
RM 3:25 : JESUS CHRIST, OUR PENAL SUBSTITUTE

No. EE11

Without exception we are all guilty and liable to be punished by God. *This is man's greatest crisis!* (Rm 1:18-3:20).

But having declared all people guilty before God, the book of Romans continue with the most wonderful words: "But now..." (Rm 3:21).

These words precede one of the richest expositions of the gospel found anywhere in the Bible (Rm 3:21-31). At the heart of these verses is v.25. And at the heart of v.25 is the word "propitiation" (Gr. *hilasterion*).

The gentiles attributed natural disasters and other problems to the anger of their gods. *Hilasterion* is the word they used to refer to the sacrifices they offered to try and appease their idols.

Without associating the living God with paganism, we can assume that the inspired apostle is working precisely with this idea. Orthodox theology has always accepted it as such. Rm 3:25 therefore describes the cross as a *hilasterion*-sacrifice. *There* God's wrath burnt into His Son - and so His righteous anger over human sin was satisfied.

Hilasterion therefore says in a single word what Jesus Christ achieved on earth, especially on Calvary!

THE WRATH OF GOD

The Bible talks about the wrath of God times without number - even more often than about His love. And this is exactly where Paul starts as he is about to

wonderfully explain the gospel of God's grace in the book of Romans.

God's wrath is His eternal and absolute abhorrence for all iniquity and sin - as well as His acts of judgement that express this abhorrence. It is the holiness of God in action against all sin.

And let us not forget: the wrath of God is as much one of His perfect attributes as is His love, faithfulness and grace. Indifference towards sin would, after all, have indicated moral imperfection in Him.

THE PENAL SUBSTITUTE

Propitiation is not a word we use every day. A definition is therefore necessary. This is what a well-known dictionary says: "Some offering, sacrifice or suffering sufficient to win forgiveness or make up for an offence. It is an action that makes the governing power propitious (kindly disposed, gracious) toward the offender" (Funk & Wagnalls, College Standard Dictionary).

Erickson, in his *Concise Dictionary of Christian Theology*, says: "A reference to the idea that Christ's atonement satisfies the wrath of God."

Perhaps the best for us is to try and describe *hilasterion*: *Christ was the Penal Substitute who took upon Himself God's wrath against us, and suffered it in our place.*

- Christ was the *penal substitute*. The perfect righteousness of a Holy God insists on the punishment of all trespasses against His law. This is precisely what happened on Calvary. There the Son endured God's wrath against the sin - all sin and every sin - of all people God wanted to save.

- *Substitution* takes place when one person acts on someone else's behalf - in such a way that the person who was originally responsible need not endure or do whatever was necessary to be done.

It is clearly underlined in Scripture that Christ acted as substitute for those who were entrusted to

Him by the Father. For instance, two prepositions are used in Scripture that illustrate this clearly:

In Rm 5:8 and Gl 3:13 the preposition *hyper* (for the sake of, on behalf of) is translated with "for". The last-mentioned states it thus: "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse *for* us..." (NIV).

In Mt 20:28; Mk 10:45 and 1Tm 2:6 we find the preposition *anti* (in place of, in exchange for). Therefore we read in Mark 10:45: "...the Son ... (came) ... to give his life as a ransom *for* many."

Jesus Christ, compelled by His perfect love to do all the necessary for my salvation, suffered God's terrible judgements - which I should have suffered - on my behalf, and in so doing He established forgiveness and eternal glory for me.

Every true believer *must* grasp this truth. It is, after all, at the heart of the gospel. Realise, believe and embrace it - and it will change your life. Therefore Christians throughout the ages have two experiences:

Firstly a profound realisation: *for this I owe my Saviour everything - my entire life.*

Secondly, an *inner security*, which becomes an inexhaustible source of peace, joy and praise.

WHAT DOES THIS TRUTH TELL US?

1. It tells us something about God.

It is important to recognise that Christ did not stand in *opposition* to His father on Calvary. It is a completely warped and God-dishonouring idea that He protected "poor sinners" against the anger of His Father.

Calvary was first and foremost the Father's initiative. It was the Father who "presented Him as a sacrifice of atonement" (Rm 3:25). The verb literally means that the Father placed the Son before Himself, as it were - so that He, the Son, could suffer the elect's punishment.

How clearly Isaiah foresaw this! "Surely he took

up our infirmities and carried our sorrows, yet we considered him stricken by God, smitten by him, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed ... *Yet it was the Lord's will to crush him and cause him to suffer*" (53:4-5; 10).

We therefore need to see and recognise God the Father's *holy righteousness* behind the cross. On Calvary His wrath against my sin was appeased. It made right whatever was wrong in His sight. Every morsel of debt was paid.

The cross underlines the perfection of God's law, and that He stands by it uncompromisingly as man's moral standard. The ground for salvation remains therefore perfect obedience to it - *but it is the obedience of the man Christ Jesus on our behalf!*

2. It tells us something about man.

Since Calvary there can be no doubt about the seriousness of God's warning in Gen 2:17: "If you eat of its fruit, you will surely die".

There cannot be a greater and more insulting sin than to reject a Substitute such as Jesus Christ. Therefore God will punish those who turn their backs on His offer of grace more severely than those who never heard the gospel at all.

Nothing emphasises the inescapability of eternal judgement for those without a substitute more than the fact of Calvary. *Will the living God overlook a rebel when He did not spare His own Son?*

3. It tells us something about Jesus Christ..

As true man He took our place under God's judgement. He underwent the death that we should have suffered - bodily and spiritually. This is why He cries: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Mk 15:34). This is the unshakable foundation of our acquittal and immunity in terms of the law.

One of the most touching revelations in Scripture is that Jesus Christ presented Himself willingly as Substitute for sinners. In the passage about the

good shepherd He emphasises four times that He lays down His life for His sheep (John 10:11, 15, 17, 18). And in Eph 5:2 the apostle writes: "... live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God."

4. It tells us something about saving faith.

Faith knows that God's standards for man are permanently in force, and that eternal judgement awaits every person who is not united to Christ. *But true faith also embraces the fact that the penalty for my sins was already payed completely on Calvary.*

True faith therefore brings peace of mind. Toplady sings: "Payment God cannot twice demand, first from my bleeding Surety's hand, and then again from mine."

A fire-break serves as protection against fire. Wherever a fire has burnt once, it does not burn again! Remember therefore: the fire of God's wrath has already burned on Christ. Truly, on the day of judgement there will be *one* safe place - and only one - the fire-break of Calvary!

True faith does not go to Calvary only once. No, it hides at the foot of the cross continually and forever!

Two essential characteristics of true, saving faith follow from this:

Firstly, faith *understands* and *embraces* God's free gift of forgiveness in Christ - for life and death, for time and eternity. This is the heart of saving faith. A Christian dies with his Saviour's Name on his lips.

Secondly, true faith is a *looking away from yourself - to Christ, and in particular to Him as the Crucified*. Mature Christians therefore do not seek the basis for their forgiveness and future hope in their own experiences. They know that constant introspection is a recipe for discouragement. Yes, they examine themselves often (2Cor 13:5), but do not get stuck there. Their sense of sin urges them to flee to Christ again and again.

Never forget this: *redemption is objective*. It occurs in the first place outside myself - by way of speaking, in God's books.

Let us always remember the copper snake in the desert (Num 21:8-9). All one had to do to be healed was to *look at the snake*. Jesus uses this image when He talks about His coming crucifixion (John 3:14-18). *The essence of faith is to keep your eyes fixed on Christ!*

Why a snake? In the Bible the snake is a symbol of evil. The bronze snake was thus a prophecy that the Messiah would be "made sin for us" - that He would be our Penal Substitute (2Cor 5:21).

Consequently, God's salvation is accessible to all - regardless of the weight of your sins, your impotence or your unworthiness. Looking away from your bankruptcy to Christ, is all that is necessary. You do not have to do anything. You just need to *look!*

In fact, you don't dare do anything else. It hinders you from looking as you should. More importantly, Christ is either the sole saviour, or no Saviour at all! The Israelites who attempted to cure themselves, died without exception!

Can you see now why the Christian faith differs essentially from all the religions of this world - including *churchianity*? All of them trust moralism and ceremonies to bring about salvation.

No, salvation is not obtained by religious people climbing up a ladder of morality and ceremonies to God; it is God stooping down in grace to sinners in Christ!

Nico van der Walt

- Nico van der Walt subscribes to the historically respected and internationally recognized 1689 Baptist Confession - like most Reformed Baptists worldwide - as well as the Confession of Sola 5, an association of God-centred evangelicals in Southern Africa.
- Subscriptions, changes of address, cancellations and correspondence: E: duplexismh@telkomsa.net; P.O. Box 35289, Menlopark, 0102, South Africa. Tel. 012-804 0316; 083 5544 941.
- www.reformed.org.za www.antipas.org.za www.sola5.org
- Weekly a sermon like this is sent world-wide and free of charge in Afrikaans or English by e-mail to 2000 people who have requested it.
- No copyright. Please duplicate or forward electronically.
- Past E-sermons can be found on the first two websites above.
- We gladly send an introduction to the sermons to those E-addresses you might wish to send us. However, we only put those people on our mailing list who request so personally.