

The Cross of Christ

Lesson 6: Propitiation: The Wrath-Bearer -- Romans 3:24-26

We have come to one of the most important and most difficult words in the whole study, a word many people would rather skip: propitiation. It sounds technical, even forbidding, and the idea behind it makes some people uneasy. Yet the apostles placed it at the very center of the cross, and we cannot understand what happened at Calvary without it. So let us not flinch. Propitiation means the turning away of wrath through a sacrifice. It is the truth that on the cross, Jesus Christ bore the righteous anger of God against sin, in our place, so that we who deserved that judgment could be spared and welcomed instead.

Romans 3 has already taught us that all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. Paul has stopped every mouth and held the whole world accountable. The great question hanging over the human race is this: how can a holy and just God forgive guilty sinners without ceasing to be holy and just? A judge who simply waved away every crime would not be good; he would be corrupt. God's justice is not an obstacle we wish he would overlook; it is part of his perfection. And here Paul gives the answer. God put forward Christ as a propitiation by his blood. At the cross, God's justice and God's mercy meet. The penalty our sin deserved was fully paid, and it was paid by God himself, in the person of his Son.

Some recoil at the idea of God's wrath, imagining a petty, hot-tempered deity who must be appeased like a pagan god. But the wrath of God is nothing like human temper. It is the settled, holy opposition of a good God to everything that destroys what he loves. A God who felt nothing toward cruelty, abuse, and evil would not be loving; he would be indifferent. And here is the wonder the cross reveals: God does not pour out that wrath on us, nor does he pretend our sin does not matter. He provides the propitiation himself. The Judge steps down from the bench and bears the sentence in our place. As John writes, this is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins.

So read these three dense verses slowly, because they are among the richest in the Bible. They will not let us turn the cross into a sentimental story or a vague gesture of solidarity. Something real happened there. A real penalty was paid, real wrath was borne, real justice was satisfied, and real sinners were set free and declared righteous. And it was all of grace, a gift, that no one could earn. When you grasp that Christ stood in your place and took what your sin deserved, the cross stops being an idea you affirm and becomes a fire that warms and humbles your whole heart. He is the wrath-bearer, and he bore it for you.

Group Discussion: The idea of the wrath of God makes many people uncomfortable, and some prefer to leave it out of the gospel altogether. Why do you think that is, and what might we lose about the love of God and the meaning of the cross if we remove his wrath against sin from the picture?

Personal Reflection: It is one thing to say Christ died for sins in general, and another to say he bore the wrath your own sin deserved. When you let the cross become that personal, that Jesus stood in your place under judgment, what stirs in you, gratitude, discomfort, relief, or all three, and why?

Read Romans 3:24–26

Study Questions

1. Paul says we are “justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood” (vv. 24–25). What does it mean that God himself put Christ forward as the propitiation, and why is it significant that the cross is something God provided rather than something we offered to appease him?
2. Many of us instinctively try to make up for our wrongs, to earn back God’s favor by being good enough. How does the truth that propitiation is God’s gift, not our achievement, free you from the exhausting effort of trying to appease God yourself?
3. Propitiation means the turning away of wrath through a sacrifice. Why must we take the wrath of God seriously as the righteous response of a holy God to sin, and how is this wrath different from human anger or mere bad temper?
4. Where have you been tempted to think of your sin as no big deal, something God should simply overlook? How does seeing that your sin deserved real judgment, judgment Christ then bore, change the way you regard both your sin and your Savior?
5. Paul says God put Christ forward as a propitiation “to show God’s righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins” (v. 25). Why could God not simply

forgive sin by ignoring it, and how does the cross uphold God's justice rather than setting it aside?

6. Think of a time you were wronged and someone simply said "forget it" as if nothing had happened. Why does true forgiveness actually require that the wrong be taken seriously and dealt with, and how does the cross show us a forgiveness that is both costly and just?
7. Paul says the cross shows that God is "just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus" (v. 26). How does the cross allow God to remain perfectly just while also declaring guilty sinners righteous, and why is it crucial that God does not have to choose between his justice and his mercy?
8. If God dealt with your sin so seriously that it required the death of his Son, how should that shape both your hatred of sin and your confidence that you are truly and fully forgiven? Where do you most need each of those truths right now?
9. Scripture says Christ is "the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world" (1 John 2:2), and that he "gave himself as a ransom for all" (1 Timothy 2:6). Explain how the cross is a real substitution in which Christ bore the penalty of sin in our place and satisfied the righteous demands of God, and why this propitiation was offered for all people and not only for a select few. How does this guard us against both a sentimental cross that deals with no real penalty and a narrow cross offered to only a chosen elect?

10. Look back across Romans 3:24–26 as a whole, where justice and mercy meet at the cross and Christ bears the wrath we deserved. Name one specific way that knowing Jesus is your wrath-bearer is deepening your love and gratitude, and one concrete way you will respond to him this week.

Now or Later

Reflect on these passages: 1 John 4:9–10, in this is love, that he sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins; 1 John 2:2, he is the propitiation for our sins and for the whole world; 2 Corinthians 5:21, God made him to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God; Isaiah 53:5, the chastisement that brought us peace was upon him; Hebrews 2:17, a merciful high priest to make propitiation for the sins of the people.