

## Romans 3 v25 How did the Father treat Jesus on the cross?

### Introduction

Voltaire the famous French atheist had little respect for our faith and I suspect too little understand of it either. On one occasion he was talking about forgiveness and implying that we could demand it from God. Merely to ask was sufficient to receive this blessing from a benevolent grandfather-type figure in heaven. Now many people who don't share his antagonism to Christianity have a similar view of God. They perceive of a being whose thought pattern goes something like this: 'Oh you shouldn't have said that or done that, that was really naughty, but okay I'll let you off one more time, again!' Following on from that that as long as you hadn't been a hardened criminal living a vile life you could somehow find a way into heaven even if you had had no time for God or Church or any of His priorities – that He somehow had to let you in on your terms! It is sometimes framed this kind of way: 'How could a God of love allow anyone to spend eternity in hell?' This is a strange question and the opposite of the biblical puzzle of how a holy and perfect God could allow a sinful human being to enter heaven. I know my own thoughts and heart; the words I say or don't say; the actions I do or don't do and lined up against God's perfect standards I don't match up – neither do you or anyone else. There is a gaping chasm between our imperfections and His perfections. It is like trying to jump across the Grand Canyon from one side to the next. Some people could undoubtedly manage better than others in terms of distance, but no-one would come even close to making it. In Romans 3:25-26 the apostle Paul addresses this problem that humanity faces: *whom God set forth as a propitiation by His blood, through faith, to demonstrate His righteousness, because in His forbearance God had passed over the sins that were previously committed,* <sup>26</sup> *to demonstrate at the present time His righteousness, that He might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus* (New King James Version). The term here that is central to this question is 'propitiation'. Unlike 'redemption' and 'justification' it is no longer in use in contemporary English. As a result more modern Bible versions have tried to use other words to convey the meaning of the apostle's words. The NIV renders it in this way: *God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement, through the shedding of his blood – to be received by faith. He did this to demonstrate his righteousness, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished* <sup>26</sup> *– he did it to demonstrate his righteousness at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus* (Romans 3:25-26). In the Old Testament alone there are up to 580 uses of words from this word group that relate to 'propitiation', in addition to a smaller number of New Testament passages (L.L. Morris, *The Apostolic Preaching of the Cross*, pp.149-150). Therefore, the problem of how a Holy God can have fellowship with you and me is an issue taken very seriously in the Bible.

This issue was critical in the conversion of a number of well-known Christians in history. William Cowper (1731-1800), the famous poet and hymn writer had a miserable childhood. His mother died when he was only six years old and he was dispatched to boarding school where this vulnerable little boy was mercilessly bullied by older boys and despite attempting suicide twice to escape his tormentors his pleas for help were disregarded. Thankfully schools endeavour to provide a safer environment for young people today, but that trauma led him to spend time in an asylum for people with mental health issues aged twenty-five in 1756. Cowper a very sensitive individual had always had a strong conscience and was deeply troubled by injustice and wrongdoing. He had been aware of the problem of human sinfulness but not of any way to address it. He had sought advice and help, but at a time in England when the vast majority of the population had no interest in our faith, it was probably not too surprising that he had this difficulty. However, in the goodness of God, while staying in the asylum, Cowper was put in the care of a gentle Christian doctor Nathaniel Cotton in ST Albans who shared with him the good news of Jesus who could transform his life. The doctor

had overheard Cowper loudly crying out in his room on one occasion: ‘My sin! My sin! Oh for some fountain open for my cleansing!’ He shared with Cowper that God had provided for that very need in Jesus.

In his own written account Cowper told how he came to put his faith in God: The happy period which was to shake off my fetters and afford me a clear opening into the free mercy of the Blessed God in Jesus was now arrived. I flung myself into a chair near the window seat, and seeing a Bible there, ventured once more to apply to it for comfort and instruction. The first verse I saw was the twenty-fifth [verse] of the third chapter of Romans where Jesus is set forth as the propitiation for our sins. Immediately I received strength to believe it. Immediately the full beams of the sun of righteousness shone on me. I saw the sufficiency of the atonement He had made, my pardon sealed in His blood and all the fullness and completeness of my justification. In a moment I believed and received the Gospel...My eyes filled with tears...I could only look up to Heaven in silence overwhelmed with love and wonder! It was ‘joy unspeakable and full of glory’... (G. Ella, *William Cowper Poet of Paradise*, pp. 88-91)

They hymn he wrote later, ‘There is a fountain filled with blood’ is a poetic account of his conversion experience that day. The troubled young man who entered that medical facility was transformed by the revelation of this biblical truth.

### **1. The meaning of propitiation**

*God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement, through the shedding of His blood – to be received by faith. He did this to demonstrate His righteousness, because in His forbearance He had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished* <sup>26</sup> – *He did it to demonstrate His righteousness at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus* (Romans 3:25-26). We are all guilty before God of breaking His law in a context where the baseline standard is perfection. Can you imagine completing a lifetime of perfection? What about a year or a month, a week or a day? Not just in your actions –which could be possible for quite some time if we simply refer to active misconduct; but also in your speech where no bad temper, or inappropriate vocabulary or inaccurate information coming out to the disadvantage of another person? If you could say yes to this requirement regarding God’s moral law we need to remember in the Sermon on the Mount that Jesus extended it to our thought-life. How many of us would be confident of completing a day let alone a lifetime without the possibility of an inappropriate thought! By all means God would not decline entry to heaven to a person who could accomplish perfection in thought, word and deed. Such a person would not need a Saviour to die in their place and one person has qualified. Hebrews 4:14-15 reminds us of this remarkable fact: *Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has ascended into heaven, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess.* <sup>15</sup> *For we do not have a high priest who is unable to feel sympathy for our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are – yet He did not sin.* At one level this is great news someone has shown it is possible to attain to this ideal. Yet it is bad news to me because I know that I will never even come close to it. Paul in Romans 1:18 has already declared: *The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of people...* In case there was anyone who didn’t get it Romans 3:23 states explicitly: *for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.* The inevitable question immediately arises: God created humanity to have fellowship with Him and live life to its fullest extent. He cannot be inconsistent with regard to His standards nor tolerate sinful conduct. He must uphold the law. It cannot be set aside. If you and I in common with other human beings cannot resolve this predicament then a substitute must be sought to pay in full the consequences of our sinfulness. Various people over the years have claimed that the Bible contradicts itself in portraying God as simultaneously angry at human sinful conduct and loving towards human beings. However any parent knows that this is nonsense. You love your children dearly and want the very best for them, but when they do wrong there are times when you get angry and have to threaten disciplinary action and sometimes carry it out. There are times when carrying out that sanction hurts you more than the one on whom the sanction is imposed –though they may disagree with that statement! A

total stranger might be unconcerned that your child had, for example, placed themselves in a very dangerous situation such as trespassing near a main railway line with some friends, but because you love them you made a strict rule that only certain places were permissible to go to with their friends. When this rule was disobeyed you would have to enforce some sanctions for their wellbeing –because of your love not because you were being spiteful! God wants the very best for us; therefore, His holy anger against human sinfulness is rightly expressed because of the damage we can do to ourselves and to other people through such behavioural choices. We must be careful also not to have a caricature of the Father as a vengeful figure always angry and the Son always loving and mitigating His Father’s anger against sinful humanity. Nothing could be further from the truth than this misunderstanding. This biblical truth of propitiation explains how God could be true to Himself and at the same time enable guilty sinners to avoid the due penalty for their sins. It means that Jesus satisfied God’s holy requirements thus truly punishing sins that had been committed, but at the same time showing love and mercy to repentant sinners who sought to settle their accounts with God and have a new beginning in their lives. We broke God’s law, but Jesus fulfilled it. John Owen, the great seventeenth century Congregational Minister described propitiation in this way: ‘It is four things: (i) there is an offence to be removed; (ii) there is an offended person to be dealt with; (iii) the offender has to be pardoned; (iv) In order for this to happen a sacrifice has to be offered which is acceptable.’ Therefore, if God has accepted Jesus’ sacrifice in your place and mine then He cannot and will not demand that we pay again for our sins. In Paul’s own words: *There is, therefore, now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus* (Romans 8:1).

## 2. An illustration of propitiation (Leviticus 16)

In Leviticus chapter sixteen there is a description of the religious ritual followed on the holiest day of the Jewish religious calendar, Yom Kippur (The Day of Atonement): <sup>6</sup> ‘*Aaron is to offer the bull for his own sin offering to make atonement for himself and his household.* <sup>7</sup> *Then he is to take the two goats and present them before the Lord at the entrance to the tent of meeting.* <sup>8</sup> *He is to cast lots for the two goats – one lot for the Lord and the other for the scapegoat.* <sup>9</sup> *Aaron shall bring the goat whose lot falls to the Lord and sacrifice it for a sin offering.* <sup>10</sup> *But the goat chosen by lot as the scapegoat shall be presented alive before the Lord to be used for making atonement by sending it into the wilderness as a scapegoat* (Leviticus 16:6-10). Once a year, after offering a sacrifice for his own sins first, the High Priest, in the first instance, Aaron Moses’ brother, took two goats one was chosen as the sin offering and the other was the scapegoat, the substitute-goat on whose head the sins of the people were symbolically laid. First of all the goat for the sacrifice was killed and its blood taken into the Holy of Holies. It was sprinkled on the mercy seat the beautiful covering on top of the Ark of the Covenant [show picture] that contained the two tablets of stone on which the Ten Commandments were written. Here the blood ‘covered’ the broken law and atonement was made for the sin of the people. Then hands were laid on the other goat then it was turned out free to go not to be recaptured. An official was appointed to lead the goat to its freedom beyond the camp. This is the picture behind John the Baptist’s famous declaration concerning Jesus in John 1:29: *Look the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.* Jesus combined the sacrifice and the substitute in one person-Himself – as a sufficient sacrifice of infinite worth for all who come to faith in Him. Jesus would bear the wrath of God in full on the cross, as our substitute and in so doing demonstrate God’s amazing love to us through the endurance of that penalty. Romans 5:7-11 declares: *Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous person, though for a good person someone might possibly dare to die.* <sup>8</sup> *But God demonstrates His own love for us in this: while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.* <sup>9</sup> *Since we have now been justified by His blood, how much more shall we be saved from God’s wrath through Him!* <sup>10</sup> *For if, while we were God’s enemies, we were reconciled to Him through the death of His Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through His life!* <sup>11</sup> *Not*

only is this so, but we also boast in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation. Now we must be very careful in understanding that God the Father never loved Jesus more than when He was on the cross. But God had to show to us both the seriousness of sin and the extent to which He would go to reconcile us to Himself.

### 3. The benefits of propitiation

Unlike the other terms Paul has used to explain some aspect of God's salvation for us. Propitiation is not part of our vocabulary or a concept that readily crops up in our conversation. However, what I hope we can grasp is the fact that there are three benefits to what was accomplished through Jesus' offering of Himself for us on the cross. First of all:

(a) **Salvation for sinners** In Luke 18:9-14 Jesus told this story: *To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everyone else, Jesus told this parable:* <sup>10</sup> 'Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. <sup>11</sup> The Pharisee stood by himself and prayed: "God, I thank you that I am not like other people – robbers, evildoers, adulterers – or even like this tax collector. <sup>12</sup> I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get." <sup>13</sup> 'But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, "God, have mercy on me, a sinner."<sup>14</sup> 'I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.' Literally the tax-collector said: *O God, be propitiated for me, the sinner.* The Pharisee in the story was as proud as a peacock. Almost, but not quite, thinking that God was honoured that he was spending time in His presence! We speak in our culture of the 'holier than Thou' attitude of people who look down on others –this is the kind of person Jesus had in mind here. By contrast the other man a tax-collector knew he was a sinner and that he didn't deserve God's favour. He pleads for mercy from God and hopes that God will give him grace. This is the right attitude that God expects from people who seek His assistance. Jesus' concluding remarks in Luke 18:14 are very clear: <sup>14</sup> 'I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.' In his first letter John wrote these words: *Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. <sup>8</sup> Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love. <sup>9</sup> This is how God showed His love among us: He sent His one and only Son into the world that we might live through Him. <sup>10</sup> This is love: not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. <sup>11</sup> Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. <sup>12</sup> No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and His love is made complete in us (I John 4:7-11).* I John 4:10b can be translated literally as: *sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins...* it was the pinnacle of His love to make such a sacrifice for us, but in such a way that He remained righteous. At the resurrection of Jesus there are some interesting details given in John's account that are important for our theme today. In John 20:11-12 it states: <sup>11</sup> *Now Mary stood outside the tomb crying. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb <sup>12</sup> and saw two angels in white, seated where Jesus' body had been, one at the head and the other at the foot.* The significance of these details can so easily be lost on us Western Christians unfamiliar with the details of the Jewish faith that was taken as read by many of the first readers of this account. Between the angels were the grave cloths no longer needed by Jesus (Luke 24:12). The positioning of the angels was no accident it was similar to that of the angels on the mercy seat of the Ark of the Covenant. God had been propitiated –that is His justifiable anger against sin had been satisfied and atonement had been accomplished for those who come to Him through Jesus. Have you put your faith and trust in Him?

(b) **Forgiveness for believers** John again writing in his first letter. Declared in I John 2:1-2: *My dear children, I write this to you so that you will not sin. But if anybody does sin, we have an advocate with the Father – Jesus Christ, the Righteous One. <sup>2</sup> He is the atoning sacrifice [propitiation] for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world.* These verses address

some crucial questions concerning forgiveness. First of all have you truly grasped that sins committed before your conversion have been forgiven when we repented of them and gave our lives to the Lord. The slate has been wiped clean; it is a fresh start. It is never cheap grace because Jesus had to go through the agonies of the cross giving His life for you to make this possible. Sometimes there are people who cannot let go of things in the past and accept the release God has given them when they have truly sought to address their past and put it behind them. The second point here concerns Christians who may think well that's great that my sins pre-conversion have all been erased from God's records, but what about sins committed since my conversion or since my baptism – have they been forgiven when I sought it? Or are they piling up in a divine account book that the Lord might choose to bring up when I stand before Him? Do I need to saved all over again? A thousand times 'no' to this last question! But to face the question of post-conversion sin, I John 1:8-9 a few verses earlier in the same letter states: <sup>8</sup>*If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us.* <sup>9</sup>*If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and **purify us from all unrighteousness.*** Jesus' sacrifice was of infinite value, a once-for-all time perfect sacrifice accepted by the Father on behalf of His people, those individuals past, present and future who will claim Him as Lord and Saviour. Jesus is now at the right hand of the Father in heaven praying for us, 'reminding' the Father –not that He has ever forgotten anything! That we are His sons and daughters through grace by faith in Jesus; therefore, our sins when confessed are forgiven; however, there is another issue of forgiveness. In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus said these shocking words: *Forgive us our debts as we also have forgiven our debtors... For if you forgive other people when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you.* <sup>15</sup>*But if you do not forgive others their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins* (Matthew 6:12, 14-15). We do not have the right to hold grudges against others whom God has forgiven. When a matter is dealt with it is over. The past is not dug up. This is not primarily a finance issue but an attitude one. Jesus made this abundantly plain in the parable of the unmerciful servant, recorded in Matthew 19:21-35: <sup>21</sup>*Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, 'Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Up to seven times?'* <sup>22</sup>*Jesus answered, 'I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times.'* <sup>23</sup>*Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants.* <sup>24</sup>*As he began the settlement, a man who owed him ten thousand bags of gold was brought to him.* <sup>25</sup>*Since he was not able to pay, the master ordered that he and his wife and his children and all that he had be sold to repay the debt.* <sup>26</sup>*At this the servant fell on his knees before him. "Be patient with me," he begged, "and I will pay back everything."* <sup>27</sup>*The servant's master took pity on him, cancelled the debt and let him go.* <sup>28</sup>*But when that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred silver coins. He grabbed him and began to choke him. "Pay back what you owe me!" he demanded.* <sup>29</sup>*His fellow servant fell to his knees and begged him, "Be patient with me, and I will pay it back."* <sup>30</sup>*But he refused. Instead, he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt.* <sup>31</sup>*When the other servants saw what had happened, they were outraged and went and told their master everything that had happened.* <sup>32</sup>*Then the master called the servant in. "You wicked servant," he said, "I cancelled all that debt of yours because you begged me to."* <sup>33</sup>*Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?"* <sup>34</sup>*In anger his master handed him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed.* <sup>35</sup>***This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother or sister from your heart.*** God has a right to hold us to such a strict account on the basis of what He endured to make this possible for us. Do you need to ask the Lord to help you deal with grudges or a bad attitude to someone else that needs to be dealt with? Jesus sacrifice of atonement at its heart is about the means whereby each of us can both be forgiven and forgive other people- something that is foundational in relationships.

(c) **Encouragement for Christians** (Hebrews 4:14-16) <sup>14</sup>*Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has ascended into heaven, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess.* <sup>15</sup>*For we do not have a high priest who is unable to feel sympathy for our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are – yet He did not sin.* <sup>16</sup>***Let us then approach***

*God's throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.* This biblical doctrine has a final application in terms of encouragement to persevere in our relationship with God when we feel like 'throwing in the towel'. We all have times when we feel low, some people more than others by temperament as well as by circumstances. The one who endured this ordeal in your place and mine understands exactly what you are going through. Do you need to hear that this morning? The evil one wants to heap condemnation on us when we fail. He wants to implant negative thoughts in our minds like: 'how can you expect God to love you when you fail so frequently?' By contrast the Lord Jesus wants to pick us up and encourage us to keep going, to complete our spiritual journey through this life and has placed us in church families to encourage one another through the hard times of life, as well as rejoice with each other when things go well. Hebrews 8:12, quoting Jeremiah's remarkable words in Jeremiah 31 about God's new covenant, states: *For, I will forgive their wickedness and remember their sins no more.* The first part of that verse can be rendered literally: 'I will be propitious towards...' We are saved by the grace and power of God and we are kept by it as well, praise His wonderful name! God is true to His word. He loves you so much He sent His one and only son to die in your place. No wonder the apostle Paul could write in Romans 8:31-34: <sup>31</sup> ***What, then, shall we say in response to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us?*** <sup>32</sup> *He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all – how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?* <sup>33</sup> *Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies.* <sup>34</sup> ***Who then is the one who condemns? No one.*** *Christ Jesus who died – more than that, who was raised to life – is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us.* May each of us not only come to love the Lord for ourselves, but also catch a glimpse of how much He love you also, for Jesus' sake, Amen.