

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

PayPal

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *The Expositor* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_expositor-series-1.php

Now this beginning of the signs tells us, what He afterwards plainly said :

“I am come that ye might have life, and that ye might have it more abundantly.”

G. A. CHADWICK.

*THE DOCTRINE OF THE ATONEMENT IN THE
NEW TESTAMENT.*

IV. ROMANS iii. 24-26.

IN earlier papers we have seen that each of the four Gospels represents Christ as deliberately purposing to go up to Jerusalem in order there to be slain by His enemies, and as teaching that His death was needful for man's salvation, and that it was made needful by man's sin. The same teaching we found re-echoed in the Book of Acts, and asserted in plain language in the Epistles of Peter and John, and in the book of Revelation. Wherein lay the need for this costly means of salvation, *i.e.* why God could not pardon sin apart from the death of Christ, we did not learn. For an answer to this pressing question, we turn now to the writings of the greatest of the apostles, to the epistles of St. Paul.

Among these epistles, that to the Romans claims our first attention. For the absence of any specific topic needing discussion, such as the various topics dealt with in the First Epistle to the Corinthians, left St. Paul free while writing it to give an orderly statement of the Gospel as he was accustomed to preach it in its various parts and as one organic whole. In it we shall find a full and clear account of the purpose and significance of the death of Christ, and of its relation to the good news of salvation announced by Him.

After an apostolic greeting in Romans i. 1-7, and an expression of interest in his readers in verses 8-15, the writer goes on in verse 16 to describe the gospel he is eager to preach at Rome. "It is a power of God for salvation to every one that believeth"; and it is so because "a righteousness of God is revealed in it, by faith, for faith." These last words are supported and in part explained by a quotation from Habakkuk: "The righteous man by faith will live."

At this point St. Paul turns suddenly round from righteousness to unrighteousness, and from faith to idolatry and gross sin. In a moment the light of the Gospel has vanished from our view, and we find ourselves in a world in which every one, Jew or Greek, stands guilty and silent before an angry God. Fortunately, from behind this deep shadow soon shines forth in more conspicuous brightness the light of the Gospel of Christ. In chapter iii. 21 we emerge from the darkness as suddenly as in chapter i. 18 we entered it; and on doing so we find ourselves almost where we were when the darkness fell upon us. We hear the welcome sound of words practically the same as those in chapter i. 17: "but now apart from law a righteousness of God has been manifested, testimony being borne to it by the Law and the Prophets, a righteousness of God through "belief of Jesus Christ for all that believe." This conspicuous and fuller repetition, after a long digression, assures us that in these words we have the foundation-stone of the Gospel as St. Paul understood and preached it. And this inference is confirmed by the re-echoes of the same thought in verse 24, "justified freely"; in verse 25, "propitiation through faith"; in verse 26, "justifying him that is of faith of Jesus"; and by the plain restatement of the same teaching in verse 28, "a man is justified by faith"; in verse 30, "God will justify the circumcision by faith, and the uncircumcision through faith"; and in chapter iv. 5, 11, 24.

Indisputably we have here found the very kernel of the Gospel of Paul.

Across this bright vision of salvation is once more for a moment flung the deep shadow which rests so heavily upon chapters i. 18-iii. 20. But only for a moment. Evidently it is but a counterfoil to the brightness which is now everywhere around us. The sad words, "all have sinned, and fall short of the glory of God," are introduced only to support the universal purpose asserted in the foregoing words, "for all that believe." St. Paul then introduces, in a participial sentence dependent on the words just quoted, a new topic quite different from, though closely related to, the previous teaching of the epistle.

Now for the first time the death of Christ comes into view. Only after St. Paul has proved that all men are under condemnation, and has announced justification for all through faith in Christ, can he speak of justification through the death of Christ. For apart from these earlier doctrines, this costly means of salvation is needless and meaningless. In verses 24-26 we have an exposition, the fullest which the Bible contains, of the great doctrine that salvation comes to believers through the death of Christ upon the cross.

That this doctrine is introduced, not in an independent assertion, but in a subordinate clause, may surprise us. But it is in complete harmony with St. Paul's mode of thought. By uniting in one sentence and in logical connection the doctrine that "all have sinned" with justification by the free, undeserved favour of God, and through the death of Christ, he teaches that the one doctrine implies and supports the other. The costliness of the blessing is here represented as proving how far man had fallen. Just so the doctrine of universal sin is adduced in verse 23 as an explanation of justification through faith. By thus linking these doctrines together, St. Paul shows that they are inseparably connected.

The meaning of the word *justified* is placed beyond doubt by its frequent use in the LXX. and elsewhere in the New Testament. It is a technical legal term for a judge's sentence, just or unjust, in a man's favour. So Deuteronomy xxv. 1, "If there be a controversy between men and they come to judgment . . . then they shall justify the righteous and condemn the wicked"; and Proverbs xvii. 15, "He that justifieth the wicked and he that condemneth the righteous, both of them alike are an abomination to the Lord." Similarly Isaiah v. 23, 1 Kings viii. 32, 2 Chronicles vi. 23, Exodus xxiii. 7, Isaiah l. 8. Also, as a rendering of another form of the same Hebrew word, Job xxxii. 2, "He justified himself rather than God." In Matthew xii. 37, Romans ii. 13, it describes the acquittal of the righteous in the day of judgment. Compare Luke x. 29, "Wishing to justify himself"; chapter vii. 29, "They justified God"; ver. 35, "Wisdom justified by her children"; chapters xvi. 15, xviii. 14.

In the above passages, and wherever it is used in the Bible, except possibly Daniel xii. 3, Isaiah liii. 11, leaving out of account the phrase "justified through faith" now under investigation, the word *justify* cannot possibly mean to make a man actually righteous; but evidently means by thought, word, or act, to treat or receive him as such.

In the passage before us, Romans iii. 24, St. Paul asserts that we are justified, as a free gift, by the undeserved favour of God, and by means of the redemption which is in Christ Jesus.

The word rendered *redemption* is cognate to that rendered *ransom* in Matthew xx. 28, Mark x. 45. It is found in Romans viii. 23, 1 Corinthians i. 30, Ephesians i. 7, 14, iv. 30, Colossians i. 14, Hebrews ix. 15, xi. 35, Luke xxi. 28; but apparently not in the LXX. The corresponding verb is found in Exodus xxi. 8, "He shall let her go-free-for-a

ransom ; and in Zephaniah iii. 1, but not in the New Testament.

Already, on pages 6-8, we have seen that the word *ransom* always denotes liberation, and usually liberation by payment of a price. The verb corresponding to the word now before us means indisputably in Exodus xxi. 8 liberation on payment of a price ; and this seems to be its usual meaning. But both substantive and verb are very rare. The meaning of the word in the New Testament must be determined by its context, and by its cognates which are common both in New Testament and in LXX. In all these and always, as we have seen, we have conspicuously the idea of liberation, and frequently that of liberation by a price paid.

In Romans iii. 24 the idea of liberation is already suggested by the word *justified*. For we have here the justification of those whom the Law condemned. And a judge's sentence in a criminal's favour is followed by release. Consequently, since the Gospel announces the justification of all who believe, for them there is liberation. In this sense justification implies *redemption*.

The use of this last word by St. Paul in the passage before us recalls at once Matthew xx. 28, "To give His life a ransom for many"; and 1 Peter i. 18, 19, expounded on page 185, "Ransomed not with silver or gold . . . but with precious blood, even that of Christ." In these passages we have expressly liberation by price. At the close of this exposition and in future papers we shall find that this idea was also present to the thought of St. Paul.

In verse 25 the Apostle goes on to speak further about Him in whom this redemption takes place, "Whom God set forth as a *propitiation*." The word *ἱλαστήριον* is cognate to *ἱλασμός* in 1 John ii. 2, iv. 10, and denotes a means, or something pertaining to a means, of propitiation, *i.e.* as expounded on pages 122, 123, a means by which a sinner may escape from the penalty due to his sin. As such, St.

Paul now asserts that God *set forth* Christ, *i.e.* set Him conspicuously before the eyes of men.

The phrase *propitiation through faith* asserts that the propitiation becomes effective through each one's own faith, *i.e.* that through faith each one escapes from the penalty due to his sin. This is but a restatement of the foundation doctrine of verses 21, 22. For, if God receives as righteous all who believe, then by faith they escape punishment. The insertion of the words *through faith* keeps before us the great doctrine asserted in verse 22, and thus reveals its importance in the thought of Paul.

The words *in His blood* recall at once the violent death of Christ upon the cross. They may be connected either with *faith*, or with *propitiation*, or again with *set forth as a propitiation*. The word *faith* is followed by the preposition *ἐν* in Ephesians i. 15, 1 Timothy iii. 13, 2 Timothy i. 13, iii. 15, but not elsewhere in the New Testament. Moreover, nowhere in the New Testament is the blood of Christ represented as the object of saving faith. It is therefore better to join these words (as in R.V. text though not margin) with the main assertion of this clause, and to understand it to mean that God set forth Christ, covered with His own blood, before the eyes of men that He might be a means by which sinners should escape the due punishment of their sins, a means made effective by each one's own faith. But, whatever be the grammatical connection, these words assert plainly and conspicuously that the efficacy of the means of salvation used by God lay in the shed blood and violent death of Christ. Had not that blood been shed on Golgotha, there had been neither faith nor propitiation "in His blood."

The word *ἱλαστήριον* is used in Exodus xxv. 17, 18, 19, 20, 22, and elsewhere for the lid covering the Ark of the Covenant. This use of the word derives great appropriateness from the fact that before and upon this cover was

sprinkled the blood of the goat slain on the great Day of Atonement, as prescribed in Leviticus xvi. 2, 13, 14, 15, where we have again the same word. In this sense, with express reference to the tabernacle, it is used in Hebrews ix. 5. And it has been suggested, *e.g.* recently by Ultramarine in his valuable commentary on the epistle, that this is its reference here. This exposition implies that the mercy-seat was in some sense a symbol of Christ as set forth in His blood. But of such symbolic significance we have no hint in the Bible. There is no reference here to the Ark or the Tabernacle. And it is not easy to see what enrichment such reference would give to St. Paul's thought. And, as we have seen, the simple sense, as expounded above, makes the whole passage intelligible. Indeed, if we accepted the symbolic sense, we should only have to look upon the mercy-seat as the place at which propitiation was annually made by the sprinkling of blood for the sins of the people. So that either exposition would give practically the same result.

Next follows a statement of the purpose for which God set forth Christ to be a propitiation in His blood, viz. "for a proof of His righteousness." These last words can be no other than God's attribute of righteousness, as His purpose is further expounded in verse 26, "Himself just and justifying." Similarly, in verse 5, the same phrase is contrasted with "our unrighteousness," and is expounded by the question, "Is God righteous who inflicts His anger?" Evidently St. Paul wishes to say that God set forth Christ covered with His own blood in order to give proof that in His government of the world He acts according to the principles embodied in His own law. For this is the righteousness of a ruler. These words thus differ in meaning from the same phrase in verses 21, 22, "Righteousness of God manifested . . . righteousness of God through faith." But the meaning in each case is made clear by the context.

The word rendered *proof* may be studied in 2 Corinthians viii. 24, "The proof of your love"; and in Philippians i. 28, "Proof of perdition . . . of salvation." The fearlessness of the Christians under persecution was a proof that God was with them and therefore that they were in the way of salvation, and that their enemies were fighting against God and were therefore in a way leading to destruction.

To the purpose just asserted, St. Paul now adds a motive prompting God to give this proof of His righteousness, viz. His own forbearance towards sins committed in days gone by: "Because of the passing over of sins before-committed in the forbearance of God." The rare word *πάρεσις*, seems to denote a letting go by, as distinguished from the not uncommon word *ἄφεσις* which denotes forgiveness, or an indulgent delay of punishment; a meaning suggested by the words following, "In the forbearance of God." "The before-committed sins" can only be those committed before the death of Christ. The due and announced punishment of sin is death. And justice always demands an early infliction of punishment. To permit needless delay of punishment, is unjust and is injurious to the State. Yet for long ages sin had run riot on earth, even among the people to whom God had given a written law prescribing death as the penalty of sin. That those whom the law condemned to die were permitted to live, seemed to show that the punitive justice of God was asleep. St. Paul says that this long forbearance in the past moved God to set forth Christ as a propitiation in His blood in order to give proof in the present time of His righteousness, which seemed to have been obscured by this long-continued forbearance. That this purpose is stated twice, before and after the mention of God's forbearance, reveals its importance in the thought of St. Paul and in his present argument.

This divine purpose by no means implies that God was under obligation to give up Christ to die, but only that in ages gone by God acted as He would not have done had He not resolved to give in later ages this great manifestation of His righteousness which He had permitted to remain for a time in some measure overshadowed. The words "in the present season" contrast conspicuously His action in St. Paul's day with the sins committed in earlier days.

The long sentence I am in this paper endeavouring to expound concludes with a statement of the ultimate purpose for which God set forth Christ as a propitiation: "That He may be Himself righteous and a justifier of him who hath faith in Jesus." These last words are incapable of exact rendering into English. "Faith of Jesus" is, as in verse 22, a faith of which He is the personal object. Practically it is belief of the word and promise of Jesus. The man whom God justifies is τὸν ἐκ πίστεως Ἰησοῦ, *i.e.* one whose relation to God is determined by, and in this sense derived from, faith in Christ. So verse 30: "Who will justify the circumcision by faith," δικαιώσει περιτομὴν ἐκ πίστεως. Of such, God is a justifier: δικαιοῦντα τὸν ἐκ πίστεως Ἰησοῦ. St. Paul asserts that the ultimate aim for which God gave up Christ to die was to unite in Himself the two characters of being "Himself righteous," and receiving as righteous those who have faith in Christ. In other words, God gave Christ to die in order to reconcile with His own justice the justification of believers.

Notice here an aim slightly different from that set forth in the words foregoing, "for a proof of His righteousness." These earlier words imply that apart from the death of Christ the righteousness of God would be obscured by the justification of believers. The concluding words of verse 26 imply that to justify sinners without some such propitiation as that here described would be actually unrighteous.

This development of thought is a legitimate inference.

For justice ever demands to be made conspicuously manifest. A judge who, without strong reason, permits his justice even to be obscured is no good pattern of justice.

The above exposition implies that the death of Christ was absolutely needful for man's salvation, and that this necessity lay in the justice of God, which forbade the justification of sinners except by means of the propitiation found in the blood of Christ. For God cannot possibly be unjust. Consequently, if by the death of Christ God harmonized with His own justice the pardon of sin, He thus made possible that which otherwise would have been impossible. Moreover, if this end could have been attained by a less costly sacrifice, we may infer with confidence that God would not have paid for it a price infinitely and needlessly great. Indeed, had He done so, it would have been no proof of His love; for genuine love never prompts a needless sacrifice. In other words, the passage before us implies that to fallen man the only way of salvation was through the cross of Christ, and that every other way was closed by the justice of God; that in the very nature of God there was a barrier to the justification of sinners, and that God Himself broke down this barrier by giving Christ to die.

This plain inference cannot be evaded by expounding the words *εἰς τὸ εἶναι αὐτὸν δίκαιον* as describing not a purpose, but only an actual result of God's surrender of Christ to die, "so that He is Himself just and a justifier," etc. For the preposition *εἰς* followed by an infinitive mood with the neuter article is constantly used in Greek and in the New Testament to describe a purpose; so Romans i. 11, "That ye may be strengthened"; chapter viii. 29, *εἰς τὸ εἶναι πρῶτ.*, "That He may be first-born among many brethren"; xi. 11, "In order to provoke them"; xii. 2; and elsewhere frequently. To denote a mere result, the Greek language has the common conjunction, *ὥστε* with infinitive or indicative, as in chapter vii. 4 and 6. In verse 25, *εἰς ἐνδειξιν* indis-

putably denotes a purpose ; and it is difficult to give to the same preposition another sense in verse 26. Moreover, this exposition, even if grammatically admissible, would not greatly change the practical significance of the sentence. For if the death of Christ has, as matter of mere result, harmonized the justification of believers with the justice of God, then through His death that which without it would have been unjust and therefore impossible has become just and actual. So remarkable a result could hardly have come without a deliberate design of God. In other words, the result implies the design.

Nor would the practical significance of these words be much altered if we gave to them a merely logical sense, "in order that He may be seen to be just and a justifier," etc. For if to justify sinners by mere prerogative was not in itself inconsistent with the justice of God, it is difficult to conceive that its justice was incapable of demonstration except at the infinite cost of the death of Christ. In any case, God could not possibly permit His justice to be permanently obscured. And if, as St. Paul here asserts, God gave Christ to die in order to vindicate His justice, we infer with confidence that for this end nothing less than this costly sacrifice was sufficient, and that consequently the death of Christ was demanded by the justice of God. This being so, there is no reason why we should not give to these plain words their simple meaning.

We have now learnt, by careful exposition of his own words, that St. Paul taught that God gave Christ to die in order to harmonize with His own justice the justification of believers. If so, their justification was impossible apart from the death of Christ ; and the impossibility lay in the essential righteousness of God.

These results, derived from our examination of the ultimate purpose of the death of Christ as set forth in verse 26, will explain the language used in verses 25 and 24, and the

New Testament teaching expounded in my earlier papers. For if, as we have just seen, St. Paul taught that the justification of sinners was impossible apart from the death of Christ, and that God gave Christ to die in order to remove this impossibility and to save all who believe, then is His death the divinely given means of their salvation; and St. Paul could correctly say that God set forth Christ to be a propitiation through faith in His blood. For through His death and by God's design believers escape the due penalty of their sins. We understand also 1 John ii. 2, "and Himself is a propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only, but also for all the world"; and chapter iv. 10, "sent His Son to be a propitiation for our sins."

We understand now "the redemption which is in Christ Jesus" in verse 24. For we have learnt that whereas apart from the death of Christ forgiveness was impossible, now through His death all who believe are justified. Consequently in Him there is liberation from the guilt and stain and bondage of sin, and this liberation has cost the price of (Matthew xx. 28, Mark x. 45) His life and of (1 Peter i. 19) His precious blood. These are our ransom as being the costly means of our salvation.

This exposition relieves us from the difficulty of saying to whom was paid the ransom price of our salvation. It was paid to no one. The phraseology before us is only a metaphorical and expressive mode of asserting the costliness of our salvation. The metaphor underlying this phraseology is one of the most frequent in human language and thought. Whatever is obtained with difficulty, with effort or toil or pain, we speak of as costing this effort or toil or pain, even when no one receives the price we pay. And only in this sense is the death of Christ the ransom of our life.

We understand also the absolute necessity of the death of Christ as asserted in Matthew xvi. 21, "He must need

go away to Jerusalem . . . and be put to death." For if, apart from the death of Christ, the justice of God forbade the justification of sinners, His death was absolutely needful for the work He came to accomplish. This necessity moved the great Teacher to put Himself, of His own free will and in the prime of life, in the hands of men who He knew would kill Him. Thus are explained all the passages expounded in my earlier papers which assert or imply the necessity of the death of Christ for our salvation, of those which speak of Him as deliberately laying down His life, and of those which call attention to His death as in a special sense, and as distinguished from His example and teaching, a means of our salvation. In other words, the passage now before us is a key which unlocks the teaching of the entire New Testament about the death of Christ in its relation to the salvation of men.

The correctness of our exposition of this passage will be confirmed in subsequent papers by the logical and practical inferences which in the Epistle to the Romans St. Paul derives from the fundamental statement now expounded, and by other passages in other epistles in which we shall find similar teaching.

It must be admitted that the above explanation needs to be itself explained. It raises questions as serious as those which it answers. We still ask, Why cannot a just ruler pardon by mere prerogative? And with still greater perplexity we ask, How does the death of the Innocent harmonize with the justice of God the pardon of the guilty? These difficult questions we must postpone until we have completed our study of the teaching of the New Testament on the purpose and the significance of the death of Christ.

Meanwhile something has been accomplished. We have found, in St. Paul's most systematic exposition of the Gospel of Christ and immediately following his enunciation

of his fundamental doctrine of justification through faith, a careful statement setting forth the relation of the death of Christ to this great doctrine. And we have seen that this statement gives unity and intelligibility to the teaching on this subject of the four Gospels, the Book of Acts, the Epistles of Peter, and the Book of Revelation. In other papers we shall find that the teaching of St. Paul just expounded underlies his entire thought touching the death of Christ in its relation to the salvation of men.

In my next paper we shall consider the teaching of the remainder of the Epistle to the Romans and that of the Epistles to the Galatians and the Corinthians.

JOSEPH AGAR BEET.