

An old story is told of a king in Africa who had a close friend with whom he grew up. The friend had a habit of looking at every situation that ever occurred in his life (positive or negative) and remarking, "This is good!"

One day the king and his friend were out on a hunting expedition. The friend would load and prepare the guns for the king. The friend apparently did something wrong in preparing one of the guns, for after taking the gun from his friend, the king fired it and his thumb was blown off.

Examining the situation the friend remarked as usual, "This is good!" To which the king replied, "No, this is NOT good!" and proceeded to put his friend in prison.

About a year later, the king was hunting in an area that he should have known to stay clear of. Cannibals captured him and took him to their village. They tied his hands, stacked some wood, set up a stake and bound him to the stake. As they came near to set fire to the wood, they noticed the king was missing a thumb. Being superstitious, they never ate anyone that was less than whole. So untying the king, they sent him on his way.

As he returned home, he was reminded of the event that had taken his thumb and felt remorse for his treatment of his friend. He went immediately to the prison to speak with his friend.

"You were right," he said, "it was good that my thumb was blown off." He proceeded to tell the friend all that had happened. "And so I am very sorry for sending you to prison for so long. It was bad for me to do this."

"No," his friend replied, "This is good!"

"What do you mean, 'this is good'? How could it be good that I sent my friend to prison for a year?"

"If I had NOT been in prison, I would have been with you."

Wayne Dyer (**picture**) was right, "*If you change the way you look at things, the things you look at change.*" This morning we want to talk about perspective, God's perspective. In a few weeks we'll be remembering Good Friday and Easter. But today as we celebrate Communion together, we want to consider **God's Perspective of the Cross**.

What happened on the cross from God's point of view? What did it mean to God the Father as His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, died a criminal's death? In order to answer that question let's focus on just three verses, Romans 3:24-26 (p. 941). Our text has been called "*the marrow of theology*," and well it should be because this passage contains the very heart and soul of the Gospel. These verses contain three answers to the question, **What did the cross mean to God?**

1. The Cross was the turning away of God's wrath. What is *propitiation*? Here's a simple definition: *Propitiation means to turn away wrath by the offering of a gift. In this context it means that the death of Christ turns away God's wrath from us.*

God's wrath is not a popular topic these days. Many pastors fear to preach on God's wrath lest they incur the wrath of their congregation. We'd all rather hear about God's love than about His wrath, yet both are entirely biblical because both wrath and love flow from God's basic nature.

While it's true that "*God is love*" (1 John 4:8), it's also true that He hates the wicked (Psalm 11:5). Sometimes in our attempt to appear compassionate, we proclaim that God "*hates the sin and loves the sinner.*" Let me caution against using that statement indiscriminately because it's only partly true and can be misleading.

Does God love sinners? Absolutely. He does because sinners are part of the world Jesus came to save (John 3:16), but that statement seems to imply that love is God's only response to sin.

Check out the book of Psalms and you'll discover that God hates sinners and abhors the wicked. Much of our contemporary preaching is anemic precisely because we fail to preach the whole truth to guilty sinners. If all we say to the lost is "God loves you," we're in danger of making them think that their continued rebellion doesn't matter to God.

Instead, we must warn them to flee from the wrath to come (Luke 3:7). And if we must say, "God hates sin but loves the sinner," let's at least add this phrase, "And He warns the sinner to repent before it's too late."

So that I'm not misunderstood, let me say that I believe fervently in God's love. Yet God's love, as magnificent as it is, can't cancel God's holy hatred of sin. There's no conflict between love and anger. True love is often angry. Ask any parent and they will say (at one time or another) "I'm angry because the one I love has disappointed me." Because God is holy, He's angry over our sin but because He is love, God provided a means to turn away His own anger by the sacrifice of His Son.

In pagan religions, the worshipers offer animal sacrifices to appease their gods. Periodically, Haiti is in the news. As you may know, Haiti is the land of voodoo. At least 90% of the people practice voodoo to one degree or another. Sometimes the Haitians will slaughter a chicken and place the blood (with the entrails) on a dish by the front door, hoping to ward off evil spirits. It's their way of appeasing the god who stands behind voodoo. That's the pagan idea of propitiation.

For example, we see propitiation at work when a husband realizes that he's offended his wife. Hoping to make it up to her, he stops on the way home and buys flowers and candy and a card. Before she can say a word, he gives her the gifts, hoping to turn away her wrath and restore a good relationship.

The greatest illustration comes from the Old Testament Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur) when the high priest would enter the Holy of Holies with the blood of a goat. Leviticus 16 describes the ritual in exacting detail. It must be the high priest and him alone, and it must happen on the Day of Atonement—and on no other day.

On the Day of Atonement the high priest would take off his regular clothes and put on a sacred linen tunic. He'd sprinkle the blood on the lid of the Ark of the Covenant. That lid—made of beaten gold—was called the "Mercy Seat." Inside the Ark was a copy of the Ten Commandments—representing the Law of God. By the sprinkling of the blood, the sins of the people were "*covered*." That covering by means of blood was called the "*atonement*." The sacrifice of blood turned away the wrath of God. Why is this so important? Because God's justice demands death as the ultimate punishment for sin.

What does the symbolism of the Day of Atonement represent? During the other days of the year when God looked down from heaven, he saw the Ten Commandments inside the Ark. The Ten Commandments stood as a testimony against the sins of the nation of Israel. But on the Day of Atonement God saw the blood of the sacrifice which covered the sin of the people of Israel.

But that sacrificial system had a major problem. It provided temporary forgiveness because it was based on the blood of animals. We know it's impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sin (Heb. 10:4). It's why every year, year after year, the high priest would go in and do it all over again. When he died, another high priest would take his place and do the same thing each year on the Day of Atonement. The Old Testament system provided no permanent forgiveness for sin.

But when the Lord Jesus died on the cross, the blood that He shed was like the blood on the Mercy Seat. It turned away the wrath of God and covered the sin of the entire human race. How could that be? In the Old Testament it is the blood of bulls and goats, in the New Testament it's the eternal blood of Jesus Christ which has eternal value in the eyes of God.

When Jesus hung on the cross, He cried out, "*My God, my God, why have You forsaken Me?*" (Mark 15:34). In that moment all the wrath of God was poured out on Jesus. He became sin for us. All of your sin and all of mine and the sins of the whole world were poured out on Jesus. In that moment God turned His face away from His own Son. To call the death of Christ a "*propitiation*" means that God's wounded heart is now satisfied with the death of His Son. When a sinner trusts Christ, God accepts him on the basis of the bloody sacrifice Christ made when He died on the cross.

Why did God do it this way? Because as an infinite God of infinite holiness, all sins committed against Him are infinite in magnitude. Only a gift of infinite value could turn away the infinite wrath of God. Only God Himself (in the Person of His Son) could make such an infinite gift. That's why our piddly little efforts to turn aside God's wrath are doomed to failure. We think going to church or being baptized or saying our prayers or being good or stopping a bad habit or "trying really hard to be better" will somehow turn away the infinite wrath of God.

The wonder of propitiation is that the offended party (God), who has every right to be angry at sinners Himself, offers the gift Himself (the death of Christ) to turn away His own wrath, making it possible for guilty sinners to be forgiven. When we come to God through Christ, we come to a friendly Father and not to an angry God.

2. The Cross was the demonstration of God's justice. In verse 25 and again in verse 26 Paul says God set forth Christ as a propitiation for sin "*to show His righteousness or justice*" so that He might be "*just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.*"

On the Moody Radio station during a talk show a caller from Miami asked why Christ had to die on the cross for our sins. The man was troubled by this fact and said that he didn't believe that Christ had died in our place. as a substitute taking our punishment. The host tried to answer his question by referring to this text—Romans 3:25-26.

What the listeners didn't know is that while the host was answering the question, the man was shouting into the phone. He had to be taken off the air but evidently he didn't realize it or didn't care. The very notion of Christ as our substitute made him so angry.

Some years ago popular TV talk show Phil Donahue (**picture**) listed the various reasons why he had become disillusioned with Christianity. Among them was this: "*How could an all-knowing, all-loving God allow His Son to be murdered on a cross to redeem my sins?*" That's an excellent question because it goes to the very heart of the gospel.

Why did Jesus have to die? Why would God put His own Son to death, especially to save people who'd rebelled against Him? In searching for the answer, it helps to think of another question: *Since God is both all-powerful and infinitely gracious, why didn't He simply offer forgiveness to anyone who says, "I'm sorry"?*

Many think that's what God should have done. Then we wouldn't have to deal with the embarrassment of God killing His own Son.

But God is just and sin had to be punished. From a human point of view, God had a problem. Because God is holy, He can't allow sin to go unpunished. His justice demands that every sin be punished—no matter how small it may seem to us. If He were to forgive sin without punishment, He'd cease to be holy and just. God would no longer be God because He would have denied His own character. That couldn't happen. All offenses against God must be punished. That's why sinners can't simply say, "I'm sorry" and instantly be forgiven. Someone has to pay the price.

We see this in our justice system. Suppose a man is found guilty of embezzling a million dollars from his employer. Let us further suppose that just before sentencing, he stands before the judge, confesses his crime, begs for mercy, and promises never to embezzle money again. How would you react if the judge accepted his apology and released him with no punishment? Suppose the man had been convicted of rape and then was set free with no punishment simply because he apologized. Or what if he apologized for murdering a father and mother in front of their children—and the judge set him free? Would it be right to free him because he apologized and promised to never do it again? Should he be forgiven and released? What would we do with the judge who set them free? We'd throw that judge in prison for a long time.

Even in this life a price must be paid for breaking the law. When lawbreakers are set free with no punishment, respect for the law disappears. The same is true in the spiritual realm. When sin is not punished, it doesn't seem very sinful. God's "problem" was to devise a plan of salvation whereby He would remain holy and just, and still provide a way of forgiveness for guilty sinners. Somewhere, somehow, there had to be a place where grace and wrath could meet. That place is the cross of Christ.

Back to Phil Donahue for a moment. He asked a second question that deserves an answer: *"If God the Father is so 'all-loving,' why didn't He come down and go to Calvary?"* And the answer is, He did. He did! God came down to this earth in the Person of His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, and died for our sins.

The paradox of salvation is this: God is a God of love and longs to forgive sinners. But He is also a God of holiness who must not and cannot overlook sin. How could God love sinners and yet not overlook their sin?

No one would ever have dreamed of His answer. God sent His own Son to die for sinners. In that way, the just punishment for sin was fully met in the death of Christ, and sinners who trust in Christ can be freely forgiven. Only God could have done something like that. That's why Paul says, God is both just (in punishing sin) and the justifier of those who believe in Jesus.

In the death of this One Man, all the sins of the human race are fully paid for—past, present and future. As a result, those who believe in Jesus find that their sins are gone forever. It's the heart of the gospel: God's holiness demands that sin be punished. God's grace provides the sacrifice. What God demands, He supplies. Salvation is a work of God from first to last. It's conceived by God, provided by God and applied by God.

3. The Cross was the place of the outpouring of God's grace. Romans 3:24, *"and are justified by His grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus."* The original literally means "without a cause."

Salvation comes *"without a cause"* in us. That means that God saves us despite the fact that He can't find a reason within us to save us. Salvation is a "free gift." There's nothing in us that causes God to want to save us. No good works, no inner beauty, no great moral attainment, no intellectual merit of any kind. When God saves us, He does it despite the fact that we don't deserve it.

Recently, I read a great definition of grace: *What you need but do not deserve.* God declares us righteous when we have nothing but the sewage of sin in our veins. That's the doctrine of free grace. God saves us, people who don't deserve it! God saves people who actually deserve condemnation! God saves people in spite of themselves and contrary to their record. It's *"pure, abounding, astounding grace!"*

When God saves people, He doesn't do it because of any potential He sees in them. I think most of us secretly feel (though we'd never say it) that there must have been something in us worth saving. Human pride dies hard. But it's not as if God saw a musician and said, "We need a good guitarist in the church. I think I'll save him." Or "She's got a lot of money and we could use some extra cash for world missions." No, God doesn't save us on the basis of our potential. Apart from the grace of God, the only potential we have is the potential for eternal judgement.

When God saves, He saves us by free grace, wholly apart from anything in us or anything we might "bring to the table" later. It's a shocking truth, hard to hear, but entirely biblical. In the end, it's very comforting because it means that anyone, anywhere, at any time can come to Christ for salvation. No one has any advantage since *"there is no difference"* because all have sinned and come short of the glory of God (Romans 3:23).

An elderly country woman named Betty trusted in Christ for salvation. One of her skeptical friends heard about it, and intending to make fun of her, asked if she'd become a Christian. "Yes, I have," she replied. "Well," said the skeptic, "are you now an expert in theology?" "I'm no Bible scholar," Betty replied. "I'm simply positive that God loves me enough that He'd rather go to hell than have me go there, and that God loves me enough that He'd rather leave heaven and die than for me not to get to heaven to be with Him."

The skeptic insisted, "Is that all you know about it? Can't you at least explain what being saved by grace means—that is one of your central doctrines, isn't it?" Betty thought for a moment, then answered with these words: "Jesus stood in my shoes at Calvary, now I'm standing in His." It'd be hard to find a better explanation of justification by grace.

This is so hard for us to believe. We'd prefer to work for our salvation. God's gift of salvation costs us nothing, even though it cost Jesus Christ everything. The Lord now says to us, "Take it by faith! It's yours for free. I have paid the price for you."

Conclusion: William Cowper (**picture**) was a friend of John Newton, the author of *Amazing Grace*. But Cowper had a very melancholic disposition and often struggled with bouts of severe depression. At one point he became extremely depressed, fearing that he was under the wrath of God. "I flung myself into a chair by the window and there saw the Bible on the table by the chair. I opened it up and my eyes fell on Romans 3:25, which says of Christ, 'Whom God has made a propitiation through faith in His blood.' Then and there, I realized what Christ's blood had accomplished and I realized the effects of His atonement for me. I realized God was willing to justify me, and then and there, I trusted Jesus Christ and a great burden was lifted from my soul."

Looking back on that day, William Cowper wrote a hymn we still sing:

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

Friend, has the blood of Jesus ever been applied to your heart? God's Son has made propitiation. He's turned away the wrath of God. He shed his blood and what was a place of judgment is now a mercy seat for people like us.

I read recently about a billboard posted near a Chicago freeway advertising the cardiac services of Christ Hospital in Oak Lawn. The billboard reads: "*Christ is #1 in Open Heart Surgeries.*" I don't know about the hospital, but I can vouch for its namesake.

Jesus Christ is indeed #1 in open heart surgery. He has never lost a case. When you come to Him by faith, He gives you a brand-new heart.

Because of the cross, salvation is now entirely free. What then must I do to be saved? Must I be holy? Must I be good? Must I change my ways? Must I promise to clean up my act?

God's answer is, "My grace is absolutely free!" But the human hearts cries out, "I must do something, I must make my contribution." So we clean up, go to church, give money, get baptized, do good deeds, and on and on. We think God will never forgive us until we do something to deserve it. But it's not true. God forgives, God gives His justification away freely. How dare we think we can somehow pay Him for His Son's life.

If I said you can be justified for \$5, who wouldn't pay? If I said you must walk a hundred miles, we'd all line up tomorrow morning. If I said God will justify you if you'll endure a 20-minute beating, would we not endure the pain and count it a small cost? But if I say, "Free, free, God's grace is free," something in the human heart rebels against that fact. But either you take it freely or you don't take it at all.

How do we receive God's gift of salvation? Simply by asking for it. Do you know in your heart that you want Christ in your life? You may have Him today! It's the wonder of the gospel. Don't say, "I'll do my best and come to Christ later." That's the language of hell. You can't be saved as long as you cling to your notions of goodness.

"I'll get better," you say. No you won't. You can't get better, that's your problem. You're as good as you can be right now—and that's not very good. Sin has gripped your soul and made you depraved inside and out.

God knows that you and I can't clean ourselves. He wants us to come to Him just as we are. If you're a mess and you know it, come to Christ. If you're a sinner and want to be forgiven, come to Christ. If you feel unworthy, come to Christ. If you feel like a failure, come to Christ. If you admit that your life is a mess, come to Christ.

Friend, please run to the cross as your only hope of salvation. If you have any stirring in your heart, any sense of your need, any desire to be saved by grace, that desire has been placed in your heart by God. May that desire lead you to the cross where Jesus waits to receive you, to forgive and make you His child!