

Deeper Truth

5. The Doctrine of the Cross



CRAWLEY
COMMUNITY
CHURCH

INTRODUCTION

At the beginning of Matthew chapter 24 the disciples ask Jesus an interesting question: “What will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?” I’m not sure what answer they were expecting, but it was probably not the answer they got:

And Jesus answered them, “See that no one leads you astray. For many will come in my name, saying, ‘I am the Christ,’ and they will lead many astray. [Matthew 24:4-5]

and

And then many will fall away and betray one another and hate one another. And many false prophets will arise and lead many astray. [Matthew 24:10-11]

Those are verses that we should take careful notice of. The Christian church throughout the ages, and even more so today is engaged in a battle for the truth. How do we stay true to God’s word and how do we avoid being deceived by false teaching or doctrine? The sad truth is we will all probably know people who at one point were walking strongly in the faith but now seem to have been pulled away. The why’s and wherefores of that are not really the subject of the course, but rather “How do we stay true to God’s word?” How can we do our utmost to ensure we are not deceived or distracted, or worst still become those who deceive or distract others? The simple answer is to study God’s word and to understand the truths in there, and what it says and what it does not say.

We are also more likely to be led astray by subtle twists and modifications to God’s word rather than an outright denial. Satan at no point said to Adam and Eve “God doesn’t exist, help yourself to any fruit you like.” They would have seen through that deception very quickly. Rather he asked:

“Did God actually say, ‘You shall not eat of any tree in the garden?’” [Genesis 3:1b]

We also need to be aware of those truths that are fundamental to our faith and a denial of such will instantly lead us into error as opposed to other truths that can be interpreted in different ways, and for which Christians can hold different views. An absolute truth that must be defended to the uttermost is the fact that Christ will return. The means and manner of that return, and the whole are of what happens in the end times is however subject to much debate. With such subjects the various viewpoints will be presented.

Likewise, the truth that God created the whole universe out of nothing in one single act of creation is another truth we must hold to. The manner of that creation (was it over seven literal days or seven periods of time) is another area on which much has been written and different view put forth.

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All verses are from the from the English Standard Version (2001)

Bible verses and passages are shown in blue, other quotes are shown in red.

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5. The Doctrine of the Cross

At the centre of the gospel and our faith stands the cross. On the one hand Christ's death and the ensuing triumph over sin and devil is so simple that all can understand it, however, there is a richness that makes this a unique sacrifice that works on so many levels. Scripture speaks in many ways of what is accomplished through Christ's death on the cross. The effects of sin on our lives are many, but on each count the cross provides the answer.

In this section we will consider Christ's death on the cross from five different perspectives and in each case we will see a different consequence of sin and a wonderful resolution bought by Christ. Alone they are like pieces of a jigsaw puzzle; when joined a wonderful complete picture of the cross comes into view.

The table below gives a simple summary of the different consequences of sins, and how Christ's death on the cross addresses each one:

Action	The result of sin	The effect of Christ's sacrifice (Christ is our...)	Sample Text
Sacrifice	Man is sullied and dirtied by sin.	Sacrificial Lamb (He takes our sin on himself)	John 1:29
Redemption	Man is enslaved by sin and the devil.	Redeemer (He frees us from slavery)	Ephesians 1:7
Reconciliation	Man is alienated from God	Reconciler (He restores our relationship with God)	Ephesians 2:13
Propitiation	Man faces God's anger	Propitiation (He turns away God's anger)	Romans 3:25
Justification	Man is declared guilty of failing to keep God's law	Justifier (He confers righteousness upon us)	Romans 3:23-24

5.1 Sacrifice

5.1.1 The problem caused by sin.

The laws of the Old Covenant made it very clear that sin was something that tainted and stained and sullied men. There was a penalty that needed to be paid. Through sacrifice the sins of one (a person) were transferred to another (an animal) who was then killed thus paying the penalty for those sins so that the person might be cleansed.

The sacrifices of the Old Covenant were imperfect in they did not confer a lasting freedom, those who sinned and made sacrifice for those sins went on to sin again and so further sacrifice was needed. The earlier Levitical priesthood was superseded by the perfect priesthood of Christ. In the same way the imperfect sacrifices of the Old Covenant are superseded by the perfect sacrifice of Christ. Christ through the New Covenant is a better and complete sacrifice that once and for all takes our sins.

So, Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many.

[Hebrews 9:28a]

And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.

[Ephesians 5:2]

The next day he saw Jesus coming toward him, and said, "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!"

[John 1:29]

There were a number of very clear steps to sacrifice under the Old Covenant which will help our understanding of Christ's sacrifice. In a general sense sacrifice involves deprivation and loss. We can speak of the sacrifices parents make for their children, the sacrifices some citizens ensure during a war, or the sacrifices an athlete might make to win a race. All such uses bring out the idea of deprivation and cost.

5.1.2 The solution bought by Sacrifice.

5.1.2.1 The 'bringing near'.

It would seem obvious that to make a sacrifice one had to 'bring' the sacrifice to the place where it would be sacrificed. But to the Hebrews, making their sacrifices under the Old Covenant this was a significant action such that the verb 'to draw near' became a technical expression meaning to 'draw near to sacrifice.' The uses of the verb implicitly meant a sacrifice was taking place.

5.1.2.2 The laying on of hands

In carrying out the sacrifice the worshipper would lay his hands on the animal.

He shall lay his hand on the head of the burnt offering, and it shall be accepted for him to make atonement for him.

[Leviticus 1:4]

This was not a casual touch but a firm laying on of hands. The worshipper was identifying with the sacrifice and through the laying on of hands the sin was transferred from the one to the other. In some instances the worshipper would confess his sins, in effect saying "these are the sins that are transferred."

Throughout the year, the sins of the ancient Israelites were daily transferred to the regular sin offerings as outlined in the Torah. Once a year the High Priest took two goats and presented them at the door of the tabernacle with a view to dealing with the corporate sins of God's. Two goats were chosen by lot: one to be "The Lord's Goat", which was offered as a blood sacrifice, and the other to be the "Azazel" scapegoat to be sent away into the wilderness. The blood of the slain goat was taken into the Holy of Holies behind the sacred veil and sprinkled on the mercy seat, the lid of the Ark of the Covenant. Later in the ceremonies, the High Priest confessed the sins of the Israelites to Yahweh placing them figuratively on the head of the other goat, the Azazel scapegoat, who "took them away" never to be seen again. The sin of the nation was thus "atoned for" (paid for) by the "The Lord's Goat" and "The Azazel Goat".

In applying this to Christ and the New Covenant it can be seen that sacrifice is not something that is abstract or distant. One does not make a sacrifice or is sacrificed without there being a very strong bond. In being our sacrifice Christ personally identifies with us. Also notice the two clear aspects of this sacrifice:

- Blood is shed for sin
- Sin is 'taken away'

5.1.2.3 The blood

It is fair to say that in today's society the idea of God demanding a sacrifice is harder to apply. Critics of Christianity can point the abhorrence of killing and shedding of blood. Even well-known hymns of a couple of centuries ago do not play so well today.

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

[William Cowper 1772]

And so, the problem with sacrifice, and the shedding of blood is not a matter of theology (the Bible clearly states it) but one of apologetics (how do we apply it).

Firstly – the shedding of blood is not just some gory act with no deeper meaning but life itself was seen as being in the blood."

For the life of the flesh is in the blood, and I have given it for you on the altar to make atonement for your souls, for it is the blood that makes atonement by the life. *[Leviticus 17:11]*

When we say, "Christ shed his blood for us", it is not just a graphic way of saying he died for us – it literally says, "He gave His life for us".

Secondly, we cannot separate Christ from God and it is not that one person demands of another this ultimate sacrifice, but God Himself is our sacrifice.

"whom God put forward as a propitiation (sacrifice) by his blood,

[Romans 3:25]

Those who say God was morally corrupt because He demanded His own son die as a response to sin miss the point that the Christ who suffered and died on the cross was God himself.

5.2. Redemption

5.2.1 The problem caused by sin.

Redemption can be seen as the deliverance of a person or people out of captivity, by the paying of a price.

Greek work: lytrolos
NT Word: apolytrolos

Although redemption is now a theological term it had a very secular meaning in the past. For the Greeks, those conquered in battle were taken as slaves, but sometimes rich noblemen were also captured. They could be sold back to their countrymen for a ransom.

The associated words are very clear; the countrymen would raise a **ransom** which would be taken by a **redeemer** and the captive would be bought out of captivity or **redeemed**.

Through sin we have been 'captured' and 'enslaved' by the enemy and we are in need of a redeemer.

God is spoken of in the Old Testament as a redeemer:

"I know that my Redeemer lives." [Job 19:25]

Thus says the Lord your Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel. [Isaiah 43:14]

You, O Lord, are our Father our Redeemer from of old is your name. [Isaiah 63:16b]

And of course, in the New Testament Christ is spoken of as our redeemer:

And are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus. [Romans 3:24]

In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of grace. [Ephesians 1:7]

he entered once for all into the holy places, not by means of the blood of goats and calves but by means of his own blood this securing our eternal redemption. [Hebrews 9:12]

And because of him you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption. [1 Corinthians 1:30]

Therefore he is the mediator of a new covenant, so that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance, since a death has occurred that redeems them from the transgressions committed under the first covenant. [Hebrews 9:15]

"Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law." [Galatians 3:13]

Our word 'redemption' comes from three Jewish root words that each explain further the idea of redemption.

5.2.2 The solution bought by Redemption.

5.2.2.1 G'l: the kinsman redeemer

Unfortunately, we do not have an equivalent word in our language today that adequately represent 'G'l' – we do not say 'to kinsman' or 'to act as a kinsman', yet this was a very specific word for the Jews.

Ruth 4:1-12

Deuteronomy 25:5-6

A kinsman has a duty towards his family of those he was related to. Ruth as a childless widow came under the provision of the law that required her kinsman to marry her and the first child to be regarded as the son of the dead man. Boaz was prepared to carry out this action and it that way the story of Ruth and Boaz is a parallel to the story of mankind and Christ.

Leviticus 25:47-49

A poor man could sell himself into slavery, but he could not remain a slave forever. His owner could refuse to sell him to a member of the general public, but he could not refuse to sell him back to one of his relatives – his kinsmen, who has the right to buy him back, or redeem him.

Thus, the aspect of our redemption that is expressed by G'l is the aspect of our kinship and more importantly, our relationship with Christ. Although separated from God by sin there is still a family bond that is recognised. Jesus in effect says; "these are my brothers and sisters who are in slavery and the duty – the kinsman obligation – therefore falls on me to rescue them."

5.2.2.2 Pdh: the option to redeem.

As exciting as the idea of Christ as our kinsman redeemer is, we need to be aware that God is under no obligation to redeem us. Boaz had a duty and was obliged to redeem Ruth, but we cannot point the finger at God and demand that He redeem us.

The second root word 'Pdh' addresses the optional nature of redemption.

You shall set apart to the Lord all that first opens the womb. All the firstborn of your animals that are males shall be the Lord's. Every firstborn of a donkey you shall redeem with a lamb, or if you will not redeem it you shall break its neck. Every firstborn of man among your sons you shall redeem. [Exodus 13:12-13]

The unclean animals did not have to be redeemed. The option existed to either sacrifice a lamb or to kill the donkey. Of course, in most cases the lamb would be sacrificed as the donkey was a more valuable animal however the option to redeem or not is clearly shown.

God was under no compulsion to act for us. As we saw before, anything He did was purely out of His love and grace.

5.2.2.3 Krp: the ransom

This last word clearly expresses the fact that to redeem someone costs something – there is a price, or ransom, to pay.

There is a difficulty here that we need to address concerning the idea of God paying for our redemption. What currency did He use? And who did He pay? The idea that God paid Satan a ransom for our release is clearly unacceptable; God does not give anything to Satan, but we must nevertheless accept that paying a ransom implies a cost.

In Numbers 35 it is shown that one of the duties of the kinsman was to avenge the murder of one of his family. The law gave him the right to kill the murderer, yet this was not described as redemption, it simply came within the range of the law itself. The term redemption was only used when a price was paid. So, we have a problem; who did God pay the ransom to?

"I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with great acts of judgement." [Exodus 6:6b]

"You with your arm redeemed your people." [Psalm 77:15]

Do not move an ancient landmark or enter the fields of the fatherless, for their Redeemer is strong; he will plead their cause against you. [Proverbs 23:10-11]

The idea behind these verses is the exertion of force or strength as payment. The runner might say "the race was won at great cost", or "running has cost me dearly." No money as such changed hands, but there was an exertion of force and effort.

Our redemption 'cost' God dearly. Whilst there was no payment to Satan our redemption was not without effort, indeed it was only obtained by great effort.

5.2.3 Summary

Redemption clearly shows three things, and it brought them vividly to the minds of the 1st Century Christians as they read scripture:

- 1) People, by their sin, are enslaved.
- 2) Christ paid the price (ransom) for our freedom.
- 3) The redeemed are now free from their captivity.

5.3. Reconciliation

5.3 Reconciliation

5.3.1 The problem caused by sin.

Reconciliation can be seen as restoring the relationship between us and God that had been broken by sin.

All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. [2 Corinthians 5:18-19]

The verse does not tell us much about what reconciliation achieves, only that our sins are no longer counted against us, but a dictionary will help us expand our understanding:

It means to restore friendship, to make up after a quarrel, and describes the good relations that ensue after enmity has been put away. Quite literally it means a re-establishing of relationships. There was once unity between men and God, then enmity, and then a re-establishment of unity. Reconciliation is more than conciliation or arbitration which are processes that must be gone through to enable reconciliation to take place.

Reconciliation can be seen as restoring the relationship between us and God that had been broken by sin.

The problem caused by sin that is emphasised by the ministry of reconciliation is that due to sin, men and God no longer have a good relationship; it is broken, and the two parties need to be reconciled.

You adulterous people! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God. [James 4:4]

The word 'hatred' is from the Greek word 'echthra' meaning enmity or hostility. However, the alienation works two ways; not only are we at enmity with God but He is at enmity with us. God hates sin and is opposed to it in every aspect of way it manifests itself, and so as sinners there is enmity on God's part towards us as well as on our part towards God.

This is very important because many non-Christians will say "I have no quarrel with God", but God has a quarrel with them.

Two forces in a war oppose each other, one side cannot sit passively by – the enmity still exists. One cannot say; "I am not at war today", peace still has to be made.

5.3.2 The solution bought by Reconciliation.

We have said already that Christ, by His death, brings these two hostile parties back to unity – He makes peace between us and God, but there are three things in particular to note:

5.3.2.1 Reconciliation is a 'two-way street'.

If we are at enmity with God and God is at enmity with us then reconciliation must work both ways

For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life. [Romans 5:10]

For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility [Ephesians 2:14]

"Christ truly suffered, was crucified, dead and buried, to reconcile His father to us."
[Article 2 Anglican 39 Articles 1571]

5.3.2.2 Reconciliation is a work of Christ.

It is very easy to imagine that we are in the wrong and need to reconcile ourselves to God. Although we are sinners and are in wrong, reconciliation is not really addressing that particular problem and many scholars miss this point when explaining reconciliation. It is not just man repenting and putting away God's wrath; nor is it the love of God flooding men's hearts; nor is it the recognition of God's gracious relationship to us. All of these are true but are not reconciliation.

but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. [Romans 5:8]

The problem with the earlier statements is that they leave everything to human activity which in turn leaves Christ out of the equation and reduces everything to the 'clearing up of a misunderstanding.'

More than that, we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation. [Romans 5:11]

The whole tense of this passage is of Christ obtaining reconciliation while we were still sinners and alienated from God. Because of His death on the cross He can now offer that reconciliation to men. Again, this emphasises the fact that it is a work of Christ.

5.3.2.3 Reconciliation is a re-establishment of peace.

For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility. [Ephesians 2:14]

Peace is not just the absence of war but the presence of God's blessing; it is a positive word. Not only has the enmity been removed but blessing has been re-established.

5.3.3 Summary

- 1) Sin causes there to be a hostility between men and God.
- 2) Reconciliation is God's work achieved by Christ's death on the cross
- 3) Reconciliation (and the positive blessings of reconciliation) needs to be received.

5.4 Propitiation

Propitiation can be seen as the turning away of God's wrath, directed towards us as sinners.

This is saying a different thing to reconciliation. That emphasises that men and God were on different sides of the fence, propitiation homes in on the very real anger that God directs towards the sinner.

God is a God of wrath; He is totally opposed to sin; He will resist it completely and is angry towards it. If we are to find true salvation that anger must be turned away. This word is not used much today and unfortunately many of the words that are used do not fully explaining the idea it conveys. We talk of atonement, of expiation (both not used much today, or of forgiveness) – yet Propitiation is something very specific.

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. [Romans 3:25]

The Greek word is *hilasterion*.

NIV: sacrifice of atonement

RSV: expiation

NEB: The means of expiating sin by His sacrificial death

GNB: The means by which people's sins are forgiven.

And so, we have many ways of describing what we mean by *hilsaterion*, we know somehow God's anger towards us is turned away, let us see if we can develop the idea further.

5.4.1 Introduction: the problem caused by sin

A concept which seems sadly lacking in much liberal theology today is the fact that God is a God of wrath and that He not only gets angry about sin, but He is angry towards sinners.

We often forget the absolute and total hostility God has towards sin in every aspect that it presents itself.

We often use the phrase 'hate the sin not the sinner', or 'God loves the sinner but hates his sin', which whilst true, can direct us away from a very real truth. We do not like to think of God's anger directed personally towards us and so do not think about propitiation which shows how the problem is dealt with.

Forgiveness – to not hold a wrongdoing against a person.

Expiation – the making of amends for a wrong – it is abstract – one expiates a crime.

Propitiation – the turning away of anger. It is personal one 'propitiates' another person.

And so even expiation – the nearest word we can substitute is still diluting the concept. In the Old Testament there are twenty words used for the wrath of God and the total number of references is over 580.

God is angry towards sin in general and also specifically towards those who sin.

Shedding of blood:

[Ezekiel 16:38]

Adultery:

[Ezekiel 23:25]

Afflicting a widow or orphan:

[Exodus 22:22-24]

Violence:

[Ezekiel 8:17-18]

Falsehood:

[Jeremiah 6:11-13]

Idolatry:

[Exodus 32:8-10, Deuteronomy 6:14-15]

But God is not just impersonal or distant; His anger is very personal and very real:

Does disaster come to a city, unless the Lord has done it? [Amos 3:6b]

I form light and create darkness; I make well-being and create calamity; I am the Lord, who does all these things. [Isaiah 45:7]

But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to his baptism, he said to them, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?" [Matthew 3:7]

For there will be great distress upon the earth and wrath against this people. [Luke 21:23b]

Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him. [John 3:36]

There are two words used for wrath:

Ogre; a growing ripe for something
Thymos: to seethe, a passionate outburst

God's wrath is always described as the former, something progressing naturally from His nature, and so as sinners we are faced with the absolute certainty of God's anger. It is directed personally towards us and we need a propitiator, someone who will turn away that anger.

5.4.2 The solution bought by Propitiation.

The answer to this problem can be seen in two ways. Obviously, Christ, by His sacrifice, turns away God's anger, but firstly let us see that God Himself is merciful.

5.4.2.1 The mercy of God

Particularly in the Old Testament, before the sacrifice of Christ turned away the anger of God, God Himself was seen as merciful and as acting in a restrained manner. The certainty of His anger is matched by the miracle of His mercy.

Yet he, being compassionate, atoned for their iniquity and did not destroy them; he restrained his anger often and did not stir up all his wrath. [Psalm 78:38]

"For my name's sake I defer my anger; for the sake of my praise I restrain it for you, that I may not cut you off. [Isaiah 48:9]

He does not retain his anger forever, because he delights in steadfast love. [Micah 7:18b]

You withdrew all your wrath; you turned from your hot anger. [Psalm 85:3]

The Psalmist found comfort in the mercy of God. He is not swayed by human emotions or actions as were the false Gods of the heathens, but His forgiveness flows from His own nature.

But of course, however restrained He is God's anger in nevertheless sure, and in the fullness of time Christ came as the atoning sacrifice to turn away that anger.

Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him. [John 3:36]

5.4.2.2 The sacrifice of Christ

so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people. [Hebrews 2:17b]

He is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world. [1 John 2:2]

In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins. [1 John 4:10]

The importance of Christ's sacrifice in this area can be seen in Paul's letter to the Romans.

Five times wrath is mentioned (1:18, 2:5, 2:8, 3:5, 4:15)

Paul talks of redemption and justification to a great extent in this letter, but still feels the need to talk about the wrath of God that is directed toward those outside of Christ.

We are justified by his grace.
We have redemption through Christ.

But still and as well, Christ is presented as an atoning sacrifice.

5.4.3. Summary

Without propitiation we are faced with the unsatisfactory idea that God can simply ignore his own wrath and His abhorrence of sin.

- 1) Sinners face the very real and very personal wrath of God.
- 2) God through His merciful nature is restrained in His anger, but it nevertheless remains.
- 3) God's anger is only fully turned away by the sacrifice of Christ.

5.5 Justification

5.5.1 The problem caused by sin.

Justification is a legal term, and our understanding of what it means would be aided if we imagined ourselves in a courtroom. The idea behind Justification is that our sin has conferred a verdict of unrighteousness upon us. We have failed to live up to God's standards and consequently stand accused before Him. The justification that is bought through Christ's sacrifice on the cross confers a condition of righteousness upon us and we are declared righteousness and not guilty of breaking God's law. The punishment that is associated with the breaking of God's law (eternal separation from His presence) no longer applies to us.

To justify and to make righteous are one and the same. There is only one word for both concepts, indeed most languages include Greek and Hebrew have only one word we sometimes translate as 'to justify' and sometimes translate as 'to make righteous'. Unfortunately, both words mean slightly different things in English leading to some confusion.

The concept of Justification is found throughout scripture.

92 instances of the noun 'dikaisosyne' – Justice or Righteousness
 39 instances of the verb 'dikaioo' – to justify or to count as righteous.
 10 instances of the noun 'dikaiona' – and ordinance or sentence of justification
 81 instances of the adjective 'dikaios' – just or righteous
 5 instances of the adverb 'dikaios' – justly or righteously

Each of the different ways we have looked at the cross starts from the premise that people are sinners, but see that sin in a different light:

Redemption: we are enslaved by sin and need to be set free

Reconciliation: sin has caused a breakdown of relationships

Propitiation: sin means God is angry towards us and that anger needs to be turned away

Justification sees sin from a legal perspective and declares that sins make us guilty in a legal sense to avoid the consequences of that guilty verdict we need to be declared innocent.

We have seen already that God is a just God.

A God of faithfulness and without iniquity, just and upright is he.

[Deuteronomy 32:4]

And there is no other god besides me, a righteous God and a Saviour; there is none besides me.

[Isaiah 45:21b]

And as a just God he must declare us guilty. To ignore our sin or declare us innocent in the face of contrary evidence would be against His very nature as shown by His opinion of false human judges.

who acquit the guilty for a bribe, and deprive the innocent of his right!

[Isaiah 5:23]

He who justifies the wicked and he who condemns the righteous are both alike an abomination to the Lord.

[Proverbs 17:15]

And the Psalmist sums up our situation very clearly:

Enter not into judgment with your servant for no one living is righteous before you. [Psalms 143:2]

The problem we face is very clear. If God is just and righteous; honour bound to return a guilty verdict on mankind how can He forgive us and still remain just. Punishment is demanded for our transgressions.

Yet by definition Justification can be described as that act of God by which a sinner, who is responsible for his guilt and under condemnation, through his belief in Christ Jesus is pronounced by God as Just and Righteous and consequently acquitted.

It is important to note that the scriptural use of Justification is to pronounce or declare righteousness or innocence, not necessarily to make righteous; Justification is a declarative statement by God.

Today the word usually carries a meaning of acting correctly;

“The man was justified in killing the intruder”.

Whilst the man may have acted correctly (or within the bounds of the law) he nevertheless committed the act – he is not innocent of committing the act, only of the consequences that might follow the act.

And so, there is this conflict; man is clearly guilty (he has acted against the law) yet God has pronounced him innocent – how can this be? To condemn the righteous and justify the unrighteous would be to turn the administration of justice on its head. Paul must have shocked the Romans when he wrote:

And to the one who does not work but believes in him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness, [Romans 4:5]

The best way to explore this concept is to consider four phrases that Paul uses concerning Justification.

5.5.2 The solution bought by Justification.

5.5.2.1 Justification by Grace

For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. [Romans 3:24]

Paul makes it clear in his letter that it is God who justifies; freely of His own choice and will. Since no-one is righteous no-one can justify themselves.

This is a tremendous starting point but as we have already said Justification is a legal term. It is good to know the source of our Justification, but to say we are justified by grace says nothing of the righteous basis of it, without which God would contradict His own justice.

5.5.2.2 Justified by Blood

Since, therefore, we have now been justified by his blood, much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath of God. [Romans 5:9]

Justification is not the same as granting an amnesty which is an overlooking or forgetting of wrongdoing even though the wrongdoing is still present. Nor is God simply pronouncing bad people good, and saying they are not sinners when clearly, they are. Because of Christ's sacrifice, and the shedding of blood, God can call the unrighteous righteous.

God's gracious work of bestowing upon guilty sinners a justified justification, acquitting them in the court of heaven, without prejudice to his justice as their judge
[Dr James Packer 1926 - 2020]

Many people still balk at this idea that someone had to die for our sins. God tells us to forgive one another yet why can He not simply forgive us? Why does someone have to die? It all sounds very bloodthirsty and primitive.

If anyone imagines that God can simply forgive us as we forgive others, then that person has not yet considered the seriousness of sin."
[Archbishop Anselm 11th Century]

Forgiveness to man is the plainest of duties, to God it is the most profound of problems.
[Carnegie Simpson 1865 - 1947]

And the only answer to that problem is the blood of Christ. Yet this is not simply someone else taking our punishment whilst God the impassive judge stands by; that would be morally offensive – but God is deeply involved in all stages of our Justification.

It is God himself who gave Himself in Christ to suffer for us; it was not some other person who experienced God's wrath, but God's wrath turned upon Himself to set us free.

5.5.2.3 Justified by Faith

For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law. [Romans 3:28]

This third concept from Paul emphasises that faith in God – not in ourselves or our worlds is the means of our justification.

All of Christ's sacrifice comes to nought if we still believe the something in us makes us worthy before God. The faith is totally opposite to observing the law – that cannot bring justification – it is only when we humble ourselves and give all the glory to God and recognise Christ's sacrifice as complete and total.

5.5.2.4 Justified in Christ

But if, in our endeavour to be justified in Christ, we too were found to be sinners, is Christ then a servant of sin? Certainly not! [Galatians 2:17]

The final term expands on what we have already seen. If justification were just an act performed once to render us righteous, we would say "Praise God", but we would continue to say "we seek to be justified by God".

To be justified in Christ speaks of the personal on-going relationship with Christ we enjoy through faith. Justification is not just an external transaction but an internal, on-going comment on our union with Christ.

- 1) Justification is an act of God based upon the sacrifice of Christ.
- 2) Justification is an acquittal from the punishment due to us for our sins and a declaration that we are now righteous and innocent.
- 3) Justification is given by grace and received by faith.

Questions for consideration

- Have you been aware of the empowering of the Holy Spirit at a particular time in your life, either in worship or in ministry?
- Thinking of the gifts of the Holy Spirit is there an area you are strong in (perhaps enough to encourage others) or an area you particularly wish to grow?
- How would you explain the Holy Spirit to a non-Christian friend who had never heard the term before or had heard it and was puzzled as to what it meant?

Further Reading

Deeper Truth