



Bethel Pulpit

Sermon 100

Christ Our Propitiation

**Sermon preached at Bethel Chapel, Luton,
by Mr. B. A. Ramsbottom,
on Lord's day morning, 3rd October, 1993**

Text: *“Whom God hath set forth to be a propitiation through faith in His blood” (Romans 3. 25).*

We stand amazed at the greatness and the grandeur and the glory of this subject. Really, the whole of the gospel is in it. In its sweet, sacred simplicity, and yet its profound depth, it answers the vital question: how can a sinner get to heaven? I wonder how many of you have had to ask that question, ask it personally: how can such a sinner as I, how can one so guilty as I, ever get to heaven at last? – especially when you see that God is holy, when you see that God must punish sin. How is it possible that a holy God can save a guilty sinner, take him to heaven at last?

Really, the opening chapters of the Epistle to the Romans deal with this vital, fundamental point, the relationship of a sinner to a holy God; if he is condemned by God's law, how is it possible he can ever be saved, he can ever reach heaven? So the great theme of the Epistle to the Romans is the righteousness of God. In one sense that is the great theme of the whole of sacred Scripture: the righteousness of God, that there is a God, almighty, infinite, eternal, incomprehensible. There is a God, three Persons – Father, Son and Holy Ghost – one God. And the revelation is that this God is holy, this God is righteous, this God is pure. In His mysterious sovereignty He created the world, and He put man, His greatest creation, into that world. He created man subject to the law. He gave Adam unfallen a law, a righteous law, the transcript of His own righteous character. He created man sinless, free from sin, capable of obeying that law. I know the law was given in its fulness on Mount Sinai in the Ten Commandments, but God gave it to Adam unfallen in Eden. In other words a righteous, holy God commands righteous, holy behaviour from His creature. So, do this, and thou shalt live; do it not, and thou shalt surely die – blessing promised to obedience, divine wrath promised to disobedience. Adam fell, sin entered the world, and death by sin. We were in Adam as our covenant head, the covenant head of the human race. We fell in Adam. His sin is ours. His sin is imputed to us. We are born in

sin, shapen in iniquity. By original sin, by personal sin, we are guilty. We have sinned against a righteous God. We are not righteous; we are unrighteous. We have broken His holy law. “All have sinned, and come short of the glory of God.” So we are under divine wrath. We are deserving of condemnation. We are under the curse.

How is it possible, then, that any sinner can ever be saved, that any sinner can ever reach heaven? Paul deals with this subject really under the term of justification. Justification was the great doctrine of the glorious Reformation. Justification, said Luther, is the article by which the church stands or falls. “How can man be justified with God?” “For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God.” O how sweetly does Paul unfold the gospel here! “Being justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.” Paul has proved that all are guilty, Jew and Gentile, that none can obey God’s holy law in thought and word and deed. All have come short, all have sinned. Justification is a legal term. It is a judge in a law court declaring this man innocent, declaring him not guilty. How can a holy God declare you not guilty when you know you are? Well, it is all opened up so beautifully. No man can merit salvation by what he has done or may do. Repentance does not blot out the past. Toplady goes right to the point:

“Could my zeal no respite know,
Could my tears for ever flow,
All for sin could not atone;
Thou must save, and Thou alone.”

How can a righteous God still be righteous, His law honoured, punishing sin and yet saving sinners? It was the eternal purpose of God that His chosen, those ordained to eternal life, should be justified. So in the fulness of time the eternal Son of God comes, “made of a woman, made under the law,” a real Man, without ceasing to be true, almighty God. What does He do? He takes the dying traitor’s place. He stands one, identified, with the sinner. And He lives a perfect, holy, spotless, righteous life, in obedience to His Father’s law. Why? That it might be freely given, freely imputed to all His people, all for whom He stood. And then as the whole of His glorious righteousness is given to them as their justification before a holy, righteous God, He takes all their sins, takes them upon Himself, bears them to the cross, bears the whole of divine

punishment, the whole of divine wrath due to them, and in bearing those sins He atones for them, takes them for ever away. So now a sinner, washed in the blood of Christ, clothed in His perfect righteousness, stands accepted with a holy, righteous God. There is a way in which He can come to heaven. So the righteous Judge can look upon him and see him in Christ and declare that sinner not guilty. That is justification, and it is “not of works, lest any man should boast.” It is made known by faith, received by faith, a guilty sinner believing on this glorious Saviour who has fulfilled the law, magnified it, made it honourable, gone to the end of the law for righteousness for everyone that believeth.

So the old divines used to speak of Christ as “our law-fulfilling Righteousness.” Now what does all this mean to you? Dry doctrine, or what Luther said: “Doctrine is heaven”? Let the doctrine of justification once drop into your heart as the rain or sweetly distil as the dew, then you will know that doctrine is heaven. “Therefore we conclude that a man is justified by faith without the deeds of the law.” “Being justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.” “That He might be just, and the Justifier of him which believeth in Jesus.” The people of God make a remarkable discovery: that their Judge is their Saviour, that the One who is to be their Judge in the last great day is the One who laid down His life for them.

Well then, these beautiful words I have read out to you this morning give the whole foundation of the work of justification, the salvation of the Lord’s chosen, the only way in which a guilty sinner can be accepted by a holy God and be brought to heaven at last. Of course, if your religion is real, this is the great question with you: how may I find the way to heaven? How may I be forgiven? Is there any hope for such a sinner as I am? But the point is this: that if the Lord is teaching you the glories of justification in Christ, then He will teach you your need of justification; that is, that you personally have sinned and come short of the glory of God. Now you young people, understand the scriptural teaching of sin. It is not just this person doing that action wrong, or that person telling a lie, or that person stealing. Those are acts of sin. But the point is this: we have a sinful nature. There is a lot of deep divinity in the statement that you and I are “not sinners because we sin; we sin because we are sinners.” It is deep in the heart where the malady is.

“Thine’s alas! a lost condition,
Works cannot work thee remission,
Nor thy goodness do thee good.”

It is this: the glory of this holy, righteous God, and we have sinned and come short of His glory. Every action which comes short of the glory of this holy, righteous God is sin, and deserves divine wrath. Now may the Holy Spirit reveal it to you, the nature of sin against a holy, righteous God, the nature of sin coming short of His glory. Now it is when you realise your lost, ruined condition and sin that you will long for this free justification “by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.” For it is all of grace. “Where sin abounded, grace did much more abound: that as sin hath reigned unto death, even so might grace reign through righteousness unto eternal life by Jesus Christ our Lord.”

“Whom God hath set forth to be a propitiation through faith in His blood.” This is the foundation of justification by faith; it is the foundation of the gospel; it is the foundation of our hope. How beautifully the apostle says, “Whom God hath set forth”! The eternal God has set forth His own dear Son as the Saviour of sinners. God has set him forth. It is an attractive expression, isn’t it? God has *set Him forth*. This dear Jesus, this almighty Saviour of the lost, God has set Him forth. His eternal Father set Him forth from everlasting in the covenant of grace. When eternal wisdom planned the great work of salvation, there the eternal Son of God was set forth to be the Saviour, the Surety, the Mediator, His people’s All; set forth as the One who should come to make atonement for sin, who should pay the ransom price.

“Whom God hath set forth.” And then, you see, His eternal Father set Him forth as the Saviour when He sent Him into the world. O the love of the Father in sending His dear Son into this world of sin and sorrow to make atonement for sin! His Father set Him forth – the love of the Father in it, and the love of the Son! We read, “I love the Lord, *because* . . .” We read, “We love Him, *because* . . .” And then you look the other way round: “God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son.” There is not any *because* with God. Your love to Christ, there is a *because*, a reason for it. The everlasting love of God to His people, there is no *because*, no reason for it. It is His mysterious sovereignty. He loved

because He would love. There was nothing in *any* of His creatures to cause Him, their Creator, delight.

“Whom God hath set forth.” And then His eternal Father set Him forth on the resurrection morning when He raised Him from the dead, to prove that His work had not failed, His work was not in vain. “Him hath God exalted ... to be a Prince and a Saviour, for to give repentance to Israel, and forgiveness of sins.”

“Whom God hath set forth.” And then God has ordained that His dear Son shall be set forth as the Saviour in the preaching of the everlasting gospel. How many of you are there here this morning who love to hear the dear Saviour of sinners set forth in the gospel? “Whom God hath set forth.” Set forth in eternity in the covenant of grace; set forth when He came into this world to save sinners; set forth on the resurrection morning, declared to be the Son of God with power; set forth in the preaching of the gospel. And then set forth to the experience of every sinner saved by grace. Has the dear Lord Jesus ever been set forth to you, before your eyes, your only hope, your only plea, none but Jesus?

“Whom God hath set forth to be a propitiation.” What does *propitiation* mean? Well, you know, the word *propitious* means *favourable*. If you are propitious to someone, you are favourable towards them. If something happens and it seems to be propitious, it is a favourable sign that things are going to go well. Now Christ in His great work of salvation is the propitiation of His people. That is, His eternal Father is favourable to lost, ruined, guilty sinners on the ground of what Christ has done in making atonement for their sin, in putting sin away. There is expiation: that is just the putting away of sin. Propitiation is more than that. It contains expiation, the putting away of sin, but it is also this: that the eternal Father is *favourable*.

“Whom God hath set forth to be a propitiation.” I do not want you to misunderstand things, friends. I do not want you to think that the eternal Father was against His people, that He did not love them, He was not favourable to them and it was only because Christ died that He changed His mind and became favourable. Forbidden be the thought! The eternal Father was always favourable to His people. He always loved them with an everlasting love. But where does Christ’s work of propitiation fit in? Well, it opened the channel through which God’s free, undeserved

favour could flow. The law of God we had broken; there was a barrier, a calling for divine wrath, not divine favour. How could God be favourable to these sinners who deserved His wrath? As the Lord Jesus shed His precious blood and died and finished the work of redemption, so propitiation was accomplished – the eternal God favourable to guilty sinners, the channel opened whereby His free favour could flow as sin is for ever put away by Christ in the atonement.

“Whom God hath set forth to be a propitiation.” “Herein is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us, and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins.” Christ our propitiation. To go into this a little more deeply and to explain it a little more clearly, this same word here translated *propitiation* is in the Epistle to the Hebrews translated *mercyseat*. You see, it was at the mercyseat where propitiation was made. If the mercyseat is propitiation, if propitiation is the mercy seat, then go back to Exodus 25. That mercyseat was made of pure gold. Propitiation is very precious. That mercyseat was sprinkled with precious blood. The blood of Christ is the ground of propitiation. The mercyseat really was the lid to the ark of the covenant. The dimensions were identical, completely the same. It absolutely fitted, absolutely covered the ark of the covenant. What was inside the ark of the covenant? The whole law of God which sinners had broken. The mercyseat was a perfect, absolute, entire, complete covering so that the broken law could not be seen by any eye. That is Christ our propitiation. His work on the cross completely blotted out the sin of those who had broken God’s holy law, so blotting it out that even God Himself cannot see that sin. “In those days, and in that time, saith the Lord, the iniquity of Israel shall be sought for, and there shall be none; and the sins of Judah, and they shall not be found.”

“Whom God hath set forth to be a propitiation.” Christ our propitiation. Christ our mercyseat. I understand that in the original, in that well-known, beautiful prayer, “God be merciful to me a sinner,” the publican made use of this word *propitiation*. It was almost impossible to translate. Really he said, “God be merciful to me a sinner” – God be propitious to me a sinner, through that great work of Christ, the propitiation, the mercyseat. Literally it could almost be translated, God be the mercyseat to me a sinner. Samuel Medley very beautifully comes to the very heart of it when he says, “Mercy, through blood, I make my plea; O God, be merciful to me!”

“Whom God hath set forth to be a propitiation” – a mercy seat sprinkled with blood, our only hope, the only ground of our acceptance, none but Jesus, Jesus dying on the cross, Jesus crucified for sinners.

“Whom God hath set forth to be a propitiation through faith in His blood.” No more sacred theme than this: *His blood*. The life of the dear Saviour poured out in death – *His blood*. “The blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanseth us from all sin” – *His blood*. We think of the bitter agonies, the deep sorrows He endured when He shed His precious blood that sinners might live, that He might be a propitiation.

“The waves of swelling grief
Did o’er His bosom roll,
And mountains of almighty wrath,
Lay heavy on His soul.”

The curse of a broken law, the smiting with the sword of divine justice, the weight of His people’s sin that pressed Him down, the whole of divine wrath poured out upon Him, all the sufferings of the dear Saviour when He shed His precious blood that sinners might live. *His blood* – cleansing blood, atoning blood, sheltering blood, our only hope, our only plea.

“Whom God hath set forth to be a propitiation through faith in His blood.” Now faith, God-given faith, always has to do with the blood of Christ. If you are led and taught by the Spirit of God, if God is having dealings with you, if He is preparing you for heaven, it will be this: you will be brought to feel your need, your sin, your lost condition. But then you will be given faith in His blood. This faith trusts entirely, completely in the blood of Christ. Now that is the religion that takes a sinner to heaven. Faith looks to the blood of Christ and faith trusts in the blood of Christ.

I want to linger on this point, because it is such a vital point in gracious experience. Faith at first does not see the blood of Christ as shed for me personally, individually. Faith in its first acting does not come to the blood of Christ with the sweet assurance that that blood was shed for me. That is the full assurance of faith, not the nature, the essence of faith. Faith in its first venturings, its first, trembling approaches sees the attraction, the necessity of it, but faith does not see that blood as shed for *me*, but it sees that blood shed for sinners. It is on that ground that faith

ventures, that that blood was shed for sinners, only for sinners, for none but sinners, lost, ruined, guilty, despairing sinners; and I am a sinner. So faith ventures, faith looks, faith trusts, not that I know that blood was shed for me, but hoping in that blood as shed for sinners. That is the first approach of faith, and a holy God in heaven accepts it. Faith in its nature is just the same in its first trembling beginnings as the sweet assurance of faith; and that faith will take a sinner to heaven. Hold it fast and do not let Satan rob you of it. That little, trembling faith which looks to the blood of Christ will take you to heaven as surely as the dying thief and Mary Magdalene and the Apostle Paul were taken to heaven. For,

“That sacred flood from Jesus’ veins,
Was free to take away
A Mary’s or Manasseh’s stains,
Or sins more vile than they.”

“A propitiation through faith in His blood.” So you will be brought by faith to trust in the blood of Christ, and to trust in the blood of Christ *alone*. Why, you cannot trust in anything else. You dare not trust your own heart. “He that trusteth in his own heart is a fool.” But because every other refuge is swept away, you are brought here: to trust in the blood of Christ. “Other refuge have I none, hangs my helpless soul on Thee.”

“A propitiation through faith in His blood.” It is not just a natural faith. it is not just believing that Jesus lived and died and shed His blood like you believe some historical or scientific fact. It is God-given faith. There is the nature of trust in it, this believing on the Son of God. “Through faith in His blood” – this faith that trusts, that looks to the blood of Christ, as the serpent-bitten Israelites looked to the serpent of brass, and as many as looked lived. It did not matter how dreadful their condition. As many as looked lived. And, “Thine’s alas! a lost condition.” Some of us feel it, painfully feel it.

“Thine’s alas! a lost condition;
Works cannot work thee remission,
Nor thy goodness do thee good.
Death’s within thee, all about thee;
But the remedy’s without thee;
See it in thy Saviour’s blood.”

“Whom God hath set forth to be a propitiation through faith in His blood.” O the looking by faith to Jesus and Jesus alone, the death He died, the sacrifice He offered, one sacrifice, the blood He shed, none but Jesus, no hope but in the atonement, that trusting in Him, believing on Him, looking to Him.

“Whom God hath set forth to be a propitiation through faith in His blood.” And by faith we find our resting place in the blood of Christ. It is the only place where faith can rest. O this real, God-given faith hangs on Christ. It leans on Him and on Him alone. That is, the whole weight of our salvation resting on the blood of Christ. Now is there a sinner here this morning and you have been brought to this: there is nothing between your guilty soul and a deserved hell but the blood of Christ? And it brings you here, and some of us have to take our stand here, sink or swim:

“Compelled I am on Christ alone to hang,
And plead that blood by which the church is freed.”

There is a divine compulsion in it.

“Whom God hath set forth to be a propitiation through faith in His blood.” Perhaps the best, the most sacred illustration of true faith hanging on the atonement we have in Leviticus 1. Here is this Israelite; he is conscious that he has sinned. He is guilty; he is lost. So he brings the offering, he brings the lamb. There he sees that innocent lamb slain in his place. He knows he is the guilty one, he deserves to die, but he sees that innocent lamb dying. What does he do? He places his hand on the head of that lamb – identification. Ceremonially he casts all his sins on the head of that dying lamb; his only hope, his only trust is in that dying lamb and the blood which flows. There he confesses his sin, and the holy Word of God says that “it shall be accepted for him to make atonement for him.” And,

“My faith would lay her hand
On that dear head of Thine;
While like a penitent I stand,
And there confess my sin.”

As I understand it, that is the only way to heaven, and as I understand it, that is the gospel in all its simplicity and in all its depth.

“My soul looks back to see
The burdens Thou didst bear,

When hanging on the accursed tree,
And hopes her guilt was there.”

“Through faith in His blood.”