

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

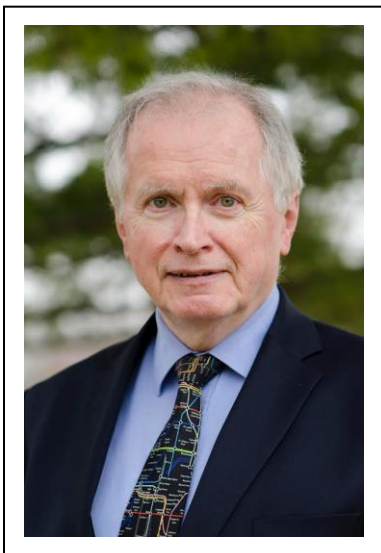
The Center of the Whole World

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But now a righteousness from God, apart from law has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement, through faith in his blood. He did this to demonstrate his justice, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished—he did it to demonstrate his justice at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus.

Romans 3:21–26 (NIV84)



There are some parts of the Bible that are “loose” in the sense that they are not too tight, not too condensed. They flow easily; you can readily follow the line of thought. Often they are narratives. There are other parts that are tightly reasoned; they are hard to understand and may cause your eyes to glaze over when you read right through them. You encounter so many theological words that unless you know the passage extremely well, you are reading the words, but you are not following it. It is just too much too fast. You must unpack such passages phrase by phrase if you are to gain more than vague impressions. Romans 3:21–26 is one of those passages.

After reading a text like this, what you have to do is slow down and unpack it. After you have carefully unpacked it, then you read it again—and immediately you see how it all hangs together. So if you have just read Romans 3:21–26 again and still feel that you have not grasped its flow, hang in there. By the end of this chapter, you will be able to see how what God here says through the apostle Paul hangs

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together. Perhaps you will also see why Martin Luther called this passage “the chief point and the very central place of the epistle to the Romans and of the whole Bible.”¹

Where the Passage Falls in Romans

The passage needs to be set within the framework of Romans. This paragraph is located immediately after the large block of material that runs from 1:18 to 3:20. The central point of that block is to prove, quite frankly, that we are all damned. Romans 1:18 begins the section: “The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of human beings who suppress the truth by their wickedness.” Then Paul lays out the evidence as to how we suppress the truth. Paul argues that we deny the signs of God’s eternal power that are found in the creation itself. We refuse to acknowledge him as God, utterly abandon any sense of dependence and gratitude, care nothing for what brings glory to God, and end up corrupting our own thought processes. As Paul puts it, “Their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened” (1:21). Ultimately we distort even our own sexuality, our maleness and femaleness, slouching comfortably toward infidelity and perversion. Both Jews and Gentiles, Paul insists, stand under God’s well-deserved curse. The Jews have not lived up to the standard of the great revelation that we now call the Old Testament (the Hebrew canon). Gentiles have not lived up to what they *do* know, whether that knowledge has come from their very constitution as human beings (after all, all of us were made in the image of God) or from socially constrained moral structures. In sum: our consciences are strong enough to condemn us because whatever revelation we have received—whether from the Bible, from nature, or from our very constitution as human beings—we do not live up to what we *do* know. We stand under the righteous wrath of God.

Paul’s argument in 1:18–3:20 clashes powerfully with our culture. It ends in 3:9–18 with a list of quotations from the Old Testament designed to prove one point: all human beings are sinful. It is a terrifying passage, and it bears on one of the hardest truths to communicate today:

There is no one righteous, not even one;
there is no one who understands,
no one who seeks God.
All have turned away,
they have together become worthless;
there is no one who does good,

¹ Margin of the Luther Bible, on Rom. 3:23ff.

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not even one. (Ps. 14:1–3; cf. 53:1–3; Eccl. 7:20)

Their throats are open graves;
their tongues practice deceit. (Ps. 5:9)

The poison of vipers is on their lips. (Ps. 140:3)

Their mouths are full of cursing and bitterness. (Ps. 10:7)

Their feet are swift to shed blood;
ruin and misery mark their ways,
and the way of peace they do not know. (Isa. 59:7–8)

There is no fear of God before their eyes. (Ps. 36:1)

When I do university missions today, for the most part I am speaking to biblical illiterates. The hardest truth to get across to them is not the existence of God, the Trinity, the deity of Christ, Jesus' substitutionary atonement, or Jesus' resurrection. Even if they think these notions are a bit silly, they are likely to respond, "Oh, so that's what Christians believe." They can see a certain coherence to these notions. No, the hardest truth to get across to this generation is what the Bible says about sin.

Sin is generally a snicker-word: you say it, and everybody snickers. There is no shame attached to it. It is so hard to get across how ugly sin is to God. When I talk about sin, I have "gone to meddling." I am not talking about a group of external ideas that people may or may not believe; I am talking about a category they feel they must repudiate. There is so much in our culture that teaches us that we define our own sins, either individually or socially (i.e., we belong to a certain community that has established its own heritage of rights and wrongs). For somebody else to come in and say, "This is right" or "That's wrong" sounds like manipulation from the outside, and they think that it fails to recognize the social origins of all constructions of good and evil. They sometimes become so indignant with this notion of sin that I must spend a lot of time talking about it!

We live in an age where the one wrong thing to say is that somebody else is wrong. One of the impacts of postmodern epistemology is that we all have our own independent points of view, and we look at things from the perspective of our own small interpretive communities. What is sin to one group is not sin to another group. But not only does the Bible insist that there is such a thing as sin, it insists that the heart of its ugly offensiveness is its horrible odiousness to God—how it offends God. Thus, Romans 1:18 begins not with analyzing sin from a social perspective but by observing God's response to it: "The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men

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who suppress the truth by their wickedness.” Then chapter 2 shows that religion by itself does not help, and chapter 3 concludes that Jews and Gentiles alike are all under wrath. All of this is climaxed by the list of quotations I’ve just cited from 3:9–18. Even though this is very hard to absorb in our culture, I cannot too strongly insist that unless this stance is understood, our passage, Romans 3:21–26, will make very little sense because we will not grasp the nature of the problem being addressed.

4

Some of us have a view of the gospel that makes Jesus out to be something like an automobile club repairman: Jesus is a nice man, he’s a very, very nice man, and when you break down, he comes along and fixes you. Yet what Paul depicts here is that the nature of our brokenness turns first and foremost on our offensiveness to God. It is the wrath of God that is disclosed from heaven. Paul is certainly not denying that there are many kinds of social parameters to sin; he is not overlooking the raw fact that sinners can also be victims. Perpetrators have very often been the abused. Sin is a social thing. We commit sin, and we affect others. On the other hand, if we think of ourselves only in terms of victimhood, then we need only a healer or repairer. If all the damage we do is exclusively horizontal, what we need *most* is social transformation. Of course, the Bible can picture God and his salvation in these sorts of categories. Yet in the Bible the most fundamental category of all to which the biblical writers resort in order to portray the nature of the problem is our offensiveness before God. It follows that what is needed first and foremost for us to be saved—for this situation to change—is to provide a means by which we may be reconciled to this God.

As a rule, unless people agree on what the problem is, they cannot agree on what the solution is. Unless we can agree on what we are being saved from, we cannot agree on what salvation itself is. For example, if we decide that the fundamental human problem is simply our location, our sense of loneliness in the universe, our sense of inadequacy, or our pathetic levels of self-esteem, we will tilt the gospel to meet this perceived need. “Don’t you realize that the gospel will give you your needed sense of self-importance? That will solve the problem of self-esteem.” “Don’t you recognize that the fundamental human problem is economic injustice? The good news is that God is all for justice. Preach this gospel and our cultures will be transformed.” I hasten to add that the Bible does dare to address matters of how we are to think of ourselves—matters that therefore bear on self-esteem—and it is concerned with justice. Yet on the face of it Paul is convinced that the root problem is our rebellion against God, our fascination with idolatry, our grotesque de-godding of God.

Some might reply, “Haven’t you ever heard of wonderful organizations like ‘Doctors Without Borders’? Don’t you believe in the notion of common grace? We do so much

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good in the world.” Paul does not deny any of that. Cornelius, prior to becoming a Christian, was thought of as a good man in relative terms.

Yet in the absolute sense of measuring up to God’s standards, this is what Paul says. And the interesting thing about this long list of references is that they are all from the Old Testament. Paul quotes the Bible to underscore that this is what God says about this situation.

5

Even when we are doing the good—whatever it is that we do—it is still so habitually done independently of God because we are going to be our own gods. We are at the center of the universe. Thus, we end up de-godding God in order to be able to sing with Frank Sinatra, “I did it *my way*.” This is the very heart of all idolatry. All the bad stuff that sluices down the corridors of history emerges finally through that vaunted, awful self-independence. The fundamental problem is the universal idolatry of humans: we de-god God.

Even when we understand that this is Paul’s argument in Romans 1:18–3:20, for many of us it is still difficult to feel empathy with Paul’s stance as he provides his list of Old Testament quotations in 3:9–20. They seem a bit over the top, almost a grotesque negativism. After all, you do not go around saying, “I’m at the center of the universe.”

On the other hand, if someone were suddenly to hold up a picture of your graduating class from high school or college and say, “This is your graduating class,” which face do you look for first—just to make sure it is there?

Or if you have an argument—a real humdinger, a knock-down-drag-’em-out-one-in-ten-years argument, a real first-class roustabout argument—and you go away just seething, thinking of all the things that you could have said, all the things you should have said, all the things you would have said if you had thought of them fast enough, and then you replay the whole argument in your mind—who wins?

I have lost a lot of arguments in my time, but I have never lost a mental rerun.

The problem is that if I think that I am at the center of the universe, then most likely you do, too. And frankly, you stupid twit, how dare you set yourself up over against me? And now, instead of God being at the center, each human being, each of God’s own image bearers, thinks he or she is at the center. We find our self-identity *not* in being God’s creature, but in any other person, institution, value system, ritual—anything so that God cannot be heard, cannot be allowed to make his ultimate claim as our Creator and Judge. “God [we say]—if he or she or it exists—jolly well better serve *me*, or else, quite frankly, I will find another God.” That is the beginning of idolatry.

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“I’m looking for the kind of God I can believe in,” you say. But this stance is both tragic and foolish, is it not? For it presupposes that the “I” is the ultimate criterion, the ultimate god. Surely the real question is, “What kind of God is there?” Otherwise you are simply manufacturing your own god, and that is what idolatry is.

Scarcely less horrific, this stance means that I am now also in conflict with all these other people who want to be at the center of the universe, and there is the beginning of war, hate, rape, and fences—all because I say, “I will be god.”

God finds this deeply, profoundly, personally offensive. It is not merely tragic for us since we are destroying ourselves; it is also abominably disgusting to God. It is degrading to God. That is why the Old Testament connects God’s wrath with idolatry. That is also why in the New Testament covetousness can be talked about in terms of idolatry. If you want something badly enough, that thing becomes god for you. It is idolatry, which means that instead of wanting God, you want the thing, which de-gods God. That is why Jesus says that the first commandment is to love God with all your heart and soul and mind and strength. This is the one commandment that you break when you break any other commandment. Whenever we sin, this is the reason why, regardless of the sin, the most offended person is God.

Not too long ago I read a piece called “Escape from Nihilism” by J. Budziszewski (pronounced boo-jee-SHEF-ski). Before he became a Christian, Budziszewski earned his PhD in ethics, forcefully arguing that we make our own rules for right and wrong, establishing our own moral structures. At the time, he was an atheistic philosopher of religion who taught at the University of Texas. After he abandoned his atheism, he reflected on his shift:

I have already noted in passing that everything goes wrong without God. This is true even of the good things he has given us, such as our minds. One of the good things I’ve been given is a stronger than average mind. I don’t make the observation to boast; human beings are given diverse gifts to serve him in diverse ways. The problem is that a strong mind that refuses the call to serve God has its own way of going wrong. When some people flee from God they rob and kill. When others flee from God they do a lot of drugs and have a lot of sex. When I fled from God I didn’t do any of those things; my way of fleeing was to get stupid. Though it always comes as a surprise to intellectuals, there are some forms of stupidity that one must be highly intelligent and educated to achieve. God keeps them in his arsenal to pull down mulish pride, and I discovered them all. That is how I ended up doing a doctoral dissertation to prove that we make up the difference between good and evil and that we aren’t responsible for what we do. I remember now that I even taught these things to students. Now that’s sin.

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It was also agony. You cannot imagine what a person has to do to himself — well, if you are like I was, maybe you can — what a person has to do to himself to go on believing such nonsense. St. Paul said that the knowledge of God's law is "written on our hearts, our consciences also bearing witness." The way natural law thinkers put this is to say that they constitute the deep structure of our minds. That means that so long as we have minds, we can't *not* know them. Well, I was unusually determined not to know them; therefore I had to destroy my mind. I resisted the temptation to believe in good with as much energy as some saints resist the temptation to neglect good. For instance, I loved my wife and children, but I was determined to regard this love as merely a subjective preference with no real and objective value. Think what this did to my very capacity to love them. After all, love is a commitment of the will to the true good of another person, and how can one's will be committed to the true good of another person if he denies the reality of good, denies the reality of persons, and denies that his commitments are in his control?

Visualize a man opening up the access panels of his mind and pulling out all the components that have God's image stamped on them. The problem is that they all have God's image stamped on them, so the man can never stop. No matter how many he pulls out, there are still more to pull. I was that man. Because I pulled out more and more, there was less and less that I could think about. But because there was less and less that I could think about, I thought I was becoming more and more focused. Because I believed things that filled me with dread, I thought I was smarter and braver than the people who didn't believe them. I thought I saw an emptiness at the heart of the universe that was hidden from their foolish eyes. But I was the fool.²

Then he describes how grace began to call him and recounts steps to his belief in God. Here is a man who is beginning to understand Romans 1:18–3:20.

I have a friend in Australia who often does university missions, and he occasionally preaches a message entitled "Atheists Are Fools, and Agnostics Are Cowards." Now, I am not suggesting that this is a title all of us should choose. He is an Aussie, and Aussies tend to be a little more direct than most of the rest of us. But at a certain level, it is easy to sympathize with what he is saying. From God's perspective, it is the fool who has said in his heart, "There is no God" (Ps. 14:1).

² In *re:generation Quarterly* 4/1 (1998): 12–15.

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The point is that unless you really see the lostness of us human beings in our rebellion against God, it is very difficult to make sense of what comes next.

What Paul Establishes in Romans 3:21–26

In the passage in front of us, Paul talks about the solution, how we are to be just before God. The controlling expression in this paragraph is “the righteousness of God.” The expression, which could be rendered “the justice of God” or “the justification of God,” occurs four times in these six verses. The verb *to justify* occurs an additional two times, and the adjective *just* or *righteous* occurs once. This whole passage has to do with how a person can be considered just before this holy God, granted that our condition is as miserable as it is made out to be in the first two and a half chapters. To get at the heart of Paul’s solution, we will reflect on the four steps that he establishes in his argument.

1) *Paul establishes the relationship of God’s righteousness in Christ to the Old Testament’s law covenant (3:21)*

“But now” introduces something new into Paul’s argument. This is not just a logical transition: “but now, at this step in the argument ...” Paul can use “but now” in diverse ways, but in this context the expression means, “*But now*, at this point in the stream of redemptive history.” Something new has come along.

What is the nature of the change that Paul here envisages? In the past there was something else, “but now” what is there?

A popular but misguided view is that in the Old Testament God was especially wrathful, “but now” in the New Testament God is especially loving and gracious. The argument runs like this: in the old covenant, God demonstrated himself in righteous wrath, not least in famines, plagues, and war. Now, however, under the terms of the new covenant established by the cross, God displays a gentler side to his character in the gospel. Many Christians think that in the Old Testament God is almost bad-tempered, while in the New Testament Jesus tells his followers to turn the other cheek—and he himself goes to the cross on our behalf. So when Paul introduces his paragraph with the words “but now,” he is preparing to paint a portrait of God that is a little softer than what is found in the Old Testament.

For at least three reasons, this view is a huge mistake. First, while there is plenty of judgment in the Old Testament, those same Old Testament documents affirm, with equal fervor, God’s kindness, generosity, love, and grace. For instance:

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The Lord is compassionate and gracious,
slow to anger, abounding in love.³
He will not always accuse,
nor will he harbor his anger forever....
As a father has compassion on his children,
so the Lord has compassion on those who fear him;
for he knows how we are formed,
he remembers that we are dust. (Ps. 103:8–9, 13–14)

There are many, many passages of that sort. The psalmists are constantly praising God for his mercy, patience, forbearance, and so forth. The Old Testament does not picture God as some bad-tempered, short-fused boor who is anxious to say, “Zap! Gotcha!”

Second, this view does not adequately account for the New Testament’s depiction of God’s wrath. It is not as if once we turn to the New Testament all the clouds suddenly lift. Yes, there are some wonderful descriptions of God and his love, and Jesus does teach us to turn the other cheek. But almost all of the most colorful metaphorical depictions of hell come from Jesus—not exactly “gentle Jesus, meek and mild.” Before one decides that the God of the New Testament is displayed exclusively in terms of sweetness, kindness, and light, it is worth remembering passages such as Revelation 14:17–20:

Another angel came out of the temple in heaven, and he too had a sharp sickle. Still another angel, who had charge of the fire, came from the altar and called in a loud voice to him who had the sharp sickle, “Take your sharp sickle and gather the clusters of grapes from the earth’s vine, because its grapes are ripe.” The angel swung his sickle on the earth, gathered its grapes and threw them into the great winepress of God’s wrath. They were trampled in the winepress outside the city, and blood flowed out of the press, rising as high as the horses’ bridles for a distance of 1,600 stadia.

This imagery—and it is imagery—is drawn from ancient wine vats, stone vats into which one threw ripe grapes. The servant girls would then kick off their sandals, pull up their skirts, and trample down the grapes. At the bottom of the vats were little holes with channels under them, and the grape juice would get squeezed out of the grapes to run off to be collected in bottles. In this adaptation of such imagery, *people* are being thrown into this winepress of God’s wrath, and they are being trampled down until their blood flows to a distance of 200 miles at the height of a horse’s bridle. Now, you tell me that the picture of God in the New Testament is of a softer, gentler, kinder God.

³ Cf. Ex. 34:6; Num. 14:18; Neh. 9:17; Pss. 86:15; 103:8; 145:8; Joel 2:13; Jonah 4:2; Nah. 1:3.

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I suspect that the reason we even think like that—even for a moment—is that in the Old Testament the pictures of God’s wrath are temporal, expressed primarily in historical terms. In the New Testament the pictures of God’s wrath are primarily (though not exclusively) in final eschatological and apocalyptic terms—and most of us do not really believe the latter, so we are not frightened of them. Our culture is so present-oriented that we filter out depictions of final judgment; we are not frightened of hell. We are far more frightened of war, old age, sickness, disease, and bankruptcy. We are more frightened of temporal judgments than final judgment. We skirt through the pictures of judgment in the New Testament, with the result that they do not bother us much. But when it comes to plague, pestilence, and war, then we are scared witless. That says much about our focus on this present life.

The move from the Old Testament to the New Testament is not a move from a wrathful God to a loving God. Rather, the New Testament ratchets up both themes. The depictions of both God’s wrath and God’s love are ratcheted up in intensity in the New Testament documents. The cross spectacularly displays God’s love, but it also displays God’s wrath against sin; it massively underscores God’s condemnation of sin.

Third, this view does not make adequate sense of the rest of Romans 3:21. In a nutshell, Paul’s argument in this verse is this: in redemptive history God’s people prior to the cross were under the Mosaic law covenant, “but now” God’s righteousness has been made known apart from that law covenant.

The prepositional phrase “apart from the law” can be translated in at least two ways. It modifies either “the righteousness of God” or “has been made known.”

1) “But now *a righteousness from God apart from law* has been made known.” On this reading, the righteousness from God is itself apart from law (e.g., apart from keeping the law). This view misses the point of the passage.

2) “But now *apart from law* the righteousness of God has been made known.” It is not a different righteousness; rather, the righteousness of God “has been made known” in a different way, namely, apart from the law covenant. From Moses on, all the demonstration of God’s righteousness in the Old Testament is bound up with the structure of the Mosaic covenant. That was the covenant under which God’s people found themselves. “But now” we have come to the end of the law covenant. Paul introduces a new covenant, which Jeremiah pointed to six hundred years before Christ (Jer. 31:31ff.). The Old Testament anticipated a priest-king in the order of Melchizedek, not simply a priest in the order of Levi bound up with the Mosaic covenant (Ps. 110). So now this righteousness from God is here, and we need it to solve the problem of the first

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two and a half chapters to be just before God. This display of God's righteousness has been revealed apart from the law covenant.

Before telling us exactly how this works, however, Paul hastens to insist that even if this righteousness from God has been disclosed apart from law, he does not want people to think that the righteousness from God has nothing to do with the law covenant or that the new covenant is so completely cut off from the Old Testament that quite frankly we can now scrap the Old Testament. Paul immediately adds another clause: the righteousness from God of which he is speaking is that "to which the Law and the Prophets testify." Paul insists that if you rightly read the Old Testament, you will discover that these very writings, rightly understood, point forward to, testify to, anticipate, and prophesy what has culminated in Christ. Yes, we are under a new covenant, but the old covenant anticipated what now is. The new covenant is the fulfillment of the old covenant.

Reading the Old Testament in this way should not be surprising to Christians. After all, we do something similar when we read the initial Old Testament Passover account. The angel of death passed over the land of Egypt, and all those who were in homes protected by the blood of a lamb sprinkled on the doorposts and lintel were saved from wrath: the angel of death "passed over" them. Paul then writes, "Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed" (1 Cor. 5:7). By his death, we have been saved from well-deserved wrath: Christ was sacrificed for us, and wrath has "passed over" us. In short, there are good reasons for thinking that Old Testament structures are themselves looking forward to something. They are announcing something beyond themselves.

Another Old Testament example is Yom Kippur (the Day of Atonement). The letter to the Hebrews works this out in great detail. In the Old Testament the priest took the blood of a bull and a goat and went in to the Holy of Holies, the most holy place, the cube-shaped room in the tabernacle, and sprinkled on the top of the ark of the covenant the blood of the animals, both for his own sins and for the sins of the people. But the ultimate sacrifice, the ultimate payment for sins, is surely not the blood of a bull or a goat. How could such blood pay for anything in a final way? The writer to the Hebrews lines up his arguments to show that such blood finally points forward to the blood of Christ himself (see esp. Hebrews 9–10).

So also in the passage before us. Under the terms of the old covenant, it was impossible to think of God's righteousness apart from the many strictures of that Old Testament covenant. "But now" a righteousness has been revealed *apart* from that covenant—even though, Paul insists, the law and the prophets bore anticipatory witness to what Jesus is putting in place under the terms of the new covenant. Paul establishes the revelation of

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God's righteousness in its relation to the Old Testament; he sets forth the roots of the good news in the pages of the Old Testament.

2) *Paul establishes the availability of God's righteousness for all human beings, without ethnic distinction but on condition of faith (3:22–23)*

Verse 22 says, "This righteousness [i.e., the righteousness described in 3:21] from God comes through *faith* in Jesus Christ to all who *believe*." In English, the noun *faith* sounds different from the verb *believe*. The two English words come from two separate roots. But in Greek these words share the same root: *pist-* (*faith* is *pistis* and *to believe* is *pisteuō*). Here is a rendering that uses English words to show you how they sound the same in Greek: "This righteousness from God comes through *trust* in Jesus Christ to all who *trust*." The word *trust* can function as both a noun and a verb. But that translation, like the Greek, sounds a bit repetitious.

Partly because of that repetition, people have sometimes taken the first word, "faith," to mean what it sometimes means elsewhere: not "faith" (or "trust"), but "faithfulness." They read it this way: "This righteousness from God comes through the *faithfulness* [or trustworthiness] of Jesus Christ to all who *believe*." This gets rid of the repetition: the first occurrence refers to *Jesus'* faithfulness, and the second to *our* faith. Moreover, this rendering makes theological sense. It still maintains an emphasis on faith ("to all who *believe*"), but it "comes through the faithfulness of Jesus Christ." The New Testament (particularly John's Gospel and Hebrews) certainly emphasizes Jesus' faithfulness: he obeys his Father; he is faithful to the very end; he is faithful over the whole house where God has made him the Son. In short, this alternative rendering makes a certain kind of theological sense. Yet it really isn't what the text means. Throughout Romans 3 and 4, Paul repeatedly returns to the notion of "faith," and in every single case he is referring to *our* faith, not to *Jesus'* faithfulness.⁴

That raises the question, "Why then does Paul repeat himself?" If this is talking about our faith in Jesus, why does he repeat it ("to all who *believe*")? The reason is bound up with the little word "all": "This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to *all* who believe [*because*] there is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." The reason for the repetition is to emphasize "all," which connects this paragraph with 1:18–3:20: *all* are under sin, *all* are condemned, and *all* need God's righteousness. To paraphrase it again: "This righteousness from God comes through faith

⁴ The finest linguistic treatment of the "faith of Christ" debate ("faith in Christ" vs. "faithfulness of Christ") is by Moisés Silva, "Faith Versus Works of Law in Galatians," in *Justification and Variegated Nomism: The Paradoxes of Paul*, ed. D. A. Carson, Peter T. O'Brien, and Mark A. Seifrid, WUNT 181 (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004), 217–48.

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in Jesus Christ to *all* who have faith. For *there is no difference* between Jew and Gentile, for *all* sin and fall short of the glory of God." To fall short of the glory of God, to fall short of giving him the glory that he deserves, lies at the center of the idolatry the entire Bible condemns, and all of us are guilty, as the apostle has just taken almost three chapters to demonstrate.

In other words Paul spends two and a half chapters showing that all human beings sin, and the only way that this "righteousness from God" that is now appearing can address the sweep of that universal need is if it is available in principle to all without ethnic distinction: Jew and Gentile alike. Jew and Gentile are both condemned and both savable. This righteousness from God is available not simply to Jews under the terms of the old covenant or to those who become Jews by taking on the restrictions of the old covenant (e.g., being circumcised); it comes to *all* who have faith. It is open in principle to all human beings without ethnic distinction but on condition of faith. That is part of what makes this new covenant *new*.

The old Mosaic covenant was bound up with a certain ethnic group, the Israelites. If you wanted to participate in the blessings of that covenant, it was not enough just to go and live in Israel. To become a legal Israelite, sooner or later you had to come under the terms of the covenant. The blessings of the covenant were mediated through the terms of that covenant. We might paraphrase: "But now a righteousness from God has appeared apart from that law covenant, although that law covenant testifies to this. And this righteousness from God comes through trust in Jesus Christ—to *all* who trust in Jesus Christ. For there is no difference between Jew and Gentile, for all sin and fall short of the glory of God." That is precisely what ties this paragraph to the previous two and a half chapters. The solution meets the need. There is not a whiff of racism here. We are all guilty before God, and the cross is our only hope.

If we are Christians, we are used to this sweep of things, this vision of the grace of God that crosses all ethnicities. Nevertheless, the wonder of it needs to fall on us again. Around the throne on the last day, there will be many men and women from every tongue and tribe and people and nation—not just white, middle-class Americans (see Revelation 4–5). This spectacular diversity is something that wonderfully emphasizes the unity. See, for example, Ephesians 2, where Jew and Gentile are brought together into one new humanity in Christ Jesus because we have been saved by grace alone through faith alone in order to produce the good works that God has ordained from before the foundation of the world.

This is similar to the end of Galatians 3. As far as our standing before God is concerned, if this gospel is true, then in Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female. This is an incredibly sweeping breadth, for this righteousness from God is open

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to those who have faith in Christ—to *all* who have faith in Christ, for *all* are lost and fall under sin's condemnation and desperately need the forgiveness that only God himself provides.

All people without distinction are both condemned and savable: Jew and Gentile alike, Jews and Arabs alike, blacks and whites alike, Westerners and Easterners alike, Northerners and Southerners alike. Pragmatically, this needs to be worked out. Of course, there are some churches that are situated in neighborhoods that draw from only one ethnic group. In that case the way you demonstrate the truth of this passage may be by linking up with churches that are grounded in other ethnicities. Mix and match and swap ministers for a week or two—something to demonstrate that you are not simply *American* Christians but that you are *Christian* Christians. But if your church is in a neighborhood where the population is already diverse, ideally one of the things you should want to do, you should be *trying* to do, is demonstrate that community diversity in your congregation: a community of believers who are different but nevertheless have an incredible oneness and unity in Christ Jesus.

I suspect that if I were not a Christian, I would not spend a lot of time seeking out people who are very different from me. I like people who are like me. But if this gospel is important to me and important to you, then we will discover that we have links with the strangest people all over the world. Part of my job takes me to country after country. I have come to know brothers and sisters in Christ in many dozens of different ethnicities. This gospel, this righteousness from God, is for those who trust Christ—for *all* who trust Christ, for *all* have sinned and come short of the glory of God. Those deep commonalities must transcend our personal tastes in music, food, clothing style, economic status, sense of humor, intellectual interest, diverse national histories, and the like. Equally, it must drive our evangelism. Does not Jesus himself teach in the Sermon on the Mount that any pagan can find friends among people who are like him, but it takes the grace of God to transcend those kinds of limitations?

3) *Paul establishes the source of God's righteousness in the gracious provision of Christ Jesus as the propitiation for our sins (3:24–25a)*

Two terms in these verses need just a wee bit of unpacking.

REDEMPTION

In our world a word like *redemption* belongs to God-talk. In other words you normally do not talk fluently about redemption in everyday life. Redemption is something religious people talk about. Until fairly recent times, however—and still in some sectors—

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redemption was frequently used in an economic sense. For instance, you might redeem a mortgage. People do not speak of “redemption money” anymore, but they did a bare fifty or sixty years ago, when there were a lot more pawn shops around. If you needed some money in the great depression, you might hawk a watch. You would sell it to the pawn shop. They would keep it for three weeks or six months or whatever agreed time period before they would sell it, and in that time you could go back and redeem it; that is, you could pay money to have it freed (the amount for which you sold it plus a percentage)—to have it released so that you could have it back again. You could redeem your watch.

In the ancient world, redemption language was common. Of course, it is found in Scripture (e.g., God redeems Israel from slavery), but it was common economic language in the Greco-Roman world. It was a word commonly used on the streets in any imperial city. It was used, for example, for the redemption of slaves. In the ancient world you might become a slave as a result of losing a war or because marauding parties attacked your territory and captured you and your family. But sometimes in the ancient world you became a slave because of economic circumstances. There were no bankruptcy laws to protect you—no chapter eleven or chapter thirteen (to use categories that are familiar to Americans). So suppose you borrow some money to start a business, and you lose your shirt during an economic downturn. What do you do? You sell yourself and maybe your whole family into slavery. There is nothing else you can do. So many people became slaves in the ancient world as a result of bankruptcy.

But suppose that you have a well-to-do cousin twenty-five miles away (a day’s journey) who hears that you have sold yourself into slavery. Not only is this cousin well-to-do; he is pretty decent. So he decides to buy you back. He redeems you. He travels a day’s journey to where you have become a slave, and he makes an arrangement with your owner. There was adequate provision for this under the law. The way it normally worked was like this: the redeemer paid the price money for the slave to a pagan temple plus a small cut for the temple priests (and how small a cut was variable!). Then the temple paid the price money to the owner of the slave, and the slave was then transferred to the ownership of this temple’s god. Thus, the slave was redeemed from the slavery to the slave owner, in order to become a slave to the god. Of course, if you are a slave to a pagan god, that basically means that you are free and can do anything you want. It was in part a legal fiction in order to say that the person does not lose his slave status but nevertheless is freed from slavery in the human sphere because the price has been paid. The man has now been redeemed.

Paul picks up that language and says that Christians have been redeemed from slavery to sin, but as a result of this, they have become slaves of Jesus Christ (see Romans 6).

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Many of our English translations say “*servant* of Jesus Christ,” but the word most commonly used is *doulos*, which always refers to a slave. We are *slaves* of Jesus Christ. We have been redeemed from slavery to sin. Somebody has paid the price. We sing it: we have been “redeemed by the blood of the Lamb.”

We are justified freely by grace, Paul writes, “through the *redemption* that came by Christ Jesus” (3:24). The slave cannot buy his own freedom; otherwise he would not be a slave. He cannot save himself!

Now, how does this work? Paul has still not explained it. It is not literal redemption purchased with money, and whatever it is that is paid is not literally paid to sin. In what sense, then, are we redeemed? What has freed us? How does it work? The answer: God presented Christ as a propitiation.

PROPIFIATION

Translations variously say “propitiation,” “expiation,” “sacrifice of atonement,” and even “remedy for defilement.” The best translation is “propitiation.” Of course, “propitiation” has to be explained. On the other hand, all of the terms have to be explained. “Sacrifice of atonement” is not patently obvious. If you must explain all available terms, you might as well explain the one that is closest to the original! In this case the best one is “propitiation.” But what does it mean?

The question is particularly important because much of Paul’s argument in this paragraph turns on it. Propitiation is the act by which someone (in this case, God) becomes propitious, that is, favorable. Propitiation is the sacrificial act by which someone becomes favorable.

In ancient paganism, propitiation worked like this. There were a lot of gods with various domains (god of the sea, god/goddess of fertility, god of speech, god of war, etc.) who were a bit whimsical and bad-tempered. Your job was to make them propitious (i.e., favorable) toward you. For example, if you wanted to take a sea voyage, you would make sure that the god of the sea, Neptune, was favorable by offering him a propitiating sacrifice in the hope that he would provide you with safe passage. So the object of the propitiating sacrifice is the god himself, and the purpose is to make the god propitious.

Expiation, by contrast, aims to cancel sin. Expiation is the sacrificial act by which sin is canceled, removed, “expiated.” The object of expiation is sin. By contrast, the object of propitiation, as we’ve seen, is God. Expiation refers to cancelling sin, and propitiation refers to satisfying or setting aside God’s wrath. The particular word used in Romans 3:25

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is used most commonly in the Old Testament to refer to a propitiating sacrifice that turns aside God's wrath.

In the 1930s, C. H. Dodd, a Welsh professor, wrote an essay that had a worldwide (disruptive) impact. He made a profession of faith during the Welsh revival in 1904–1905. By the 1930s he had become quite a liberal (but pious) theologian at the University of Manchester in Britain and later taught New Testament at the University of Cambridge. In his influential essay, he argued that this word in Romans 3:25 cannot possibly mean “propitiation” because in the pagan world humans offer propitiatory sacrifices to whimsical, bad-tempered gods, but according to the Bible, God is already so propitious and loving that he sent his Son (cf. John 3:16). If God is already so favorable to us that he gives his Son, how can one speak of the Son's sacrifice on the cross as making God favorable? God is already favorable or else he would not have sent his Son in the first place. So how can Jesus' death on the cross possibly be propitiation? How much more propitious can God become than giving us his Son in the first place?

Dodd insisted that the word must really mean “expiation (canceling sin), not “propitiation,” since God does not need to be made more favorable to us than he already is. Dodd's view became quite popular in the Western world. When he later edited the translation of the New English Bible, he so much hated the term *propitiation* (and did not really like the term *expiation* either) that he used the expression “remedy for defilement.” While on the senior committee that was discussing the translation of Romans 3, he was overheard to mutter under his breath, “What rubbish!” In light of this, someone wrote a limerick:

There was a professor called Dodd
Whose name was exceedingly odd.
He spelled, if you please,
His name with three Ds,
While one is sufficient for God.

Now, that riposte does not answer a single thing, but it is a peculiarly English way of handling theological controversy! It does not get anywhere near the heart of the issue, but it is clever.

Somebody eventually pointed out to Dodd that the previous two and a half chapters of Romans are headed up by 1:18, which states that there is some sense in which God's wrath *is* against us. Dodd denied that this is real wrath but rather a metaphorical way of

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talking about the inevitability of moral consequences: if you do bad things, bad things will happen to you. Dodd denied that God's wrath was actually personal.⁵

I am not sure we are reading the same Bible! When you read through the Bible, whatever else the wrath of God is, it is intensely personal. "I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me" (Ex. 20:5). The real danger of Dodd's analysis is that God does not have much invested in all of this. There is some sort of impersonal moral law in the universe, and God is merely presiding over things from a distance. If you do something bad, inevitably bad stuff happens to you. Watch out for bad karma! God's job is to come along and save you from bad karma. But that is not the God of the Bible! Every single sin that we commit is not simply transgression of some abstract moral code so that karma takes its toll. Sin in the Bible is first and foremost offense against God. Of course, the sin must be cancelled; that is expiation. But the God who has been offended must be satisfied; that is propitiation. It is also true that in the Bible expiation and propitiation hang together: it is difficult to see how you can have one without the other (which is why some translations prefer a global expression like "sacrifice of atonement"). But we cannot ever lose sight of the fact that God is personally offended by our anarchic rebellion and is judicially angry with us.

For example, David commits adultery and then murder. When the prophet Nathan confronts David, he repents and subsequently addresses God in a psalm in which he writes, "Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight" (Ps. 51:4). In one sense, of course, that was a lot of bunkum, pure hogwash. He certainly sinned against Bathsheba (he seduced her and committed adultery with her); he sinned against her husband, Uriah the Hittite (he had him bumped off); he sinned against the baby in Bathsheba's womb (the baby died, but even if the child had lived he would have been a bastard, never knowing the man who was his mother's husband); he sinned against the military high command (he corrupted them in order to have Uriah bumped off); he sinned against his own family (he betrayed them); he sinned against the whole covenant people (he betrayed the nation as their chief officer). There is nobody that he has *not* sinned against, and now he has the cheek to say, "Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight" (Ps. 51:4). This makes you want to say, "David, get realistic here!" And yet there is another sense in which he is profoundly right. This is exactly the case, for what makes sin so sinful, awful, condemning, and damnably

⁵ For refutations of C. H. Dodd's view of propitiation, see Roger Nicole, "C. H. Dodd and the Doctrine of Propitiation," *Westminster Theological Journal* 17 (1954-1955): 117-57; and Leon Morris, *The Apostolic Preaching of the Cross*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965).

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heinous is not all of its social ramifications. It is that sin is first and foremost sin against an almighty and holy God.

That is why Jesus says that the first commandment is to love God with heart and soul and mind and strength. It is the first commandment because it is the one we always break when we break anything else. Always. It is awful. If you cheat on your income tax, the party most offended is God. If you cheat on your spouse, the party most offended is God. If you indulge in racism, the party most offended is God. If you nurture bitterness, the party most offended is God. That is what makes sin *sin*, and we must be reconciled to this God. We certainly need to have horizontal relationships restored as well, but if you have the horizontal relationships restored but do not have forgiveness from God, you do not have much! In eternal terms what you must have is God looking at you favorably.

The Bible pictures God's standing over against us in both wrath and love. That is what Dodd failed to see. An imperfect analogy is that parents can be ticked at their children at times while still loving them. God stands over against us in wrath because of our sin and his holiness. If he did not stand over against us in wrath when his holiness sees our sin, it would not say much for his holiness. "Oh, you can be a Hitler and bump off millions of people. I'm not bothered. No skin off my nose." Would that be more loving of God? Would that not contradict his holiness? Would it be more loving of God if he said to his image bearers who de-god him and relativize him, "Oh, no offense taken. I don't really care"? No, he stands over against us in wrath. God's wrath is the inevitable confrontation of God's holiness over against our sin. The remarkable thing is that God stands over against us in love just the same—not because we are so lovable or cute but because he is that kind of God. "But when the time had fully come, God sent his Son" (Gal. 4:4) to be the propitiation for our sins.

This marks the fundamental difference between pagan propitiation and Christian propitiation. In pagan propitiation, *a human being* offers a propitiatory sacrifice to make a god propitious. In Christian propitiation, *God the Father* sets forth Jesus as the propitiation to make *himself* propitious; God is both the subject and the object of propitiation. God is the one who provides the sacrifice precisely as a way of turning aside his own wrath. God the Father is thus the propitiator and the propitiated, and God the Son is the propitiation.

Have you ever used the following illustration to explain the gospel? God in the gospel, we sometimes say, is like a judge who has a guilty party before him at the bar, and he pronounces the sentence—whether it is five years in jail, a \$10,000 fine, or whatever. Then the judge steps down from the bench, takes off his robes, and takes the person's place in prison or writes out the check for the fine. And we say, "This is what the Christian gospel is all about. It is a substitution."

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I have used this or similar illustrations myself. But I do not do so anymore, for I have come to see that in itself the illustration is misleading. It is not entirely wrong, of course. It does explain something of penal substitution: another takes my place and bears my penalty. But the illustration is misleading because there is one part of it that is fundamentally skewed. In our world it cannot easily be made to align with justice. In Western judicial systems, the judge is supposed to be a neutral arbitrator or administrator of a system of law that is bigger than he or she is. The offense is not against the judge. If the judge is the one who got mugged, then when the mugger stands before him, the judge must recuse himself from the case because he is not supposed to be the offended party. That is why we speak of criminals committing an offense against the state or the law or the republic or the crown. We do not speak of an offense against the judge because if the offense is against the judge, the judge must recuse herself in order to preserve a certain kind of neutrality. If in our system a judge pronounced sentence and then went down and took the criminal's place, it would be a miscarriage of justice. The guilty person must pay. The judge does not have the right to set aside the law like that. Judges are supposed to be independent arbitrators of the system. The offense is not against them.

Let me put it another way. Suppose, God forbid, that you were attacked, beaten up horribly by a gang of thugs, raped, and left in the hospital half dead, defiled, violated, and with bones broken. Then I come and visit you in the hospital a few days later and say, "Be of good cheer. I have found your attackers, and I have forgiven them." What would you say to me? You would probably have a relapse right on the spot! "What right do you have to forgive them? You're not the one who was violated! You're not the one lying in a hospital bed!" Isn't that what you would say? And you would have every right to say it. Only the offended party can grant forgiveness to the perpetrator. So what right does the judge have to show these wretchedly guilty people mercy? It would be a perversion of justice.

But with God it is different. He is the judge, yet he is always the most offended party. And he never ever recuses himself. That is all right because he is never corrupted, either. His justice remains absolutely perfect. He never makes a mistake. God is not simply administering a system of morality that is bigger than he is. When we sin against God, we are not simply sinning against the law with God as a neutral observer. That is where C. H. Dodd got it so wrong. *God is the most offended party, and he is our judge!* He stands over against us in wrath righteously because he is holy, and he stands over against us in love because he is that kind of God. And he sends forth his Son to be the propitiation—the one who sets aside God's wrath—for our sins.

But this still does not quite explain how it works.

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4) Paul establishes that God's justice, his righteousness, is demonstrated through the cross of Christ (3:25b–26)

God did not present Christ as a propitiation *first and foremost* to save us or to demonstrate his love. Rather: “He did this to demonstrate his *justice*, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished” (v. 25). “The sins committed beforehand” refer not to sins that we committed prior to our conversion but to sins committed by human beings before Christ’s death on the cross (hence the “but now” of 3:21). There was no *ultimate* punishment to pay for those sins. It was not until the cross that justice would be finally meted out, as verse 26 explains: God “did it to demonstrate his justice *at the present time*, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus.” The cross is not only the demonstration of God’s love; it is the demonstration of God’s justice.

The way that Jesus propitiates his Father is in the Father’s wise plan. All of God’s justice is worked out in Christ, who takes our curse and penalty in his own body on the tree. That is why Christians speak of *satisfying* the wrath of God. This expression does not mean that God is up in heaven smirking, “This really satisfies me.” It means that the demands of his holiness are met in the sacrifice of his own Son. His justice is *satisfied* in Jesus’ propitiatory sacrifice so that all may see that sin deserves the punishment that he himself has imposed, and the punishment has been meted out. This vindicates God so that he himself is seen to be just, as well as the one who justifies the ungodly (cf. Rom. 4:5). Justification is first and foremost about the vindication of God. God simultaneously preserves his justice while justifying the ungodly. That is the heart of the gospel.

With all due respect to those who insist that penal substitution is just one gospel metaphor of many, propitiation is in fact what holds together all the other biblical ways of talking about the cross. There are two reasons for this:

1) All the other ways that the Bible speaks of the cross are tied to this one. For example, the cross reconciles us to God. Why, then, do we have to be reconciled to God? Because we are alienated from him as a result of our sin. But does not such alienation spring from God’s justice, which frowns upon our sin? What then alienates us from God? Our sin. Dealing with our sin reconciles us to God. And propitiation makes God propitious toward us, despite our sin. Again, the new birth is critical; we need a new nature by the transforming work of the Spirit. There is more to salvation than simply being forgiven. On the other hand, does God give us a new nature without reference to all the sin, ugliness, and rebellion that we have committed in the past? Or is all the power of the new nature bound up with our being reconciled to God by Christ’s sacrifice? That is why the gift of the Spirit in John’s Gospel is seen as flowing out from the cross. It is the gift that flows out from Christ’s triumph on the cross. It is conditioned by the cross.

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But it is more than that.

2) This way of looking at the cross lies at the heart of the gospel because it is embedded in the Bible's storyline. When people first sinned against God, God responded by pronouncing death (cf. the repetition of "so-and-so lived so many years, then he died" in Genesis 5). All along the Bible's storyline, God responds to sin with judgment because he is so deeply offended (e.g., the flood). The sin that above all arouses God's wrath is idolatry, the de-godding of God. "The Lord your God is a jealous God" because he alone is God. Idolatry is vertical; social sins are horizontal. All social evils exist first and foremost because humans de-god God. Sometimes in our efforts to communicate what Christianity is about we focus on the social structure of sin to show that Christianity is socially relevant, but that misses the heart of what sin really is. Although all the social manifestations of sin are horribly ugly and must be dealt with in their time and place, they must be put within the larger framework of idolatry. That is why when Paul preaches to a pagan crowd in Acts 17, he defines the problem in terms of idolatry—anything that dethrones God, that makes humans the center and removes God from the center. In short: the drama that is unpacked by the developing storyline of the Bible puts at the center of the plot the need to be reconciled to God. And that necessarily returns us to the expiation of sin and the propitiation of God.

God presenting Christ as a propitiatory sacrifice is not an instance of "cosmic child abuse" in which God beats up on his kid.⁶ We read a mere two chapters later in Romans 5:6–8, "You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man, though for a good man someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us." *God* demonstrates his love in that *Christ* died for us. You must not think that God stands over against us while Christ stands for us, as if Father and Son are somehow at odds, so that the Father takes it out on his Son. *God* demonstrates his love by sending Christ. This is bound up with the very nature and mystery of the incarnation and the Trinity. This is the triune God's plan. It hurts the Father to lose his Son, but he does it because he loves us. And the Son demonstrates his love for us by

⁶ Contrast Steve Chalke and Alan Mann, who, dismissing the notion of penal substitution and a propitiating sacrifice, write, "The fact is that the cross isn't a form of cosmic child abuse—a vengeful father, punishing his son for an offence he has not even committed. Understandably, both people inside and outside of the church have found this twisted version of events morally dubious and a huge barrier to faith. Deeper than that, however, is that such a construct stands in total contradiction to the statement 'God is love.' If the cross is a personal act of violence perpetrated by God towards humankind but borne by his son, then it makes a mockery of Jesus' own teaching to love your enemies and refuse to repay evil with evil. The truth is the cross is a symbol of love. It is a demonstration of just how far God as Father and Jesus as his son are prepared to go to prove that love. The cross is a vivid statement of the powerlessness of love" (*The Lost Message of Jesus* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003], 182–83).

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listening to and conforming to his Father's own wonderful plan so that this plan of the triune God is worked out in God's justice being secured and protected by virtue of the fact that *Christ* bears our sins and God's just standards are preserved even while we stand free and go forgiven. *God* demonstrates his justice in the cross.

Do you want to see the greatest evidence of the love of God? Go to the cross. Do you want to see the greatest evidence of the justice of God? Go to the cross. It is where wrath and mercy meet. Holiness and peace kiss each other. The climax of redemptive history is the cross.

Because it is this God who is offended by our sin and stands over against us in judgment, and it is this God who loves us anyway, this sort of passage deals most powerfully and potently with the problem and provides the remedy. God in the fullness of time sent forth his own Son. In this one climactic sacrifice, God takes action both to punish sin and to forgive sinners. In any final sense, the sins had remained unpunished; now they are punished in the very person of the Son. And God is now both just and the one who justifies the ungodly. This is received by faith.

Do *you* believe? Or do you find yourself among the millions who begin to glimpse what the cross is about and dismiss the entire account as scandalous? A living-and-dying-and-living God? A God who stands over against us in wrath and who loves us anyway? A cross where punishment is meted out by God and borne by God? Scandalous!

And what will you do when you give an account to him on the last day, and tell him that you read this chapter or heard this message and walked away?

Conclusion

Everything that we know and appreciate and praise God for in all of Christian experience both in this life and in the life to come springs from this bloody cross.

Do we have the gift of the Spirit? Secured by Christ on the cross.

Do we enjoy the fellowship of saints? Secured by Christ on the

Does he give us comfort in life and in death? Secured by Christ on the cross.

Does he watch over us faithfully, providentially, graciously, and covenantally? Secured by Christ on the cross.

Do we have hope of a heaven to come? Secured by Christ on the cross.

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Do we anticipate resurrection bodies on the last day? Secured by Christ on the cross.

Is there a new heaven and a new earth, the home of righteousness? Secured by Christ on the cross.

Do we now enjoy new identities, so that we are no longer to see ourselves as nothing but failures, moral pariahs, disappointments to our parents—but as deeply loved, blood-bought, human beings, redeemed by Christ, declared just by God himself, owing to the fact that God himself presented his Son Jesus as the propitiation for our sins? All this is secured by Christ on the cross and granted to those who have faith in him.

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These themes have often been picked up very powerfully by both old hymns and new ones. William Rees (1802–1883) wrote, “Here Is Love Vast as the Ocean”:

On the mount of crucifixion fountains opened deep and wide.
Through the floodgates of Your mercy flowed a vast and gracious tide.
Here is love like mighty rivers poured unceasing from above.
Heaven’s peace and perfect justice kissed a guilty world in love.

The themes of God’s wrath, forbearance, and love barrel through Scripture and climax in the cross. Another such hymn is a 1995 contribution by Stuart Townend, “How Deep the Father’s Love for Us”:

Behold the Man upon a cross,
My sin upon His shoulders.
Ashamed I hear my mocking voice,
Call out among the scoffers.

It was my sin that held Him there
Until it was accomplished.
His dying breath has brought me life
I know that it is finished.

In all of our theologizing, in all of our debates about how the New Testament uses the Old Testament and the precise meaning of inerrancy and all the other subjects that must be addressed, do not ever lose the heart of the issue: “God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ” (2 Cor. 5:19).

Dilemma wretched: how shall holiness
Of brilliant life unshaded, tolerate
Rebellion’s fetid slime, and not abate
In its own glory, compromised at best?

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Dilemma wretched: how can truth attest
That God is love, and not be shamed by hate
And wills enslaved and bitter death—the freight
Of curse deserved, the human rebels' mess?
 The Cross! The Cross! The sacred meeting-place
 Where, knowing neither compromise nor loss,
 God's love and holiness in shattering grace
 The great dilemma slays! The Cross! The Cross!
This holy, loving God whose dear Son dies
By this is just—and one who justifies.^{7 8}

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Carson has been described as doing "the most seminal New Testament work by contemporary evangelicals"¹⁰ and as "one of the last great Renaissance men in evangelical biblical scholarship."¹¹ He has written on a wide range of topics including New Testament, hermeneutics, biblical theology, the Greek New Testament, the use of the Old Testament in the New, and more.

⁷ D. A. Carson, *Holy Sonnets of the Twentieth Century* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994), 101.

⁸ Carson, D. A. (2010). *Scandalous: the cross and resurrection of Jesus* (pp. 38–72). Crossway.

⁹ <https://www.etsjets.org/node/12592>

¹⁰ Mark A. Noll, *Between Faith and Criticism*, 2d ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1989), 136.

¹¹ Köstenberger, Andreas J. "Detailed biography on D.A. Carson" (PDF). Archived from the original (PDF) on 2009-08-24. Page 5.