

IN MY PLACE CONDEMNED HE STOOD - The Biblical Pattern of the Atonement - Part eight - Sunday, July 17th, 2022
Pastor Don Horban, Cedarview Community Church, Newmarket, ON

THE MOST IMPORTANT PARAGRAPH EVER WRITTEN

IPAD TEXT - Romans 3:21-26 - “But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it— [22] the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction: [23] for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, [24] and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, [25] whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God's righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins. [26] It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.”

The title of this message comes from **Leon Morris'** marvelous commentary on Romans where he specifically calls our text, “*...quite possibly, the most important single paragraph ever written.*” If that’s even close to the truth it deserves careful study.

It is dreadful to stop and examine the things our world passionately considers worthy of **mind-time**. O, how Christians need to re-evaluate their own thought space. What we think about doesn’t just **occupy** our minds. It **forms** them. So what you think about - what you apply thought to - is the most important thing about you. And the church is fast losing the capacity to be dominated by, what Paul calls, “***the mind of Christ***”(1 Corinthians 2:16).

Here's the simple rule. God made us as creatures of **thought**. Unlike your cat or your dog or your budgie, you are not a creature of **instinct**. And the reason God created you and me as people who **think** is so we, above all the rest of creation, could reflect on His greatness and His love and His wisdom, His manifest glory in the rest of His creation, and, above all else, His redemptive work in Christ Jesus. The rest of creation may **respond** to God as creatures of their Creator. Snow glistens, the seasons come and go, squirrels gather nuts, roses bloom. But they don't **ponder** these things. They just **do** them.

We have the capacity to **contemplate** God and **treasure** God and **esteem** God as beautiful and marvelous and worthy of worship. We have the capacity to prize and savor Him above all the rest of creation. In short, God made you able to **think** so you could **think about Him** in a way stones and plants and worms and aardvarks and hippos and dust-mites cannot.

But there is also great potential for disaster and misuse here. If you, as a disciple of Christ, don't **stuff your mind** with truly great thoughts, the tiny, tiny, tiny ideas and images and objects of this world will start to **seem** big to you. But they only **seem** big because as your mind dwells on them it is getting smaller and smaller.

So the things of this world **seem** big only in **proportion** to the shrinking mind they form. This is the deepest danger of carelessly pouring out attention on what is trivial. A mind dieted on the trivial will soon start to see it as stuff that **matters**. And blindness forms such that truly **vital** ideas soon have no luster or value. So just because something I devote my mind to is **trivial** doesn't mean it isn't **deadly** in the effect it can have on my soul.

A big part of the value of the church lies right here. A good church should hold up what is important in front of people as often as possible so they don't forget about it. The sermons in a church worth its salt should be infinitely more than just **culturally relevant**. They should be **culturally confronting**. Good sermons - like good worship songs - should always stretch the mind and expose what is **trite before they call us to think of what's important**. We're all here today to remind ourselves that devotion to Christ is impossible with a **pre-occupied** mind. You don't have to have a **brilliant** mind to love God. But you **do** have to **use** and **focus** and **concentrate** the mind you have.

One more caution. **Thinking** about something isn't quite the same as **knowing** about it. In fact, sometimes **knowing** about something can actually **prevent** you from thinking about it. Thinking about something - take God, as an example, but it applies to almost anything - gives the **flavor** of it to the rest of your life. Thinking about something causes it to **occupy** the rest of your life. That's because when you **think** about something you no longer **assume** it. You don't take it for granted. What you think about - really think about - **focuses** and **drives** the rest of your being.

All of this pre-amble is to call us all to **think about** this great text. It's a text that **deserves** and **requires** the very best of your God-given mental equipment.

I want to examine this text by talking to it. I want to ask three questions and see if this text can answer them. They are some of the most important questions any person can ask.

- 1) **WHAT IS OUR SITUATION STANDING BEFORE A HOLY GOD ON OUR OWN?**

We don't have to roam far from our text to find some troubling words. In fact, what ***prompted*** Paul's words in our text is stated immediately before it, in **verses 19-20 - "Now we know that whatever the law says it speaks to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be stopped, and *the whole world may be held accountable to God.* [20] For by works of the law *no human being will be justified in his sight,* since through the law comes knowledge of sin." - IPAD TEXT**

These are not encouraging words. If you had a pen or pencil you'd want to underline phrases like "***every mouth stopped,***" and "***the whole world held accountable,***" and "***no human being justified in his (God's) sight.***"

I take that to mean we can't plead ***ignorance*** (that's what the text means when it says we're ***accountable***). We can't hope for ***escape*** (how many are exempt if the "***whole world***" is held accountable?). And we can't find a good ***excuse*** (we'd ***like*** to think of something clever or extenuating to say, but we'll just be speechless - "***every mouth stopped***" - nothing to say in our defense).

But the problem goes deeper still. If God were merely *disappointed* with my sin, I may be *grieved* by it, but I wouldn't be *endangered* by it. Following in the chain of logic established in the Passover account in Exodus chapter 12, the Day of Atonement account in Leviticus chapter 16, and the Suffering Substitutionary Servant in Isaiah chapters 52 and 53, Paul, yet again, follows the consistent path of Scriptural revelation by citing God's *wrath* against my sin:

IPAD TEXTS Romans 1:18 - "For the *wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth.*"

Romans 2:5 - "But because of your hard and impenitent heart *you are storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath when God's righteous judgment will be revealed.*"

Romans 2:8 - "...but for those who are self-seeking and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness, *there will be wrath and fury.*"

It would be easy to pile up verses, but I think you get the point. The danger of sin isn't primarily something that lies within the sin itself - like reaping what you sow. True, as the Bible says, "*the way of the transgressor is hard.*" Sin carries its own self-inflicted consequences. But this isn't sin's *primary* danger.

Unfortunately, this primary truth has to be taught all over again in the church. There is a very common view of sin, held by many evangelicals right now, that is *kind* of true - it holds to *some* of the Biblical teaching on sin - but still falls far short of engaging the full measure of Scriptural impact.

The view is called the *immanentist* view of God's wrath. It's not important that you remember the name, but you *do* need to know the thinking around it. The chief idea is that God's wrath against sin isn't His *personal* wrath. That is, sin doesn't draw anger out of God's Person as such. God has simply established a created order where sin brings its own pain and difficulty. So *God's wrath* is not a *personal response on the part of God against sin*. The world is just divinely organized to make transgression a self-destructive practice.

This interpretation is getting old now. It's been around for centuries but came to expression in best-sellers like, "*The Shack*." "*I don't need to punish people for sin. Sin is its own punishment....*"(p.118). These words pour out of the mouth of none other than "Papa God" Himself - or *herself* - portrayed by an apron clad "*Aunt Jemima*." "*Sin is its own punishment.*" That's the dominant emergent/progressive view of the danger of sin.

This is becoming the common in-the-box view of almost all progressives from Greg Boyd, Bruxy Cavy, Brian McLaren, Brian Zahnd, Jen Hatmaker, Rachel Held Evans, Sarah Beesey, Peter Enns, and a host of others.

I have no personal fight with any of these people. But some doctrines are closer to the heart of New Testament Christianity than others and why I need Jesus as Savior is as basic as it gets. We're not quibbling about the timing of the rapture here.

And something else. The New Testament seems to almost anticipate this distortion. Consider these familiar words, and notice a very significant detail: **Romans 1:16-18 - "For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. [17] For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, "The righteous shall live by faith." [18] For the *wrath of God is revealed from heaven* against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth." - IPAD TEXT**

In the first primary explanation of the **reason** for the gospel, the apostle not only gives passing mention to sin, but heightens the urgency of dealing with it by telling us - **warning** us - of God's wrath. And just to make sure we don't box up God's wrath in the natural cause-and-effect events of our lives, he specifically says God's wrath comes from God's own place - **heaven** - "**....the wrath of God is revealed from heaven**"(18). This is Paul's way of reminding us that this is not **natural** wrath. It isn't wrath from the **earthly** side of things. It is **God's own wrath** in a very personal way.

So, **what is our situation before God on our own?** Paul says we're accountable because of the law. We're guilty because of our sin. We're without excuse with nothing to say. And, far worse than any one of these or all of them combined, we're deserving of God's absolutely just, holy wrath.

Question number two:

2) **IF THIS IS OUR SITUATION, HOW CAN WE BE RESCUED?**

IPAD TEXT - Romans 3:21-25a - “But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it— [22] the righteousness of God *through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe*. For there is no distinction: [23] for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, [24] and are *justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, [25] whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith....”*

Of course, the important transition words are the first two - “***But now....***”(21). A corner is being turned. A great change is blowing in the wind. Something has happened since the dark announcement of **verse 20 - “For by works of the law *no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin.*” - IPAD TEXT**

This is a huge transition. “No human being justified....” to “....and are justified by his grace as a gift....!(24). Those two opposite conditions imply an incredible change, a seismic shift, in our standing before God. And we’re told immediately, as if to remove even the thought from our minds, that ***we*** didn’t effect this change. It didn’t take place on ***our*** side of the story.

The whole paragraph - remember, the one Leon Morris called the most important paragraph ever written - is assembled with words that remove human accomplishment from the equation. We “**fall short of the glory of God**”(23). We are “**justified by his grace as a gift**”(24). The redemption we receive, “**God put forward....**”(25), to be “**received by faith**”(25).

But what exactly did Jesus **do** for us? And here, the answer is a bit surprising, though it shouldn't be, in light of all the prophetic passages we've been studying in the Old Testament on the atonement. Paul uses a very specific word right in the middle of this paragraph that is full of Biblical meaning. It's right in the middle of **verse 25** - “**....whom God [speaking of Jesus] put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith....**”

There's that old English word, so carefully crafted by William Tyndale, that carries the prophetic context of the Old Testament in its letters - “**propitiation.**” It's a word that is designed to push our thoughts **backwards** to truth already revealed. The NIV comes close with its more contemporary, though not as concise, interpretation, “**sacrifice of atonement.**” And immediately, as soon as we hear those words, we're meant to place ourselves in the context of Exodus chapter 12 and Leviticus chapter 16.

Propitiation isn't a word we use in every day dialogue. That doesn't make it a **bad** choice. In fact, it might help preserve its content from the mournful decay common usage inflicts on the meaning of words. Once the books and the web sites and blogs and social media make words common, they usually don't carry the meaning they once did. Common usage tends to inject the meaning we **want** the word to have rather than being **confronted** by the meaning the word actually **does** have.

Propitiation means ***“the satisfying or carrying away of wrath.”*** Think about that for a minute. In perhaps the key paragraph in the whole New Testament on the atonement Paul doesn't even refer to being rescued from our **sin**. No. He focuses on being rescued from God's holy **wrath**. And he **got** that meaning from the trail of prophetic texts scattered throughout the pages of the Old Testament. He got the idea from God Himself.

Understanding the text this way helps explain those difficult words in the last part of **verse 25 - “...whom God put forward [Jesus] as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God's righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins.” - IPAD TEXT**

Passed over former sins? Are you kidding me? What about the flood? What about Sodom and Gomorrah? What about Lot's wife? What about the plagues? Is this how God "**passed over sins**"?

But when you understand what Paul is saying about the death of Christ and the removal of God's wrath you realize Paul doesn't mean God didn't express **any** judgment on sins when they were committed. He means God did nothing to **remove** His wrath in a **permanent fashion** before Christ came and died on the cross. Those sins weren't dealt with in the sense of the issue being **settled**. That's what Jesus came and died to accomplish.

Please hear and register this enormous truth, church. Through our trust in Christ Jesus, God's wrath against our sins **terminated - spent itself out** - when Jesus died on the cross. And His resurrection is proof of that.

So question number two is, "**How can we be rescued?**" And I want to wrap up this point by saying the obvious. The way someone offers rescue reveals a great deal about the danger he thinks I am in. Imagine a man trapped in the basement underneath the rubble of a collapsed building. He's trapped in darkness and a deadly gas is leaking into his cramped quarters.

With only a tiny passage way to the surface, frantic rescuers offer help while others organize machinery to remove the rubble. If they pass a **flashlight** down through the hole, it shows they think the victim's primary problem is **darkness**. But if they pass down an **oxygen tank and mask** it proves they know his primary problem isn't **darkness** but a **poisonous gas**.

And when Paul says Father God, in His wisdom, sent His only Son to be a **"propitiation"** for our sins, he's telling us that, in God's eyes, our chief problem isn't our bad habits, or bad self-image, or loneliness, or lack of joy, but God's just wrath against us.

Question number three:

3) **WHY DID THE TRIUNE GOD PERFORM THIS GREAT WORK?**

IPAD TEXT - Romans 3:25b-26 - "...This was to show God's righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins. [26] It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus."

We've already looked at verse 25. There was something incomplete in the way God dealt with sins before the atoning work of God the Son on the cross. God wasn't **finished** with those sins. True, the people were **treated** as forgiven when they repented. But, as the writer of Hebrews tells us, that was just God **treating** those repentant sinners as though Christ's atoning work was already accomplished. The sacrifice of bulls and the goats accomplished nothing truly redemptive - **Hebrews 10:4 - "For it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins."**IPAD TEXT

Verse 26 tells us **why** God did His great work in Christ Jesus. And, surprise, surprise, **God** is at the center of the explanation, not **us** - **"It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus."**

God rescued us to **"show"** something about Himself. Some translations say He did it to **"demonstrate"** something. Paul goes on and tells us what God revealed - what He took great **pains** to reveal. He wanted to reveal to all of us that He is incredibly loving, true enough. But He wanted to reveal that His love was not the **fallen** love we all possess.

He wanted to reveal that He is always ***two things at the same time - and never less***. He is the wonderful ***justifier*** of the ungodly. And He is always ***just*** in the way He punishes sin. God went to the cross for us to reveal - show - demonstrate - that He is both ***justifier*** and ***just***. That is, ***loving to the undeserving*** and ***appropriately wrathful against sin***.

And, just as I wrap up, if you think this is all theological mumbo-jumbo, here's why it is all precious for you beyond telling. If in justifying you, all God did was ***let you off the hook***, you would appreciate your present pass for sin, but you'd always wonder about your future standing. Who knows what you may do down the road and how God will react to it then?

But if through Christ atoning work - His ***wrath-bearing*** work - God has not only let you off the hook, but dealt with all human sin in a way that is so thorough and just that all future grounds for condemnation have been paid and removed - if there is truly ***“no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus”***(Romans 8:1) - then I have assurance and confidence in my loving Heavenly Father and my Mighty Redeemer.