

Christ, My Covering Romans 3:25-26

Our dear friend, George Ella, was commissioned by the British Historical Museum to author the official biography of William Cowper (1731-1800), poet, theologian and songwriter extraordinaire of the 18th Century. Ella points out in his work on Cowper that he was committed to an insane asylum at 28, believing himself “damned” by God. Dr. Nathaniel Cotton, an evangelical believer and Cowper’s medical doctor, continually held out hope for William. One day, while reading a Bible given to him by the good doctor, Cowper came across the two verses we just read and a dramatic change occurred:

“Immediately I received the strength to believe it, and the full beams of the Sun of Righteousness shone upon me. I saw the sufficiency of the atonement He had made, my pardon sealed in His blood, and all the fulness and completeness of justification. In a moment I believed, and received the gospel” Testimony of William Cowper

C.E.B. Cranfield says these verses reveal “*the innermost meaning of the cross.*” In them we found the reason Christ “had” to die and what He accomplished through His death.

I. The death of Christ is a propitiation --- “*set forth to be a propitiation*” (v.25).

Words matter. It is important for people to learn the language of Scripture because the words of Scripture carry with them very rich meaning. Propitiation is a word not used often in English but is rich in biblical meaning. It is translated “*a sacrifice of atonement*” in the NIV, but the best translation of the word is “*mercy covering.*” What is a mercy covering? It is protection against wrath. “*God be merciful to me.*” The Bible is quite clear that sin produces God’s wrath. This is an unavoidable law. However, the wrath of God is different from the wrath of man. His wrath is a holy, judicial, and righteous wrath against violations of His law --- established by Him. The same Greek word is used in Hebrews 9:5 “*the mercy seat (covering) of the ark.*” Christ is my covering. He bears the wrath (curse of the law) due my sins. He is my mercy-seat, my mercy covering. I find myself in Him, protected from God’s wrath. Some say, “*The cross isn’t needed! God forgives because He is love!*” How foolish.

II. The death of Christ is a declaration --- “*to declare his righteousness*” (v.26).

God put Christ forward (he sent him to die) in order to demonstrate his righteousness (or justice). The problem that needed solving was that God, due to mercy, seemed to be unrighteous, and wanted to vindicate himself and clear his name. Indeed, verse 26 says he would have been unrighteous, or unjust, in justifying sinners, if Christ had not been put forward as a propitiation by his blood: “. . . *so that he would be just. . .*” That is the basic issue. **God's righteousness is at stake.** His name or reputation or honor must be vindicated. Before the cross can be for our sake, it must be for God's sake. God has been doing what Psalm 103:10 says, “*He does not deal* (next page)

with us according to our sins or repay us according to our iniquities.” He has been

passing over thousands of sins. He has been forgiving them and letting them go and not punishing them. The world says, "*But God is love and doesn't have to punish sin!*"

Listen to the appropriate words of John Piper regarding this kind of thinking.

The secular mindset does not even assess the situation the way the Biblical mindset does. Why is that? It's because the secular mindset thinks from a radically different starting point. It does not start with the **Creator-rights of God** - the right to uphold and display the infinite worth of his glory. It starts with man and assumes that God will conform to our rights and wishes. But in the context of Romans, the issue is: how has the glory of God been treated and what is God's righteous response to that?

Romans 3:23 says "*All have sinned and fall short of [or lack] the glory of God.*" What's at stake in sinning is the glory of God. When Nathan confronts David about his sin, Nathan quotes God as saying, "*Why have you despised me?*" We could imagine David saying, "*What do you mean, I despised you? I didn't despise you. I wasn't even thinking of you. I was just hot after this bathing woman, and then scared to death that people were going to find out. You weren't even in the picture.*"

And God would have said, "*The Creator of the universe, the designer of marriage, the fountain of life, the one who holds you in being, the one who made you king - that One, I the Lord, was not even in the picture! That's right, David. That's exactly what I mean. You despised me.*" All sin is a despising of God, before it is a damage to man. All sin is a preference for the fleeting pleasures of the world over the everlasting joy of God's fellowship. David demeaned God's glory. He belittled God's worth. He dishonored God's name. That is the meaning of sin - failing to love God's glory above everything else." "All have sinned and 'exchange' the glory of God." The death of Christ is the display of the righteousness of God in punishing sin that denigrates His glory and Person.

III. The death of Christ is a reconciliation --- "*the justifier of him which believes*" (v.26).

Reconciliation is the bringing together of things once united, but now divided. If a marriage is on the rocks, but things change for the better, the marriage is said to be reconciled. Man was united in the garden, but sin brought about separation. All men by nature are separated from God because of the sin of one man (Adam) and the nature of man which is sinful and does not seek God. God would remain just by condemning all men, but He has chosen to give His Son in order to "*remain just and the justifier of him which believeth in Jesus.*" God forgives me, brings me into relationship with Himself, and declares me to be completely and perfectly righteous due to the blood (or death) of Jesus Christ. I am reconciled to God through the work of my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, not my own works or efforts. It is for this reason that the believer has no room, at all, for any kind of spiritual boasting.