

Propitiation --- Romans 3:23-25a

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Introduction

Romans 3:23-25a *For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, 24being justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus; 25whom God displayed publicly as a propitiation in His blood through faith.*

Throughout history, there have been many false gospels proclaimed. The only Gospel that God cares about and that accomplishes what He desires is the message of Jesus Christ, and Him crucified. The Gospel centers on the shed blood of Jesus that satisfies God's justice and therefore satisfies, or propitiates, the wrath of God for sinners.

There is a story told of a terrible train accident that occurred at a railroad crossing in the early 1900s. Several people were killed when a train hit a car. There was a court trial and the watchman who had been at the crossing at the time of the accident was questioned. The judge questioned the watchman by asking . . .

- Q. Where were you at the time of the accident?
A. I was at the crossing.
Q. Did you have a lantern?
A. Yes.
Q. Did you wave that lantern to warn them of the danger?
A. I certainly did.

The judge and jury said that was enough evidence and dismissed the case. When the watchman walked out of the court, he told a family member, "I am sure glad they did not ask me about the light in the lantern. Because the light had gone out."

There are a lot of so-called Gospel lanterns waved by people in churches today but the light of the message of the blood of Jesus is out. Tragically, the result is that many people end up like those in Matthew 7, who think that they are okay with God; yet Jesus says to them, *"I never knew you; DEPART FROM ME."*

We have all heard the Gospel presented as God's gracious answer to human problems: that is, "If you come to Christ, He will fix your marriage;" "He will heal you;" "He will give you a good job;" "He will make you wealthy;" "You will have a sense of belonging;" "You will have peace and joy;" or "Christ came to correct social injustices," and the list goes on.

There is no doubt that the Gospel does bring us blessings in many of these areas, but it does so by first solving a deeper problem. The deepest of all human problems is the broken relationship between man and his Maker. The greatest one eternal predicament in which all people find themselves is that they are born children of wrath in danger of the judgment to come. We have seen that in our study of Romans thus far.

We are misrepresenting the Gospel message if we present Jesus as One who will fix life. The primary focus of Scripture is on the good news that Jesus came to die in order to propitiate the wrath of God for sinners.

I love singing the old hymns as well as new music that is produced today. The stories behind many of the hymns are fascinating to read. One such story involves William Cowper. Cowper was an eighteenth-century poet who authored a number of hymns that are still much appreciated today. Cowper had a miserable childhood. His mother died when he was six years old and he was immediately taken to a boarding school. He was a small boy and had a sensitive nature, so he was bullied and beaten up by the older boys.

Cowper struggled through his early years as he grew up. He entered law school, but his mind began to fail. Twice he attempted to commit suicide. In the year 1756, when Cowper was 25 years old, he was put into a private asylum under the care of a man by the name of Dr. Cotton. In the 1700s, being placed into an asylum led to terrible treatment. But Dr. Cotton was a devout Christian man, and he treated Cowper in a way that brought him out of his depression and introduced him to salvation in Christ Jesus.

One of Cowper's major problems was that he was troubled by his sin. He would say repeatedly, "My sin, my sin, oh for some fountain that would cleanse me from my sin!" Up to that point, he had found no such fountain. But under the care of this patient Christian doctor, he discovered the only fountain that can ever wash away sin.

Cowper related in his salvation story that he sat down to read the Bible as he had done many times before. But that time the first verse that he read was our text this morning, *Romans 3:24,25 Being justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus; 25whom God displayed publicly as a propitiation in His blood through faith.*

Cowper wrote, "Immediately, I received strength to believe, and the full beams of the Sun of Righteousness radiated on me. I saw the sufficiency of the

atonement He had made, my pardon in his blood, and the fullness and completeness of His justification. In a moment I believed and received the Gospel.” Later, Cowper wrote this hymn:

There is a fountain filled with blood
Drawn from Immanuel's veins.
And sinners, plunged beneath that flood,
Lose all their guilty stains.

The dying thief rejoiced to see
That fountain in his day.
And there have I, as vile as he,
Washed all my sins away.

E'er since by faith I saw the stream
Thy flowing wounds supply
Redeeming love has been my theme
And shall be till I die.

We need to pause for a moment and consider the picture that Cowper paints for us here. We sing this hymn, but have you ever stopped and thought about a fountain of blood? That is not a real pretty picture. Moreover, have you pictured yourself being “plunged beneath that flood” of blood? I do not think that we would run to be first to immerse ourselves into a flowing fountain of blood, but that is the picture here, and it reflects biblical truth.

Hebrews 9:22 And according to the Law, one may almost say, all things are cleansed with blood, and without shedding of blood there is no forgiveness.

There are examples in Scripture that show both how destructive our sin is and how great the grace of God is, when we consider the subject of “blood” in the Bible. For example, God was the first to take a life in all of history when He killed innocent animals to clothe Adam and Eve. Blood had to be shed because of sin. As you follow the theme of blood in the Bible, the grandpa figure of our tame, loving God is shattered. We find a holy and just God who sheds blood as a just response to sin.

Revelation 14:19-20 So the angel swung his sickle to the earth and gathered the clusters from the vine of the earth, and threw them into the great wine press of the wrath of God [this speaks of the judgment of mankind during the tribulation]. 20And the wine press was trodden outside the city, and blood came out from the wine press, up to the horses' bridles, for a distance of two hundred

miles. This is a picture of rebellious mankind being thrown into the winepress of God's wrath. Blood shed is the result of man's sin and God's righteous wrath. *"Without shedding of blood there is no forgiveness."*

I told you in our study of Romans that, having described in detail man's sinful plight and hopelessness, Paul turns the corner in Romans 3:21 and explodes with God's provision for man's salvation. In our studies so far, we have considered the great terminology used in these verses; namely, "justification," "grace," "faith," "God's righteousness," and "redemption." But there is one word that we have not considered; that word is "propitiation."

We do not use this word in our modern English; however, in order to grow in our understanding and to appreciate what Christ has done for us and how salvation impacts our lives, we must come to grips with what this word conveys. There are Bible scholars in the church today that consider "propitiation" a controversial word that should not be used in describing the Gospel. They object on the grounds that propitiation involves appeasing the wrath of God and, for a number of reasons, they do not like to think that God and His wrath have to be pacified.

What is vitally important to keep in mind as we consider propitiation is this: God's wrath is closely associated with God's justice. God's anger is not spurious, subjective, vacillating, or arbitrary like man's wrath can be. His wrath is a perfect response to mankind who has violated what is true, right, and holy.

God's anger towards sin is a settled and furious response to mankind who spurns what is good and right and rebels against Him. It is important to keep these thoughts in mind about God's wrath as we consider propitiation because propitiation has everything to do with the shedding of blood. It comes to this: either your blood must be shed in response to God's wrath or Christ's blood on your behalf.

Review

We have been apart from our study of Romans for almost a month. I remind you that we took some time to study the first three chapters of Romans, where Paul lays a foundation for the Gospel. The Gospel begins with the bad news of man's rebellion against God. Paul breaks down man's rebellion into three categories: 1) Pagan Man; 2) Moral Man; and 3) Religious Man.

We have considered that all of mankind falls under the heading of Pagan Man. Pagan Man suppresses the truth of God. Man has no excuse for his refusal to acknowledge God in everyday life. As man rejects God, God gives him over to his sin. The end result is a descriptive list of vices that is beyond belief as Paul

describes the heart of man.

This list is recorded in Romans 1:28-32 *And just as they did not see fit to acknowledge God any longer, God gave them over to a depraved mind, to do those things which are not proper, 29being filled with all unrighteousness, wickedness, greed, evil; full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, malice; they are gossips, 30slanderers, haters of God, insolent, arrogant, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, 31without understanding, untrustworthy, unloving, unmerciful; 32and although they know the ordinance of God, that those who practice such things are worthy of death, they not only do the same, but also give hearty approval to those who practice them.*

We also considered Moral Man, who is no different than Pagan Man, but he thinks himself to be more righteous than others. Romans 2:1,3 *1Therefore you have no excuse, everyone of you who passes judgment, for in that which you judge another, you condemn yourself; for you who judge practice the same things. . . . 3But do you suppose this, O man, when you pass judgment on those who practice such things and do the same yourself, that you will escape the judgment of God?*

Lastly, we considered Religious Man. Religious Man goes further than Moral Man in that he claims to know God and keep God's law, but in reality he is no better than Pagan Man. Concerning Religious Man, Paul writes in Romans 2:21-23, *“You, therefore, who teach another, do you not teach yourself? You who preach that one shall not steal, do you steal? 22You who say that one should not commit adultery, do you commit adultery? You who abhor idols, do you rob temples? 23You who boast in the Law, through your breaking the Law, do you dishonor God?”*

We saw that Paul concludes his description of man by saying that man is totally depraved. There is no one who is righteous. There is no one who seeks after God. There is no one who understands. The end result is that all of mankind is accountable to God. Paul brings us to realize that in the darkest and deepest pit of our depravity, there is absolutely nothing that we can do to be made right with God.

At that point, Paul turns the corner and says, *“But now . . .”* As I said before, Paul overwhelms us with the provision that God has made for sinful man. *“But now . . .”* God provides justification for those who believe. Believers will never enter the courtroom of heaven. They pass from death to life. What's more, God makes the believer as righteous as He Himself with the righteousness that is utterly and categorically different than man's righteousness.

Paul makes clear that the Gospel is an issue of fulfillment. The Law witnessed to the Gospel by exposing sin and then providing a lamb whose blood was shed to cover sin. Furthermore, the prophets foretold of the Messiah who would be the Lamb of God as we see in Isaiah 53. We have considered the roles of grace and faith and the doctrine of redemption.

Propitiation

And now, as if all that is not enough, Paul goes further and describes salvation in terms of propitiation. I want to consider what the Bible teaches about propitiation under two headings: 1) God's Wrath and 2) Christ's Propitiation.

When the Bible teaches us that God set forth Jesus to be a propitiation “by His blood,” the point is that what quenched God’s wrath and saved us from the second death was not Jesus’ moral teaching or that He was a good man, but the shedding of His blood in death as a substitute, the righteous for the unrighteous.

J.I. Packer describes salvation as follows. “What does the Gospel of God offer us? If we say “the peace of God” none will disagree, but will everyone understand? The use of the right words does not guarantee right thoughts. Too often the peace of God is thought of as if it were essentially a feeling of inner tranquility, happy and carefree, springing from knowledge that God will shield one from life’s hardest knocks.

“But this is a misrepresentation because God does not shelter His children this way, and anyone who thinks He does is in for a shock. This understanding does not reflect what is basic and essential to the real peace of God. The peace of God involves a change of relationship with God—out of hostility into friendship, out of wrath into the fullness of love, out of condemnation into justification. The peace of God is first and foremost peace with God. No account of God’s peace which does not start here can do other than mislead.

“One of the miserable ironies of our time is that so-called theologians believe themselves to be re-stating the Gospel for today, but they have for the most part rejected the categories of wrath, guilt, condemnation, and the enmity of God, and so have made it impossible for themselves ever to present the Gospel at all, for they cannot state the basic problem which the Gospel of peace solves.”

I believe Packer has it right.

So as we begin to consider propitiation, we must have a right view of God's

wrath. Propitiation by definition is the satisfying of God's wrath towards sinful man.

God's Wrath

*For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,
being justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus;
whom God displayed publicly as a propitiation in His blood through faith.*

Romans 3:23-25a

As I said, we find it difficult to understand propitiation because we do not use this word. Propitiation was used in the ancient world of religion. For example, if you know your ancient Greek mythology, you may remember in Homer's Iliad that Agamemnon sacrificed his own daughter to propitiate or appease the goddess Artemis whom he had offended. Propitiation in this context was an attempt to pacify the wrath of a goddess or turn aside her anger.

Because of this usage, there are Bible scholars today who think that propitiation should not be used when referring to God's wrath. On one hand, many simply deny that God is wrathful. They say that God is not angry but loving. He does not need to be appeased by us. All we need to do is recognize that He loves us and receive His forgiveness. You can see how that goes against what Paul has gone to great pains to teach us in the first three chapters of Romans.

One theologian who downplays God's wrath writes, "Those who hold to fire and brimstone theology, who revel in ideas such as that Christ was made a sacrifice to appease an angry God, or that the cross was a legal transaction in which an innocent victim was made to pay the penalty for the crimes of others, a propitiation of a stern God, find no support in Paul. These notions came into Christian theology by way of the legalistic minds of the medieval churchmen; they are not biblical Christianity."

Wow, that is an amazing statement, an amazingly false statement. There are many today who would set aside the hard news of justice, judgment, and wrath and just talk about heaven, love, and grace. But when the Church focuses only on judgment on one hand, or only on grace at the exclusion of judgment on the other hand, that is not the Gospel. Grace is understood on the backdrop of eternal justice and God's wrath. I told you a few weeks ago that the phrase "fire and brimstone" is a biblical phrase and there are many texts that speak of God's anger and wrath.

Genesis 19:24-25 *Then the LORD rained on Sodom and Gomorrah brimstone and fire from the LORD out of heaven, 25and He overthrew those cities, and all the valley, and all the inhabitants of the cities, and what grew on the ground.*

Psalms 11:5-7 *The LORD tests the righteous and the wicked, and the one who loves violence His soul hates. 6Upon the wicked He will rain snares; fire and brimstone and burning wind will be the portion of their cup. 7For the LORD is righteous, He loves righteousness; the upright will behold His face.*

Speaking of the day of judgment, God says through Ezekiel in 38:22-23, *“With pestilence and with blood I will enter into judgment with him; and I will rain on him and on his troops, and on the many peoples who are with him, a torrential rain, with hailstones, fire and brimstone. 23I will magnify Myself, sanctify Myself, and make Myself known in the sight of many nations; and they will know that I am the LORD.”*

I am just reading from the Bible here. My heart beats for proclaiming God's grace, mercy, compassion, and love, but we cannot communicate those truths apart from the biblical truths of God's righteous wrath.

Revelation 14:9-10 *Then another angel, a third one, followed them, saying with a loud voice, “If anyone worships the beast and his image, and receives a mark on his forehead or on his hand, 10he also will drink of the wine of the wrath of God, which is mixed in full strength in the cup of His anger; and he will be tormented with fire and brimstone in the presence of the holy angels and in the presence of the Lamb.*

So much for the statement that the notions of God's wrath “came into Christian theology by way of the legalistic minds of the medieval churchmen; they are not biblical Christianity.” The Gospel of Christ includes the grace of God plus fire and brimstone. You cannot have one without the other.

So some would like to do away with the wrath of God altogether. On the other hand, some think that, because this word “propitiation” was used of the Greco-Roman gods, it is not accurate to use it to describe the One, True God of the Bible. The Greek and Roman gods were petty, always changing, and often selfishly angry. Some claim that this type of wrath does not describe the God of the Bible. What they say is true. God's wrath is not petty and vacillating, and yet the Bible still teaches that God is a wrathful God.

In Paul's letter to the Romans, he refers to “wrath” ten times. But in each

instance the word he uses is ὀργή, and his point is not that God is suddenly flailing out in petty anger against something that has offended Him momentarily. The word ὀργή portrays wrath as something that builds up over a long period of time, like water collecting behind a dam. Paul refers to God's firm and dreadful hatred of all wickedness that is building up and will one day result in eternal judgment of all who reject God, truth, and Christ.

Romans 2:6, 8-9 [God] . . . *WILL RENDER TO EACH PERSON ACCORDING TO HIS DEEDS: . . . 8to those who are selfishly ambitious and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness, wrath and indignation. 9There will be tribulation and distress for every soul of man who does evil, of the Jew first and also of the Greek.*

Romans 5:9 *Much more then, having now been justified by His blood, we shall be saved from the wrath of God through Him.*

Romans 12:19 *Never take your own revenge, beloved, but leave room for the wrath of God, for it is written, "VENGEANCE IS MINE, I WILL REPAY," says the Lord.*

As I mentioned before, what we must understand is that the wrath of God is firmly connected with His justice. God's wrath is consistent, unchanging, uniform, and steady. God's wrath is not an irrational release, or a "spur of the moment" expression of unbridled anger. If we understand that the wrath of God comes out of and is an expression of His righteousness and justice, then we will position ourselves to have a clearer understanding.

Romans 2:5 *But because of your stubbornness and unrepentant heart you are storing up wrath for yourself in the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God.*

God's righteous wrath and anger are seen in connection with the giving of the Law at Mount Sinai. Exodus 22 makes clear that God's wrath is not spurious but is connected with violation of His law. Exodus 22:22-24 *"You shall not afflict any widow or orphan. 23If you afflict him at all, and if he does cry out to Me, I will surely hear his cry; 24and My anger will be kindled, and I will kill you with the sword, and your wives shall become widows and your children fatherless.*

God is obviously serious about His holy standards. His anger is connected with His holiness and is against those who violate His holiness. Another example of God's wrath being related to His justice and man's violation of His law is found in Exodus 32:7-12 when Moses was receiving the law from God on top of Mount

Sinai.

It says, *“Then the LORD spoke to Moses, ‘Go down at once, for your people, whom you brought up from the land of Egypt, have corrupted themselves. 8They have quickly turned aside from the way which I commanded them. They have made for themselves a molten calf, and have worshiped it and have sacrificed to it and said, ‘This is your god, O Israel, who brought you up from the land of Egypt!’ 9The LORD said to Moses, ‘I have seen this people, and behold, they are an obstinate people. 10Now then let Me alone, that My anger may burn against them and that I may destroy them; and I will make of you a great nation.’”* In his book *The Apostolic Preaching of the Cross*, Leon Morris writes, “The biblical writers habitually use for divine wrath a word which denotes not so much a sudden flaring up of passion which is soon over, but a strong and settled opposition to all that is evil arising out of God's very nature.” Another theologian writes, “Wrath is the holy revulsion of God's being against that which is the contradiction of His holiness.”

So it is important to keep in mind that, as we consider the meaning of propitiation as satisfying the wrath of God, it is in the context of God's wrath as an expression of His justice. In this manner, propitiation and justification go hand in hand. Christ's death on our behalf satisfied the justice of God. We are declared as righteous as God. In similar fashion, Christ's death satisfied the wrath of God, which was the expression of God's justice.

Christ's Propitiation

God displayed [Christ] publicly as a propitiation in His blood.
Romans 3:25a

Propitiation is satisfying the just wrath of God. It has to do with absorbing the full penalty of sin. Wrath must be quenched. It is only within this context and with this backdrop that we can speak of God's love and grace and other subjects like this.

1 John 4:8-10 God is love. 9By this the love of God was manifested in us, that God has sent His only begotten Son into the world so that we might live through Him. 10In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins.

As I said, some modern theologians have reacted against using the term “propitiation” in reference to the God of the Bible. They do not see God as one who can be bribed to be favorable, like the Greco-Roman gods, so they reject the whole idea. When they come to the term in the Greek New Testament, they

translate it with “expiation” in the sense of “absolve” or “pardon” or some equivalent term which lacks any reference to anger.

In opposition to this way of thinking, one pastor states it this way, “His anger is the settled opposition of His holy nature to everything that is evil. Such opposition to sin cannot be dismissed with a wave of the hand. It requires something much more substantial. And the Bible states that it was only the cross that did this. This is not the only way of looking at the cross, but it is an important way. If God’s anger is real, then it must be taken into account in the way that sin, which caused that wrath, is dealt with. When the NT says ‘propitiation,’ then, it means that Jesus’ death on the cross for the sins of mankind put away God’s wrath against his people once and for all.”

We have considered that Paul’s argument up to this point is that all men, Jew and Gentile alike, are under the condemnation of God. Romans 1:18 *The wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men.* Christ delivers believers from the very real danger of God’s wrath. The sentence of judgment had been passed against them. The wrath of God hung over them. Paul has strongly emphasized the wrath of God throughout these opening chapters, and so Christ’s saving work must include deliverance from this wrath. This deliverance is described by the word “propitiation.”

When we talk about satisfying God’s wrath, or propitiating God’s wrath, we must include in that discussion the role of blood. I have already read for you that without the shedding of blood, there is no forgiveness of sin. “Blood” is a word pointing to the violent death inflicted in the animal sacrifices in the Old Covenant. Leviticus 17:11 *For the life of the flesh is in the blood, and I have given it to you on the altar to make atonement for your souls; for it is the blood by reason of the life that makes atonement.*

Moses was giving instruction in Leviticus 17:11 concerning offerings for sin. The animal that was to be offered for sin was first symbolically established as a representative by the sinner laying his hand on its head and so identifying himself with the sacrifice; then it was killed as a substitute. The blood was sprinkled before the Lord as a sign of turning away wrath and restoring fellowship. 1 Peter 1:2 refers to being sprinkled with the blood of Christ.

Ephesians 1:7 *In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of His grace.*

Ephesians 2:13 *But now in Christ Jesus you who formerly were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ.*

Packer writes, "The wrath of God is as personal and as potent, as His love. Just as the blood shedding of the Lord Jesus was the direct manifesting of His Father's love towards us, so it was the direct averting of His Father's wrath against us."

Conclusion

I want to conclude with a fresh insight into a well-known story that Jesus told as we consider propitiation. Luke 18:10-14 *"Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. 11The Pharisee stood and was praying this to himself: 'God, I thank You that I am not like other people: swindlers, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. 12I fast twice a week; I pay tithes of all that I get.' 13But the tax collector, standing some distance away, was even unwilling to lift up his eyes to heaven, but was beating his breast, saying, 'God, be merciful to me, the sinner!' 14I tell you, this man went to his house justified rather than the other; for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but he who humbles himself will be exalted."*

That phrase the tax collector uses "be merciful to me" is really our word for propitiation. What he actually says is, "God, be propitiated in relation to me." This tax collector understood Leviticus 17:11: *"For the life of the flesh is in the blood, and I have given it to you on the altar to make atonement for your souls; for it is the blood by reason of the life that makes atonement."* The tax collector was asking that God's wrath which was due him be satisfied by virtue of a bloody sacrifice.

I repeat what I said at the beginning: The Gospel has not been preached until the meaning of the blood of Christ has been explained. The offense of the Cross is that God had to shed His blood. Our terrible sin is what made it necessary for Christ to die for us. If we skip this message, we are like the watchman who is waving his lantern without the light shining.