. Stuart Townend, a notably gifted worship leader and songwriter, declares in his song, "In Christ alone." *The wrath of God was satisfied* "As much as I like Stuart Townend, on this occasion, I believe his theology of the Cross, is misleading. For I think he could of put it better by saying that on the Cross as Jesus died the love of God was satisfied! Whenever I sing 'In Christ alone' I mentally change the words.

You may be interested to know that others have felt the same and challenged Stuart Townend's theology on this very point and this is what he said.

"I have no intention of rewriting the line on the wrath of God, and see penal substitution as an integral and indispensable part of our understanding of the cross, as expressed throughout the Old and New Testaments. Regarding the changing of words for congregational use, this is a breach of copyright and must not be done. Better to not use the song at all than change it. I have no problem with individuals in conscience choosing not to sing that particular line when it comes round, but it must not be altered." Stuart Townend

You may be thinking, what is all the fuss about, Jesus died for sinners did he not? He died on the Cross, did he not? And because of His death; we are free to know and love God, in Christ ourselves. All that is perfectly true. And there are people that would argue that penal substitution is... **by far the most common biblical explanation of Christ's work on the cross.** And they would point you to your Bible saying...

Christ was pierced for our transgressions (Isa. 53:5). The Lord laid on him the iniquity of us all (Isa. 53:6). Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures (1 Cor. 15:3). We're justified by the blood of Christ (Rom. 5:9). God set forth Christ as a propitiation—a sacrifice that turns away God's wrath—so that those who believe in Christ would be declared righteous (Rom. 3:25, 1 John 2:2).

But therein lies a problem. It can depend upon which Bible version we read. Particularly in relation to Romans 3:25 and 1 John 2:2. That is why I quote from the Revised English Bible as well as the New International Version and the Message.

With regard to the Romans passage, the NIV speaks of righteousness demonstrated inferring justification by propitiation (although it doesn't actually use the word.) The good old Message Bible simply talks about God setting things right before the world but avoids theological propositions and the Revised English Bible definitely expresses expiation as the means of God's action.

People that support penal substitution and would ignore the Revised English Bible would insist that all of these verses and plenty more speak of God pouring out on Christ the wrath we deserved for our sins! And they, like Stuart Townend, would say that Penal substitution is inescapably central to the Bible's teaching about the gospel. Maintaining...

Penal substitutionary atonement is what makes all of the other images "work." Christ triumphed over Satan on the cross by bearing God's wrath in our place and so freeing us from Satan's power and claims (Col. 2:14-15).

Christ healed us by bearing the wounds we deserved (Isa. 53:5). Christ reconciled us to God by satisfying God's wrath against us (Rom. 5:9-11).

But are they right?

Here follows a response to Stuart Townend's comments regarding 'In Christ Alone', from a brilliant young theologian that I had the pleasure of studying with at St John's College of Divinity in Nottingham.

"Dear Stuart

I love this song - maybe the best new hymn of the past decade. BUT . . . and someone's gonna say it . . . so it might as well be me . . . "And on that cross as Jesus died / The wrath of God was satisfied" is not really biblical. Laid aside? Better. Neutralised? Ditto Christ bears our sin (this I know, for the Bible tells me so); he did not bear the wrath of God. The cross is the place of supreme, unique, divine justice and mercy: justice in that the cost of sin is paid by Christ (the economic metaphors of debt / ransom / redemption etc are perhaps the main way that the cross is explained/described in the Bible). The price too is nothing - it is a free gift, but a very expensive free gift. The cost of that was borne by Jesus, who took all our sin and its consequences (death, separation from God). It cost him everything. What a sacrifice! But it is wrong to say that Jesus bore the wrath of God.

*Why? Well, firstly it ain't what the Bible says, anywhere, period. (Oh you can translate hilasmos to mean propitiation but there so many other uses of it where it simply can't mean that - e.g. Luke 18 that it can only mean it *sometimes* if at all, and I believe not all.) The cross is the place of justice and mercy; punishing the innocent in place of the guilty is neither justice nor mercy, but a travesty of both. Besides, the Bible forbids the practice (Proverbs 27:26a).*

OK, what about Isaiah 53. Well, that's another easy one to deal with. So much of Is. 53 is quoted in the New Testament that it is worth asking what parts of that much-cited chapter are not present in the NT. The NT writers clearly knew the "punishment" parts of Isaiah 53 (verses 4b, 5, & 6), **AND they knew of the crucifixion and yet no connection is ever made between the two:** in fact, those verses are danced around, with the verses either side of them being quoted in full. (Isaiah 53:1 in John 12:38 and Romans 10:16; Isaiah 53:4a in Matthew 8:17; Isaiah 53:7-8 in Acts 8:32; Isaiah 53:9 in 1 Peter 2:22).

So the Suffering Servant seems to be partly identifiable with Christ but there is a marked refusal to cite the verses about him being punished by God for us. Being generous, Isaiah 53:6 is strongly alluded to in 1 Peter 2: 24-25 but without the bit about the Lord laying on him the iniquity of us all – i.e. without any hint of punishment. Rather, it is reworked as Christ taking upon himself the iniquity of us all. No-one lays anything on him; he takes it upon himself. (24"He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed. 25For you were like sheep going astray, but now you have returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls.") **All the NT's use of Isaiah 53 stops short of God punishing Christ.**

It is quoted in a way that excludes those verses whilst retaining the sense of sacrifice. It is also worth reminding ourselves that Christ is God. Jesus is just as angered and offended by sin as his Father; the wrath of God is (also) the wrath of Jesus (cf. Matt 21:12 / Mk 11:15 / Lk 19:45 / Jn 2:15; Rev 6:16). Jesus is not the scapegoat, whipping boy or lightning conductor on whom God vents his anger; he is God, as much as the Father and Spirit.

It is easy to see where the faulty logic occurs. Here's an example of the syllogism: (deductive reasoning in which a conclusion is derived from two premises)

a. God is holy and righteous and is therefore good and justly wrathful toward sin. b. Christ became sin for us (2 Cor 5:21) c. therefore God was wrathful towards Christ. This completely fails to take the Trinity in account: Christ is (also) God. (Try singing: "And on that cross as God died / The wrath of God was satisfied" or "And on that cross as Christ died / The wrath of Christ was satisfied" and you see the problem.) Finally, there's the problem of the resurrection. If Jesus took the punishment for our sins (from God and/or the Father and/or himself), and the punishment for sin is eternity in hell, how did Jesus rise and return? Surely he should still be dead; worse, he should be in hell forever.

Tricky, eh? One can but conclude that he wasn't in fact being punished. (And remember: the Bible **never** says that he was.) Yes indeed, the Bible doesn't say Jesus was punished for our sins. It would be a simple enough statement: very clear, clean, and quick. And it would radically alter the nature of God and the text of the Bible and the church's theology and all human ethics. Hurrah that it doesn't or both justice and mercy as we know them would be dead.

God is love, Jesus pays our debt (to use that Biblical metaphor) - but "debt" not "fine": **there is nothing penal or punishing about it.**

The cross makes good our shortfall, closes the gap ("hamartia") at Christ's ultimate and supreme expense; it restores, redeems (there's that financial metaphor again), reconciles and it costs Christ everything to do so. Grace is free but not cheap: it is expensive to the one who pays and free to the one who receives. Try forgiving someone a sin or a debt and you will pay the price, bear the cost yourself. This is not transferred punishment but self-sacrifice. Christians don't (or at least shouldn't) believe in transferred punishment; we believe that God is just and merciful (in that order because mercy is contingent upon justice) and that the cross of Christ satisfies God's justice and makes his mercy available. Hence we are called to imitate and participate in Christ's suffering and death - something that would be impossible if it were penal. Finally, the question remains: if Christ is punished then by whom? God? The Father? That's neither justice nor mercy.

Thank-you Lord: you saved us from a problem that we humans made and that we humans suffered from, but you made good our loss and shortfall at your own great expense by your obedient life and sin-bearing death."

Olly Harrison.

I can no means equate my own preaching with that of my theologically astute young colleague. However, I would point out that no matter how much we may want to champion penal substitution or Christ taking the punishment we deserve for our sins upon himself there remains the problem of how the event actually changes us. Yes we are washed clean by the blood of the Lamb but propitiation however sensitively stated is about dealing with the reaction of God against sin, not about the stain of sin on human life. It doesn't explain how our characters are transformed from selfishness to righteousness. Propitiation offers us the capacity to be Christ like but it does not effectually ensure righteous behavior. A doctor might be said to hate disease as God hates sin, but the first aim of medicine is to remove the disease and heal the patient, not to placate the anger of the doctor. Any understanding of sacrifice needs to be transformational and relational if it is to take us beyond the cross into new life and being. Salvation must heal broken lives here and now.

I would argue with Harrison that Sacrifice, according to Israelite and Christian communities understanding is not something the Son did toward the Father (propitiation) but something which God does for humankind (expiation) it is from this standing that we can see that God was in Christ and the clearest evidence for expiation is found in Paul's letter to the Romans chapter 3 from verse 25, three examples before us this morning. According to Paul, God has sent Christ as expiation by his blood. And this corresponds with the Old Testament understanding of atonement and the Trinitarian theology of the New Testament.

God acts to deal with sin by sending his only beloved Son, as a merciful and faithful high priest to make expiation for the sins of the whole people. Further evidence is given in Hebrews 2 and verse 17

Therefore he had to be made like his brothers in every way, so that he might be merciful and faithful as their high priest before God, to make expiation for the sins of the people.

Some versions replace the word expiation with a sacrifice of atonement but it means the same.

Expiation means a cost for God as well as humankind in dealing with sin, which is an enemy to life. Several of the early Christian teachers were uneasy about the idea of the Son propitiating a wrathful Father or that God's punishment of his own Son would appease his sense of justice. They preferred to emphasize the costly sacrificial act of expiation recognizing that God was in Christ wiping away sin as divine action in partnership. (Trinitarian) Also the images common to the Old Testament of sprinkling and washing with blood testify to their view of expiating sin in order to be cleansed, purified and made holy unto God.

Was it an act of a Son propitiating the wrath of the Father or was God in Christ expiating sin through the cleansing of his blood in order to make people righteous and holy before God. The question remains how does either propitiation or expiation work to destroy sin in our lives now? Could a single event in a given time be made effective for all time?

Theology's answer is that on the Cross, Jesus saved, Jesus saves and Jesus will save us; past, present and future. Otherwise atonement makes no sense. As a Christian, I am saved, I am being saved, I will be saved!

It is only by grace that we have access to the Father who gave his only beloved Son because he so loved the world. God cannot be anything other than wholly righteous and just. But, he can also choose to be merciful. What Father chooses to be angry with his children? As a parent you will always leave a way back to restore your relationship with your child however cross you are at the time. You will opt for reconciliation over retribution every time. Such is the nature of God. When my Son was born I loved him. At this very hour I love him and I will always love him until I draw my last breath.

If he does something sinful I might be consumed with righteous indignation but I will also stand with him as he faces up to the consequences of his sin. I will share in the work of expiation. Or more bluntly cleaning up the mess!

I would always prefer to talk about expiation and God being in Christ in partnership doing that work of cleansing and washing away the stain of sin. Expiation brings other people to the realization to their own need for repentance and healing.

My struggle with notions of propitiation is that it has been used as a stick to beat people into a state of grace. Advocates of this line would however argue that Jesus satisfied God's holy anger and justice and removed the defilement of sin so that sinners could freely enter the presence of the Holy God. I would say again, that to argue that the wrath of God was satisfied is not Biblical!

Over more recent years there has been a greater expression toward teaching that Jesus dealt with the evil nature of human sin under the covering of the Father's forgiveness. By the expiation of human guilt the wrath of God is appeased and his holiness satisfied. Advocates of this line would by no means deny his demand for justice and righteous living but they would express them through messages of acceptance, forgiveness and the cost of Christ's sacrificial love for all humankind. Not Cheap grace but grace given freely to us by The Son of God who met the cost and paid the price for us.

Perhaps we just need to remind ourselves that the God of the Bible is both holy and loving. His holiness means that sin cannot be condoned. His love signifies that the sinner can be accepted if the claims of divine holiness are recognized. The atoning sacrifice of Christ both satisfies the demands of His holy law and demonstrates His boundless love, the love that goes beyond the law. God was not waiting to be appeased. Rather, God freely chose to meet us, in his Son, on our level to remedy the situation. God was in Christ defeating sin and dispelling darkness, Satan is finally and forever crushed and defeated.

Note

If you are reading this after yesterday's Sermon in which I took up the theme but preached an alternative message it might help you to know that I felt this sermon to be too complex in the context of Sunday's Holy Communion. It is also rather long. I therefore chose to place my emphasis yesterday on the nature of sin and how sin angers God and obstructs our right relationship with Him. On reflection, I placed a greater emphasis upon the holiness of God and the consequences of sin over the nature of God's grace in every human encounter. With this sermon/essay I am trying to redress the balance.

Max Osborne

Monday, October 24, 2011