

## Romans 3:25

The first – and, I would argue, principle passage – of the four passages which contain the actual word ‘propitiation’ is Romans 3:21-26. Although I have already looked at this passage, I include it here, both for sake of completeness, and, more important, because it plays such a vital role in this major doctrine. It marks the lynchpin in Paul’s argument in setting out the gospel:

But now<sup>1</sup> the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the law and the prophets bear witness to it – the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction: for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation<sup>2</sup> by his blood, to be received by faith.<sup>3</sup> This was to show God’s righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins. 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 (Rom. 3:21-26).

Here, in the context which starts in Romans 1:18, we have all the leading points we have seen in regard to propitiation: All

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<sup>1</sup> That key phrase – ‘but now’ – once again.

<sup>2</sup> Wright translated this as ‘God put Jesus forth as the place of mercy’ (N.T.Wright: *Paul for Everyone: Romans Part 1*, SPCK, London, 2004, reissued 2014). Notice how Wright has effectively removed all thought of wrath. I spoke of evangelicals who endorse Wright. Tom Holland, on the cover of this book by Wright, called him ‘Paul’s greatest living interpreter’. I dissent.

<sup>3</sup> NIV is weak: ‘God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement, through the shedding of his blood – to be received by faith’. As I have already said: ‘Expiation alone does not adequately deal with the concept of propitiation, with what Scripture means by propitiation. And expiation cannot replace propitiation – neither as a word nor a concept. Far from it! The atonement needs to an expiation and a propitiation’.

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men are sinners under the wrath of God. But in his love God has determined to redeem his elect. How? How can this seemingly-impossible feat be accomplished? By an arbitrary fiat? No! God in love has determined to redeem his elect by having his wrath towards them propitiated. How? God sent his Son into the world so that he might accomplish ‘the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood’. Could anything be clearer? God has determined to show his righteousness, wrath, and love and mercy, show it in Christ, show it in him on the cross, placarding him as the propitiation necessary to accomplish his purpose. His purpose? To reveal the God that he is, to remain consistent with himself, and to redeem his elect.

There is nothing pagan about this. From first to last, it is an amazing work of the triune God who, in staggering grace and wisdom, planned, accomplished, and is now, by his Spirit, applying his sovereign will to redeem his elect while maintaining his absolute integrity.

The context, as always, is king. Romans 3:25 comes after an extended section (Rom. 1:18 – 3:20) in which Paul, in the fullest detail, set out God’s wrath against sin and the sinner, that wrath being directed against sinners, personally and individually. Wrath, God’s wrath, is the solemn lead-up context to Romans 3:25. Intimately connected with God’s wrath in the context is his righteousness, in stark contrast to man’s unrighteousness. Let us remind ourselves of some of the leading points of the apostle’s argument. As Paul declared:

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. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written: ‘The righteous shall live by faith’. For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth... They were filled with all manner of unrighteousness... Though they know God’s righteous decree that those who practice such things deserve to die, they not only do them but give approval to those who practice them (Rom. 1:16-18,29,32).

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...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 (Rom. 2:5).

For those who are self-seeking and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness, there will be wrath and fury [that is, from God] (Rom. 2:8).

But if our unrighteousness serves to show the righteousness of God, what shall we say? That God is unrighteous to inflict wrath on us? (I speak in a human way). By no means! For then how could God judge the world? But if through my lie God's truth abounds to his glory, why am I still being condemned as a sinner? And why not do evil that good may come? – as some people slanderously charge us with saying. Their condemnation is just.

What then? Are we Jews any better off? No, not at all. For we have already charged that all, both Jews and Greeks, are under sin, as it is written: 'None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God. All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one'. 'Their throat is an open grave; they use their tongues to deceive'. 'The venom of asps is under their lips'. 'Their mouth is full of curses and bitterness'. 'Their feet are swift to shed blood; in their paths are ruin and misery, and the way of peace they have not known'. 'There is no fear of God before their eyes' (Rom. 3:5-18).

That's the context of Romans 3:25. The verse must not be divorced from its context; the context gives the apostle's declaration its weight, its gravitas.

Intimately connected with all that is judgment, God's judgment, his righteous judgment, his judgment of the individual:

Therefore you have no excuse, O man, every one of you who judges. For in passing judgment on another you condemn yourself, because you, the judge, practice the very same things. We know that the judgment of God rightly falls on those who practice such things. Do you suppose, O man you who judge those who practice such things and yet do them yourself – that you will escape the judgment of God? Or do you presume on the riches of his kindness and forbearance and patience, not knowing that God's kindness is meant to lead you to

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repentance? 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. He will render to each one according to his works... (Rom. 2:1-6).

'O man, every one of you... O man... each one...'. God's wrath has a global aspect – as Wright constantly reminds us – but that wrath is directed against every single sinner; every last descendant of Adam is under God's wrath, individually and personally. And for any and every sinner to be saved, that wrath has to be propitiated.

That is the context of Romans 3:21-26. That is the background to God's design and accomplishment of redemption through Christ. That is what the gospel is about.

Consequently, any scheme which is designed to replace 'propitiation' with 'expiation' in this passage is nothing better than nonsensical, and worse; it is flying directly in the face of the massive amount of evidence which the apostle piled up. In building his case by careful argument, Paul enforced his claims by scriptural quotation, starting with Romans 1:18. And all was leading to his punch line: as he declared, God decreed the cross – and Christ's death on it – in order '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' (Rom. 3:26). Notice: in confronting the fallen world, the world of sinners, God was determined to show his righteousness – his holiness and justice, his revulsion against sin and sinners. He could, simply, have done this by obliterating the world, thus maintaining his holiness. But that would have clashed with another of God's attributes and desires; namely, his desire to show his mercy, love and grace to the elect. How could these two attributes – equally strong attributes – of wrath and love be maintained and reconciled? By propitiation! And only by propitiation.

It is not that the elect, as it were, have to use Christ to placate God's wrath, and turn him from a bully into the God who loves them: God himself, in his love, put forth his own Son, 'his dear [or] his beloved Son' (Col. 1:13) – placarding him (Gal. 3:1) –

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as the propitiation which he had devised and decreed in order to satisfy his justice and so pacify his wrath towards the elect.

If Jesus' sacrifice had not been a propitiation, the passage would have made no sense at all. If God was showing his love at Calvary – and nothing else – we would be left with a God who is no god at all.

Romans 3:26 – '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' (Rom. 3:26) – can only mean that Jesus' death satisfied or appeased God's righteous judgment and wrath, and, at the same time, demonstrated God's love and mercy. And both ends were what God had, from eternity, determined and planned. No other view will do.

I have deliberately repeated the point; it cannot be made too often.

Wright powers on and on about God's love, but he does so at the expense of the biblical – I stress the word – at the expense of the biblical revelation of God's wrath. Wright is a leading biblical scholar, but on this point he drives a coach and horses through Paul's argument.

Take the word for 'put forward' (Rom. 3:25). I used 'placarding': God placarded his Son as the propitiation. The word means 'exposed, exposed that it should be seen, and this for a purpose'. It also has the sense that God was exposing his *own* Son to the gaze of men and angels. God determined that his purpose in propitiating his wrath through the death of his Son should be at the forefront of the gospel. It was not 'done in a corner' (Acts 26:26). God exposed it to public view. He did not want men to miss it – neither when Christ died nor when believers preach the gospel. The thought that any teacher might try to interfere with this, let alone remove propitiation altogether from Scripture, is unspeakably abhorrent.

The blurb for D.Martyn Lloyd-Jones' sermon 'Propitiation' on Romans 3:25, reads like this:

Jesus saves sinners, but how are they redeemed in Christ and why did it have to happen in that way? In Romans 3:25, Paul says that [God set forth Christ as] a ‘propitiation’ for our sins in order to declare his righteousness to the sinner. In the sermon titled ‘Propitiation’, Dr Martyn Lloyd-Jones explains that this word means to appease and avert anger or wrath. The cross of Jesus Christ was needed to appease God’s wrath. Propitiation implies four things: an offence to be taken away, an offended person who needs to be pacified, a guilty person, and a sacrifice of atonement for the offence. Also in this discourse,<sup>4</sup> Dr Lloyd-Jones warns about various translations of the Bible. Many who have translated this specific passage have [wrongly] replaced the word ‘propitiation’ with ‘expiation’, giving the verse a completely different context. This happens because personal prejudices can sway the [translators]. In any<sup>5</sup> case, it is to be clear that without propitiation, the Lord cannot have a personal relationship with a person when there is sin present. This is the reason that Christ had to be the ultimate sacrifice to pay the atonement for sins.

Spurgeon:

We cannot give up the doctrine of redemption, the redemption which is in Christ Jesus! This is it, soul – listen to it – you are justified freely, but it cost the Saviour dearly! It cost him a life of obedience! It cost him a death of shame, of agony, of suffering – all immeasurable! There was your cup of wrath which you must drink for ever, and which you could never drain to the bottom! It must be drunk by someone! Jesus drinks it, sets the cup to his lips, and the very first drop of it makes him sweat great drops of blood falling to the ground! But he drinks right on, though head, and hands, and feet are all suffering – drinks right on, though he cries: ‘My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?’ Drinks right on, I say, until not one black drop or dreg could be found within that cup and, turning it upside down, he cries: ‘It is finished! It is finished’, as he gives up the ghost. At one tremendous draught of love, the Lord has drunk condemnation dry for every one of his people for whom he shed his blood! ‘Justified freely by his grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus’. There was a redemption by substitutionary suffering, a redemption by

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<sup>4</sup> Original ‘message’.

<sup>5</sup> Original ‘either’.

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vicarious obedience, a redemption by interposition of Christ on our behalf:

*To bear, that we might never bear  
His Father's righteous ire.*

...The blood, the blood, the blood – it is there the propitiation lies – and to that our faith must turn our eyes. It is so. Yes, it is so:

*My sins deserve your wrath, my God!  
Your wrath has fallen on your Son!*

My sins turned away your face – you have turned away your face from him. My sins deserved death – he has died. My sins deserved to be spit upon – to be mocked – [for us] to be cast out as felons. All this he has endured as if he were my sin, and is it not so? ‘He has made him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might be made the righteousness of God in him’. Brothers and sisters, I do declare my conscience never knew any peace until I understood this truth of God, but ever since then I have no rock I build on but this – Christ in my place, and I in Christ’s place! I am safe in him and he was chastened, bruised, wounded, slain, instead of me! He it is. Propitiation through the blood... In his pierced side my soul does find a shelter from the blast of divine wrath. It is peace now!<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> C.H. Spurgeon: ‘Justification, Propitiation, Declaration’, a sermon on Rom. 3:24-26.