

# Did Christ Die for Us or for God?

[January 1, 1995](#) / by [John Piper](#) / Scripture: [Romans 3:25–26](#) / Topic: [The Death of Christ](#)

Romans 3:25–26

God put [Christ] forward as a sacrifice of atonement by his blood, effective through faith. He did this to show his righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over the sins previously committed; it was to prove at the present time that he himself is righteous and that he justifies the one who has faith in Jesus.

## Introduction

One of the reasons it is hard to communicate biblical reality to modern, secular people is that the biblical mindset and the secular mindset move from radically different starting points.

What I mean by the secular mindset is not necessarily a mindset that rules God out or denies in principle that the Bible is true. It's a mindset that begins with man as the basic given reality in the universe. All of its thinking starts with the assumption that man has basic rights and basic needs and basic expectations. Then the secular mind moves out from this center and interprets the world, with man and his rights and needs as the measure of all things.

What the secular mindset sees as problems are seen as problems because of how things fit or don't fit with the center – man and his rights and needs and expectations. And what this mindset sees as successes are seen as successes because they fit with man and his rights and needs and expectations.

This is the mindset we were born with and that our secular society reinforces virtually every hour of the day in our lives. The Apostle Paul calls this mindset "the mind that is set on the flesh" (Romans. 8:6-7), and says that it is the way the "natural person" thinks (1 Corinthians 2:14, literal translation). It is so much a part of us that we hardly even know it's there. We just take it for granted – until it collides with another mindset, namely the one in the Bible.

The biblical mindset is not simply one that includes God somewhere in the universe and says that the Bible is true. The biblical mindset begins with a radically different starting point, namely, God. God is the basic given reality in the universe. He was there before we were in existence – or before anything was in existence. He is simply the most absolute reality.

And so the biblical mindset starts with the assumption that God is the center of reality. All thinking starts with the assumption that God has basic rights as the Creator of all things. He has goals that fit with his nature and perfect character. Then the biblical mindset moves out from this center and interprets the world, with God and his rights and goals as the measure of all things.

What the biblical mindset sees as basic problems in the universe are usually not the same problems that the secular mindset sees. The reason for this is that what makes a problem is not, first, that something doesn't fit the rights and needs of man, but that it doesn't fit the rights and goals of God. If you start with man and his rights and wants, rather than starting with the Creator and his rights and goals, the problems you see in the universe will be very different.

Is the basic riddle of the universe how to preserve man's rights and solve his problems (say, the

right of self-determination, and the problem of suffering)? Or is the basic riddle of the universe how an infinitely worthy God in complete freedom can display the full range of his perfections – what Paul calls the "riches of his glory" (Romans 9:23) – his holiness and power and wisdom and justice and wrath and goodness and truth and grace?

How you answer that question will profoundly affect the way you understand the central event of human history – the death of Jesus, the Son of God.

I introduce our text (Romans 3:25-26) with this long meditation on the power of our starting points, because the deepest problem that the death of Jesus was designed to solve is virtually incomprehensible to the secular mindset. That is why this truth about the purpose of Christ's death is scarcely known, let alone cherished, as part of everyday evangelical piety. Our Christian mindset is so skewed by natural and secular man-centeredness that we can barely comprehend or love the God-centeredness of the cross of Christ.

### **"The Innermost Meaning of the Cross"**

Our focus is very limited. We will go beneath the issue of justification and reconciliation and forgiveness to the bottom and foundation of it all – to what C.E.B. Cranfield calls "the innermost meaning of the cross" (*The Epistle to the Romans*, Vol. 1, I.C.C., Edinburgh: T.&T. Clark, 1975, p. 213).

What you should listen for as we read this text is the problem in the universe that the biblical mindset (God's mindset) is trying to solve through the death of Christ. How does it differ from the problems that the secular mindset says God has to solve?

God put [Christ] forward as a sacrifice of atonement by his blood, effective through faith. He did this to show his righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over the sins previously committed. (Romans 3:25)

Boil that down to the most basic problem the death of Christ is meant to solve. 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, for some reason, seemed to be unrighteous, and wanted to vindicate himself and clear his name. 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.

But what created that problem? Why did God face the problem of needing to give a public vindication of his righteousness? The answer is in the last phrase of verse 25: "because in his divine forbearance he had passed over the sins previously committed."

Now what does that mean? It means that for centuries God had been doing what Psalm 103:10 says, "He does not deal 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.

### **How David Despised God**

King David is a good example. In 2 Samuel 12, he is confronted by the prophet Nathan for committing adultery with Bathsheba and then having her husband killed. Nathan says, "Why have you despised the word of the LORD?" (2 Samuel 12:9).

David feels the rebuke of Nathan, and in verse 13 he says, "I have sinned against the LORD." To this, Nathan responds, "The LORD also has put away your sin; you shall not die." Just like that! Adultery and murder are "passed over." It is almost incredible. Our sense of justice screams out, "No! You can't just let it go like that. He deserves to die or be imprisoned for life!" But Nathan does not say that. He says, "The LORD has put away your sin; you shall not die."

### **Why is Forgiveness a Problem?**

That is what Paul means in Romans 3:25 by the passing over of sins previously committed. But why is that a problem? Is it felt as a problem by the secular mindset – that God is kind to sinners? How many people outside the scope of biblical influence wrestle with the problem that a holy and righteous God makes the sun rise on the evil and the good and sends rain on the just and the unjust (Matthew 5:45)? How many wrestle with the apparent injustice that God is lenient with sinners? How many Christians wrestle with the fact that their own forgiveness is a threat to the righteousness of God?

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 righteousness and glory. It starts with man and assumes that God will conform to our rights and wishes.

### **Sin is a Belittling of God's Glory**

Notice verse 23: "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." What's at stake in sinning is the *glory of God*. When Nathan confronts David, he 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 red hot after this 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 fall short of *the glory of God*."

Therefore the problem when God passes over sin is that God seems to agree with those who despise his name and belittle his glory. He seems to be saying it is a matter of indifference that his glory is spurned. He seems to condone the low assessment of his worth.

### **The Insult of Acquitting Anarchists**

Suppose a group of anarchists plot to assassinate the President of the United States and his whole cabinet, and almost succeed. Their bombs destroy part of the White House and kill some staff, but the President narrowly escapes. The anarchists are caught and the court finds them guilty. But then the anarchists say they are sorry, and so the court suspends their sentences and releases them. Now what would that communicate to the world about the value of the President's life and the importance of his governance? It would communicate that they are of little value.

That is what the passing over of sin communicates: God's glory and his righteous governance are of minor value, or no value.

Apart from divine revelation, the natural mind – the secular mind – does not see or feel this problem. What secular person loses any sleep over the apparent unrighteousness of God's kindness to sinners?

But, according to Romans, this is the most basic problem that God solved by the death of his Son. Let's read it again: "He did this [put his Son forward to die] to show his righteousness, because in his divine forbearance (or patience) he had passed over sins previously committed; it was to prove at the present time that he himself is righteous . . ." (verses 25b-26a) God would *be* unrighteous if he passed over sins as though the value of his glory were nothing.

God saw his glory being despised by sinners (like David) – he saw his worth belittled and his name dishonored by our sins – and rather than vindicating the worth of his glory by slaying his people, he vindicated his glory by slaying his Son.

God could have settled accounts by punishing all sinners with hell. This would have demonstrated that he does not minimize our falling short of his glory – our belittling his honor. But God did not will to destroy. "Indeed God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world through him might be saved" (John 3:17).

### **Do We Know (and Share!) God's Deepest Passion?**

This truth, we know well. We know well that God is for us. We know that our salvation is his goal in sending Jesus. But do we know the foundation of it all? Do we know that there is a deeper goal in sending the Son? Do we know that God's love for us depends on a deeper love, namely, God's love for his glory? Do we know that God's passion to save sinners rests on a deeper passion, namely, God's passion to vindicate his righteousness? Do we realize that the accomplishment of our salvation does not center on us, but on God's glory? The vindication of God's glory is the *ground* of our salvation (Romans 3:25-6), and the exaltation of God's glory is the *goal* of our salvation. "Christ has become a servant to the circumcised . . . in order that the Gentiles might *glorify God* for his mercy" (Romans 15:8-9).

### **Can Self-exaltation Be an Act of Love?**

Someone may ask, "How can it be loving for God to be so self-exalting in the work of the cross? If he is really exalting his own glory and vindicating his own righteousness, then how is the cross really an act of love to us?"

I fear the question betrays a common secular mindset with man at the center. It assumes that, for us to be loved, God must make us the center. He must highlight our value. If our worth is not accented, then we are not loved. If our value is not the ground of the cross, then we are not esteemed. The assumption of such questioning is that the exaltation of the worth and glory of God over man is not the very essence of what God's love for man is.

The biblical mindset, however, affirms the very opposite. The cross is the pinnacle of God's love for sinners, not because it demonstrates the value of sinners, but because it vindicates the value of God for sinners to enjoy. God's love for man does not consist in making man central, but in making himself central for man. The cross does not direct man's attention to his own vindicated worth, but to God's vindicated righteousness.

This is love, because the only eternal happiness for man is happiness focused on the riches of God's glory. "In your presence there is fullness of joy; in your right hand are pleasures forever more" (Psalm 16:1 1). God's self-exaltation is loving, because it preserves for us and offers to us the only all-satisfying Object of desire in the universe – the all-glorious, all-righteous God.

## Why Is the Cross Folly?

The root reason for why the cross is folly to the world is that it means the end of human self-exaltation, and a radical commitment to God-exaltation. No – "commitment" is not quite the right word. Rather the cross is a call to radical "*exultation*" in God-exaltation. The cross is the death of our demand to be loved by being made the center. And it is the birth of joy in God's being made the center.

## How Is the Cross Your Joy?

Test yourself. What is your mindset? Do you begin with God and his rights and goals? Or do you begin with yourself and your rights and wishes?

And when you look at the death of Christ, what happens? Does your joy really come from translating this awesome divine work into a boost for self-esteem? Or are you drawn up out of yourself and filled with wonder and reverence and worship that here in the death of Jesus is the deepest, clearest declaration of the infinite esteem of God for his glory and for his Son?

Here is a great objective foundation for the full assurance of hope: the forgiveness of sins is grounded, finally, not in my finite worth or work, but in the infinite worth of the righteousness of God – God's unswerving allegiance to uphold and vindicate the glory of his name.

I appeal to you with all my heart, take your stand on this. Base your life on this. Ground your hope in this. You will be free from the futile mindset of the world. And you will never fall. When God's exaltation of God in Christ is your joy, it can never fail.

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