
The Cross as Our Atonement

DAVE BAST

How is your righteousness? How are you doing in the pleasing to God department? Not sure? The Gospel, the Good News about the cross of Jesus Christ, has a good word for you. Stay tuned.

From Words of Hope and ReFrame Media, this is *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Dave Bast. Joining me again today to wrap up our series on the cross of Christ is Kevin DeYoung, who is the senior pastor at University Reformed Church in East Lansing, Michigan; a Christian author of a number of books, and a blogger as well. Welcome again, Kevin.

KEVIN DEYOUNG

Thanks, Dave. It is great to be here, and I am especially excited to talk about the cross, which we have been for this whole series, but now to really get to what is the heart of the Gospel? What is the best news about the Good News?

DAVE BAST

Yes; why did the cross really and truly have to happen? We did address in the first program in this series the idea that at the cross Christ has left us an example of faithfulness in suffering, even unjustly, and trusting in the God who will set all things to rights at the judgment. And then we talked in the last program about the victory that Christ has won at the cross, over all the forces of darkness and evil, especially supremely the devil and sin and death and hell; but today, we come, really, to the heart of the matter, which is the atonement, to use the classic word, that was wrought by Christ at the cross.

KEVIN DEYOUNG

And the atonement means how estranged parties are reconciled – at *onement* – it is a word that Tyndale really coined for the English Bible, and it is what holds it all together. Sometimes people will talk disparagingly: Well, this idea of substitution is – that is a theory of the atonement – that is just one theory. No, no, no, I want to say: Brother or sister, when you read the New Testament, it is the one without which there are no others. Christ is not an example except that he died for sin. He does not conquer the devil except that he is a substitute on our behalf for sin. This is absolutely the heart of the whole Christian faith we are talking about.

DAVE BAST

Yes, I think we mentioned in an earlier program John Stott's classic book *The Cross of Christ*, and he says there that the idea of substitutionary atonement by the death of Christ making satisfaction for our sins – satisfying and pacifying the wrath of God – all that language – that is not a theory; that is the reality of what happened at the cross, and everything else plays off that or works outward from that; and yet, that is the thing that is so offensive to so many people today. It is just amazing how that just raises hackles when you talk about it with people.

KEVIN DEYOUNG

Yes, and I love that line... We may be thinking even of the same paragraph in Stott, because there are so many good lines in *The Cross of Christ*, where he boils it down to and uses a phrase something like this: God's self-satisfaction through God's self-substitution – that God would satisfy himself, his standard of righteousness, but he would do it through his own self-substitution by sending his Son to die for us; and you

are absolutely right; that is the scandal of the cross, to say to somebody: God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life – the Lord has used that approach – but most people say: Yes, well, tell me something I didn't know.

DAVE BAST

Right; yes, sure; I assumed God loves me.

KEVIN DEYOUNG

Yes, and I am glad he has a plan for my life; but when you say: Here is what the love looks like – 1 John 4 – is that he sent his Son to be a propitiation – we will get back to that word later – for your sins; one, to turn away the wrath of God, then you are getting into something a little more controversial.

DAVE BAST

Yes; sinners in the hands of an angry God. What is interesting to me is that a certain segment of the Church has always, or at least for a long time, rejected this. I mean, the whole sort of liberal wing of the Christian Church, and it has caused many of them to go right outside what I would say is beyond the bounds of the Christian faith; but in our time, it is self-professed Evangelicals who are raising the red flag and saying: Whoa, wait a minute. This is terrible. And you read some very extreme statements: This is unworthy of God. This is a distortion and it is denying the love of God. It is a caricature...

KEVIN DEYOUNG

Right.

DAVE BAST

It is illogical... I remember one line of a harsh critic who said: This is immoral and illogical, this doctrine, that God would satisfy his own wrath – or pacify his wrath through the sacrifice of his Son.

KEVIN DEYOUNG

And you may recall the infamous language that a few people have adopted that the cross is cosmic child abuse; that what sort of father would just lash out his anger on his son to somehow appease his own sense of offendedness? That is a really blasphemous caricature of the cross, and what it misunderstands at the deepest level is that this was fully a Trinitarian act: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit; it is not the Father exacting some punishment on the Son; no, it is in cooperation with each other; the Son freely giving himself up in love and in joyful submission to the Father.

DAVE BAST

Yes; I often have said it is as though Jesus is saying: No, no; please, Dad; don't hurt them; hurt me instead.

KEVIN DEYOUNG

Right.

DAVE BAST

And that is so far from it; but something suggests to me that the reaction at this point means one of two things: Either the Church has gotten this terribly wrong for a long time, or this is a very sensitive point to the enemy and he would love to discredit it or obscure it or drive people away from embracing it.

KEVIN DEYOUNG

Yes; and I think he gets at that, and what is really offensive in our age is any notion of God's wrath over sin. It is fine if we talk about sin as brokenness, which it is, or sin as the destruction of shalom, which it is; but when you think of David... you know, he sins against Joab, he sins against Bathsheba, he sins against Israel, he sins against a whole lot... There is hardly anybody he did not sin against...

DAVE BAST

Uriah most definitely.

KEVIN DEYOUNG

Yes, Uriah; and then he says: Against you only have I sinned, to God, that the vertical dimension of the offendedness is what is most poignant and needs to be taken care of.

DAVE BAST

And then the following idea, that really, God has to do something about this; that somehow it is almost as if there is a rent in the fabric of reality or of creation that God cannot simply blow off and say: Oh, that is okay; I will forgive it; I am God. I will just forgive it. It just does not take the reality of evil and sin seriously enough, as the Bible does. But, you know, I raise the issue: Is this what the Church has always believed? Let me just read a quote to you, Kevin, from one noted theologian in Church history: The word dwelt among us that he might offer the sacrifice on behalf of all; surrendering his own body to death in place of all; to settle man's account with death and free him from the primal transgression – original sin – for he did not die as being himself liable to death; he suffered for us and bore in himself the wrath that was the penalty of our transgression. That is St. Athanasius, the great 4th Century bishop of Alexandria – the great Eastern Church father; and sometimes we will also hear in theological circles: Well, this idea of penal and wrath – that is all Western – that is Catholic and Lutheran and...

KEVIN DEYOUNG

just Anselm made it up or something.

DAVE BAST

Yes; the whole Church has always held to this as being the deep meaning of the cross; but more importantly, what about the Bible? Let's look at that and ask what that says after we take a short break.

Segment 2

DAVE BAST

And welcome back to *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Dave Bast.

KEVIN DEYOUNG

And I am Kevin DeYoung. It is great to be here, and we want to jump back into this discussion about the cross and the atonement – God's self-satisfaction through self-substitution, to use Stott's phrase – and we are looking at Romans Chapter 3. I will just read verses 21 through 26; this rich passage...

DAVE BAST

Reader alert... reader alert... Here comes what I think is the ultimate statement of the Gospel in all the Bible.

KEVIN DEYOUNG

Yes, absolutely.

²¹But now, the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it. ²²The righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe; for there is no distinction. ²³For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, ²⁴and are justified by his grace as a gift through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, ²⁵whom God put forward – and we will come back to this word – 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. ²⁶It 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. Dave, that is so rich and deep, maybe you can just walk us up real quickly – what is the conclusion of – by the time we get to that spot in Romans 3?

DAVE BAST

Yes, right; there is so much here. I mean, just the words: Righteousness, just, justifier, propitiation, faith, grace.

KEVIN DEYOUNG

And what is Paul talking about? Why is he getting to this meat here?

DAVE BAST

Yes, right; so, back off and go back to the beginning of Romans, where Paul talks about the problem of the human race in terms of the wrath of God. The wrath of God has been revealed from heaven against all unrighteousness. So, unpopular idea after unpopular idea; and for Paul, the backdrop of the human predicament is not what modern people might think of: Alienation or social unrest or injustice in society or lack of fulfillment or economic trouble or you name it. For Paul, the fundamental problem is that humanity has, from the beginning almost, been in rebellion against God, and this has called forth the judgment of a righteous God; and everybody is in the same boat. The whole point that he makes from the second half of Romans 1 through the first half of Romans 3 is Jew and gentile alike are in the same boat; even though Jews have the Law – they have the word of God – they have the revelation of God – they have the promises of God – they have not lived up to them; and as a result, everybody is condemned.

KEVIN DEYOUNG

Right; and so, what we need, just to get at one of these words, and there are so many...

DAVE BAST

Is a different kind of righteousness.

KEVIN DEYOUNG

Is a different kind of righteousness, and it starts with this word here: Propitiation. Some bible translations do not have it. It is an old theological word; I think it is good here that the ESV uses it. You know some of the debate with *hilasterion* and how exactly to translate it; but it is an important word for people to learn even though it has a lot of syllables – it is key; and you just break it up; the first part: Pro – for; it really has to do with how is God *for* us, that Jesus was a *propitiation*, meaning he was a sacrifice that appeased the wrath of God – that made God, who was justly angry with our sins to now justly be a God who is *for* us instead of against us. That is what it means, that he is the propitiation; and because of that, we have this righteousness. How does that work?

DAVE BAST

Right; well, before we leave that word, though, I love the biblical background to this word; and even in the history of translation I think you mentioned William Tyndale, who was the first English bible translator...

KEVIN DEYOUNG

He used the word *atonement*.

DAVE BAST

Yes, and he also coined a beautiful word to translate this term “propitiation” as it appears in the Old Testament, because it actually comes from the furniture of the tabernacle – later the Temple – it is a word that was used to describe the cover of the Ark of the Covenant; and Tyndale followed Luther’s pointing and he translated it as *mercy seat*.

KEVIN DEYOUNG

Right.

DAVE BAST

That is the cover of the Ark – the mercy seat – the place where God’s mercy is focused, because the blood of the sacrifice was applied there. So, Paul takes up that word and uses the Greek form of it to describe Christ and his death as the place where the blood atones for sin and enables, once again, God to accept us in righteousness.

KEVIN DEYOUNG

And you see how multifaceted this atonement language is, because you could think of atonement financially, that you are redeemed – you are saved out of this debt or this penalty...

DAVE BAST

When somebody pays it for you.

KEVIN DEYOUNG

Yes. You could think of it relationally – how do estranged parties get reconciled? You could think of it as a family – how do you get adopted? Here this language that you are alluding to is really sacrificial. How do we... what is our substitute? It goes back to Leviticus 1 and the burnt offering, Leviticus 16, the Day of Atonement: the high priest would put his hands on that bull or that goat and instead it would make *atonement*; it is a symbol of my identification here on this animal – my sins on the head of this animal, then slain for us; and you imagine after centuries and centuries of bloody sacrifices, the priest butchers in many respects, then to have John the Baptist, this wild-eyed prophet, say, “Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world.”

DAVE BAST

I remember visiting a temple once in India, and I happened to get there just as a sacrifice was being carried out. It was fascinating. You know, here was this young kid – not a child – a goat kid, not a human kid...

KEVIN DEYOUNG

Okay, important to distinguish.

DAVE BAST

Yes, right; here is this young kid with its four legs trussed, and it is lying on its side kind of bleating pitifully, and the Hindu priest came with a knife and cut its throat, and the blood began to run; and the guy who was with me kind of turned pale and stepped aside; and I just sat there at that moment thinking: You know, this is a lot closer to what the Old Testament Temple was than the church where I go on Sunday morning, and is; and that was right; it ran with blood. The point is, to me it seems that this is a basic human impulse. Somehow, again, in God’s common grace people everywhere have always understood you cannot just blow sin off. Blood has to be shed somehow. Without the shedding of blood, there is no forgiveness, as Hebrews 9:27 says.

KEVIN DEYOUNG

And that gets us – I want to get your take on this, Dave – to the end of this, and there are so many phrases, but I want to talk about this one: That he is the just and the justifier; because you just said it is not like the cross is God waving his hand and saying: Nah, sin – no biggie. You know all that stuff about punishment and sacrifice; Nah, I changed my mind. No, he absolutely had to be just... So, how would you unpack this phrase, and why it is so important to Paul’s theology that God would be both the just and the justifier of the ungodly?

DAVE BAST

Well, yes; I mean, again I think this is a basic divide between people theologically; between those who say: No, no, no, no; none of this is necessary. God is not mad. God is not angry...

KEVIN DEYOUNG

The gods are not angry.

DAVE BAST

Yes; God is a God of love; you are getting it wrong. You have to excise a significant chunk of the Bible in order to believe that sin is not a problem for God, as well as a problem for us; including the whole history of the sacrifices that God has ordained to drive this point home: There has to be a sacrifice for my sake. I have to do that. I cannot be God without dealing objectively with the problem of sin. It is not just a question of how can God forgive, but how can God forgive justly?

KEVIN DEYOUNG

Yes.

DAVE BAST

How can he forgive without overturning his own inner righteousness that has said, "The wages of sin is death?" Now, is God a liar? Is that untrue? Did Paul make that up and lay that on him, and God never said it? You know, basically you have to just blow the Bible off in order to get rid of this idea.

KEVIN DEYOUNG

And you said it so well, that God, by his own character, is one of justice. So, we may think of the problem: Well, how could a loving God punish people? But the whole logic of Romans is: Okay, how is a God of justice and righteous wrath going to pardon sinful people? How is that going to happen? He is not going to be just anymore. He is going to compromise his own holiness if he forgives these sinners; and so that is the marvelous conclusion here; that because Christ is the go-between – is the mediator – the one who can lay a hand on us both – he is the one to turn away the wrath of God; he is the sacrifice. Then, for Christ's sake, with his righteousness counted to us, our sin counted to him, the great exchange; now God can say: Yes, I forgive you. I welcome you. I show mercy to you; not as a kind of legal fiction, but actually as the act of his justice, which he meted out on Christ instead of on us.

DAVE BAST

Yes; I mean, if I can make a little personal reference – you know, Kevin, because we have been family friends for a long time, that my dad was once a radio preacher on Words of Hope, or as it was then called in those days, Temple Time. I actually have a book of his old messages – his old radio messages – that was based on the book of Romans; and he titled it: The problem only God could solve; which I thought is just a great... I don't know if that was original with him or not, but the problem is how to forgive sinners and still be God – still be a holy God – how to justify justly; to be just and the One who justifies; and the solution was found in Christ taking it upon himself and fully satisfying. He made him to be a curse for us, Paul says in Galatians 3, for cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree. Well, when God said that back in Deuteronomy, he knew how his Son – how he himself ultimately, in the Person of his Son – would deal with that curse.

KEVIN DEYOUNG

That God made him who knew no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. You talked earlier about the cross connected with the resurrection. You know, you get to Romans 4, at the very end, that he is raised for our justification, and just the powerful image of Christ coming out of the tomb as a signal that, yes, justice has been accomplished. It is kind of like, you know, I have young kids, and they get disciplined sometimes; and you know, if you put five boys in a room, and they are going to be punished, and one son says: No, I will take the punishment for them. I will get in my room. I will go there without supper; and the other boys wonder: Is this going to work? Can we really go free? And until they see the door open and their brother emerge from the room, they do not know that the debt has been paid for; but when they do, and they see the room is open and he has gone free, they know...

DAVE BAST

Yes, the room is empty.

KEVIN DEYOUNG

Yes; justice has been served.

DAVE BAST

Yes, that is the signal that it all worked.

KEVIN DEYOUNG

Yes, that is the empty tomb.

DAVE BAST

And everything Jesus promised is true. The resurrection is God's stamp saying: Endorsed. I endorse that.

Yes, every claim he made, every promise he offered is true.

But one more phrase I want to pick up on just as we close here, and it is verse 25:

Whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood to be received by faith. I wonder if you have thought about that language of God putting Christ forward as a propitiation?

KEVIN DEYOUNG

Yes.

DAVE BAST

He is sort of offering Christ... to whom? To whom is he offering Christ? To whom is he putting him forward?

KEVIN DEYOUNG

Well, I think there is certainly language that Christ is... You know, Ephesians 2: He is offering himself as a fragrant aroma; and in a way, he is sending his Son to satisfy himself, but he is also putting him forward to us as the object of faith.

DAVE BAST

Bingo! Bingo!

KEVIN DEYOUNG

That is how he ends it, then.

DAVE BAST

Yes; which is the point here, I think. Yes, Christ is certainly not offered to Satan as a sacrifice – Satan has no claim. He is offered within the mystery of the divine life of the Trinity in propitiatory love; but ultimately he is offered to us to be received by faith; and whenever the Gospel is shared or whenever it is broadcast, like here, or whenever it is preached, it is an invitation to say: Look; look at him; he is your offering. You need to receive him. It does not just happen automatically. He is to be received by faith. You have to lay hold on him and believe in him.

KEVIN DEYOUNG

You are absolutely right; it is about coming to Christ in faith. He calls us, the sheep know his voice. Anyone listening to this for the first time or for the hundredth time, come to Christ. There is plenty of grace and forgiveness for you, and God has put him forward to be your savior.

DAVE BAST

Thanks, Kevin; and thank you for joining our *Groundwork* conversation. Do not forget, it is listeners like you asking questions that will keep our topics relevant to your life. So let us know what you think about what you

are hearing; suggest topics or passages that you would like to hear on a future *Groundwork* program. Visit us at groundworkonline.com and join the conversation.

<https://groundworkonline.com/episodes/the-cross-as-our-atonement>

Printed on March 12, 2025

©  ReFrame Ministries