

## 8. The Righteousness of God

Peter's response to the declaration of the death of the Messiah is probably characteristic of the general tenor of first-century messianic expectation — "Far be it from you, Lord! This shall *never* happen to you" (Matt. 16:22).<sup>1</sup> God's Messiah would come, establish a throne in Jerusalem, be anointed with divine glory, raise the dead, and judge the nations. Yet God chose, "in all wisdom and insight" (Eph. 1:8), to hand him over to death. His crucifixion was "determined" (Luke 22:22) by God, "predestined to take place" (Acts 4:28), for it was "foretold by the mouth of all the prophets" (Acts 3:18). He was "delivered over by the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God" (Acts 2:23, NASB), because "it was *the LORD's will* to crush him and cause him to suffer" (Isa. 53:10, NIV).

The answer to *why* the Messiah was handed over by God "according to the counsel of his will" (Eph. 1:11) constitutes the essential center of New Testament thought and meditation.<sup>2</sup> In light of the apocalyptic hope of the day of the Lord, the resurrection of the dead, and the kingdom of God, *why* was it "necessary for the Christ to suffer" (Acts 17:3)? What did the death of the Messiah *mean*, and

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<sup>1</sup> The offense of crucifixion was such that it was madness (Gk. *mania*) to associate it with God, as Justin (c. 100–165 AD) is known for describing: "Our teacher of these things is Jesus Christ, who also was born for this purpose, and was crucified under Pontius Pilate. . . . For they proclaim *our madness* to consist in this, that we give to a crucified man a place second to the unchangeable and eternal God, the Creator of all; for they do not discern the mystery that is herein, to which, as we make it plain to you, we pray you to give heed" (*First Apology*, 13 [ANF, 1:166–67]; italics added).

See a description in Martin Hengel, *Crucifixion in the Ancient World and the Folly of the Message of the Cross*, trans. John Bowden (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977), 1–10. "A crucified messiah, son of God or God must have seemed a contradiction in terms to anyone, Jew, Greek, Roman or barbarian, asked to believe such a claim, and it will certainly have been thought offensive and foolish" (p. 10).

<sup>2</sup> Though theologians in the twentieth century have sought to move the "center" of NT theology toward eschatology, whether "realized" or not (cf. A. Schweitzer, C. H. Dodd, W. G. Kümmel, K. Stendahl, J. D. G. Dunn, N. T. Wright, etc.), the Reformation's anchor in the cross still holds (cf. E. Käsemann, C. E. B. Cranfield, L. Morris, J. I. Packer, etc.). The disputation between Stendahl and Käsemann is well known in the academy and typifies the tension (see Don N. Howell Jr., "The Center of Pauline Theology," *BSac* 151, no. 1 [1994]: 50–70). Of course, there is technically *no center to a timeline*, since the beginning, middle, and end are all of vital necessity (cf. James M. Hamilton Jr., "The Glory of God in Salvation through Judgment: The Centre of Biblical Theology?" *TynBul* 57, no. 1 [2006]: 57–84), though Paul ultimately emphasized the cross and justification by faith in light of creation and eschatological judgment (cf. Rom. 5:9; 1 Cor. 2:2; Gal. 2:20; 1 Tim. 1:15; etc.).

why was his death different than the death of any other human being? Many prophets had been martyred in the past, yet God deemed—in his own system of accounting—that this martyrdom was different, unique, and necessary.<sup>3</sup>

Based upon Paul’s descriptions of divine revelation (cf. 1 Cor. 15:3–8; Gal. 1:12), we can assume that Jesus interpreted to his disciples his own death *in detail* during the forty days of teaching (Acts 1:3) prior to his ascension. I believe this teaching concerning the divine interpretation of messianic suffering is substantially represented in the epistles of the New Testament. The death of the Messiah was understood sacrificially: making atonement for human sin, propitiating the wrath of God, justifying the sinner, and redeeming that which was primordially lost.

### THE SACRIFICIAL NATURE OF THE MESSIAH’S DEATH

As discussed in the previous chapter, the suffering of the Messiah was understood by the apostles as a sacrifice, typologically fulfilling the sacrificial system. The ultimate purpose of the sacrifices and offerings was to “make atonement on your behalf for your sin” (Lev. 5:6, NRSV; cf. Lev. 4:20,26,31,35; 5:10,13,16,18; 6:7; 8:34; 9:7; 10:17; 12:7f; 14:18ff,29ff; 15:15,30; 16:6,11,16ff,33f; 19:22; 23:28; Num. 6:11; 8:12,19; 15:25,28; 16:46; 28:22,30; 29:5). Here we note the inherently vicarious and substitutional nature of sacrifice, which is made “on your behalf.” Such substitutionality is clearly portrayed by the laying on of hands (cf. Lev. 1:4; 3:2,8,13; 4:4,15,24,29,33; 8:14,22; 16:21; Num. 8:12) and the confession of sins—especially on the Day of Atonement (Lev. 16:21; cf. Lev. 5:5; 26:40; Num. 5:7)—symbolizing *the transference of iniquity* onto the head of the animal.<sup>4</sup> Those who transgress the law will “bear [their] iniquity” (Lev. 5:1,17; 7:18; 17:16; 19:8; 20:17,19; 22:16; Num. 5:31; 14:34; 18:1; 30:15) and “bear [their] sin” (Lev. 20:20; 22:9; 24:15; Num. 9:13; 18:22). But for those who repent, confess

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<sup>3</sup> So P. T. Forsyth elucidated, “Christ, I repeat, is to us just what His cross is. You do not understand Christ till you understand His cross. . . . It is only by understanding it that it becomes anything else than a martyrdom, that it becomes the saving act of God. It is only by understanding it that we escape from religion with no mind, and from religion which is all mind, from pietism with its lack of critical judgment, and from rationalism with its lack of everything else” (*The Cruciality of the Cross* [London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1909], 45–46).

<sup>4</sup> “It is not easy to see what the laying on of hands means if there is no symbolic transfer to the animal which was to die of the sins being confessed” (Leon Morris, *The Atonement: Its Meaning and Significance* [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1983], 47).

their sins, and offer the ordained sacrifice, the animal “shall bear all their iniquities” (Lev. 16:22; cf. Lev. 10:17).<sup>5</sup> Thus by sacrifice a person’s sins are borne away, “and he shall be *forgiven*” (Lev. 4:26,31,35; 5:10,13,16,18; 6:7; 19:22; Num. 15:28).<sup>6</sup>

God, by his own initiative and mercy, makes the provision of atonement for the forgiveness of sin: “*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*” (Lev. 17:11; cf. Lev. 4:2; 6:7; etc.). So God ultimately provides deliverance from sin, a theme common throughout the Scriptures (e.g., Gen. 22:14; Deut. 32:36; Ps. 22:4; Matt. 1:21). Accordingly, it is God who offered his Messiah as a sacrifice for the forgiveness of sins: “*Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many people; and he will appear a second time, not to bear sin, but to bring salvation to those who are waiting for him*” (Heb. 9:28, NIV). “*For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed*” (1 Cor. 5:7; cf. John 1:29), “*a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God*” (Eph. 5:2). Therefore, “*When Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God, waiting from that time until his enemies should be made a footstool for his feet*” (Heb. 10:12–13; cf. Heb. 7:27; 9:26).

Throughout the Scriptures blood signifies sacrifice. Hence every reference to “*the blood of Christ*” (1 Cor. 10:16; Eph. 2:13; Heb. 9:14; 1 Peter 1:19; cf. 1 Cor. 11:27; Heb. 10:19; 1 John 1:7; Rev. 7:14; 12:11), or “*his blood*” (Rom. 3:25; 5:9; Eph. 1:7; Heb. 9:12; 13:12; 1 Peter 1:2; Rev. 1:5; cf. Col. 1:20; Rev. 5:9), is a *sacrificial reference*. It is “*the blood of the covenant*” (Matt. 26:28; Heb. 10:29; 13:20; cf. 1 Cor.

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<sup>5</sup> Thus, “It is clear from Old Testament usage that to ‘bear sin’ means neither to sympathize with sinners, nor to identify with their pain, nor to express their penitence, nor to be persecuted on account of human sinfulness (as others have argued), nor even to suffer the consequences of sin in personal or social terms, but specifically to endure its penal consequences, to undergo its penalty” (John R. W. Stott, *The Cross of Christ* [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1986], 143).

<sup>6</sup> In light of this God-ordained, atonement system, and its centrality within Judaic life, the prophecy of Isaiah 53 concerning a substitutional messianic sacrifice was readily understood and received (cf. Matt. 8:17; Mark 9:12; Luke 22:37; John 12:38; Acts 8:32–35; Rom. 10:16; 15:21; 1 Peter 2:22–25). Like the sacrificial animal, “He was wounded for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities” (v. 5), for “the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all” (v. 6). Indeed, he is “like a lamb that is led to the slaughter” (v. 7), “stricken for the transgression of my people” (v. 8). His life would be “an offering for sin” (v. 10), and hence “he shall bear their iniquities” (v. 11). So the chapter concludes that he was “numbered with the transgressors” and “bore the sin of many” (v. 12). The sacrificial language of this oracle is unmistakable, and in such light the NT writers interpret the death of the Messiah.

11:25) that “purifies” and “cleanses” us from sin (cf. Acts 15:9; Eph. 5:26; Titus 2:14; Heb. 9:14; 10:2; 1 Peter 1:22; 1 John 1:7ff). Though the Old Testament sacrifices purified the flesh, “how much more will *the blood of Christ*, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, *purify our conscience* from dead works to serve the living God. Therefore he is the mediator of a new covenant, so that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance” (Heb. 9:14–15).

Akin to the language of blood, the *vicarious language* of the New Testament assumes a sacrificial framework.<sup>7</sup> As the sacrifice was offered in lieu of the worshiper, so also the Messiah died “for” (Gk. *anti*), or “on behalf of” (Gk. *huper*), sinners.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, it is “of first importance,” Paul said, “that Christ died *for our sins* in accordance with the Scriptures” (1 Cor. 15:3). Similarly, Peter declared, “Christ also suffered once *for sins*, the righteous *for the unrighteous*, that he might bring us to God” (1 Peter 3:18). And John stated that Christ “laid down his life *for us*” (1 John 3:16) and that God “loved us and sent his Son to be *the atoning sacrifice for our sins*” (1 John 4:10, NRSV). The apostolic witness is saturated with such vicarious-sacrificial declarations concerning the death of the Messiah.<sup>9</sup> Moreover,

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<sup>7</sup> Because of selfishness and human depravity, vicarious sin-bearing is relatively uncommon in human relations. However, sometimes debts are paid on behalf of others, penalties are endured in another’s stead, and suffering is embraced in lieu of someone else. We consider such examples heroic because they inherently express a measure of love and self-sacrifice. Such sentiment was also common in the ancient world (see Martin Hengel, *The Atonement: The Origin of the Doctrine in the New Testament*, trans. John Bowden [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1981]). No one wants to bear the consequences of their own sin, much less someone else’s, yet this is exactly how the death of the Messiah is framed in the NT: “For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. For one will scarcely die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die—but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Rom. 5:6–8).

<sup>8</sup> Though controversy surrounds the substitutionality of the preposition ἀντί in a few instances, it “characteristically has the meaning ‘in the place of,’ ‘instead of,’ whether in the classics or in the χουινή” (Leon Morris, *The Apostolic Preaching of the Cross*, 3rd ed. [London: Tyndale, 1965], 34). See also “ἀντί,” BDAG, 87–88; and “ἀντί,” NIDNTT, 3:1179–80. Likewise, ὑπέρ commonly conveys “a substitutionary thought” (Morris, *Apostolic Preaching*, 62) and is often identical to ἀντί (cf. Mark 10:45; 1 Tim. 2:6).

<sup>9</sup> For example: Christ “gave himself *for our sins* to deliver us from the present evil age” (Gal. 1:4). “He himself *bore our sins* in his body on the tree” (1 Peter 2:24). It is Christ Jesus “who died *for us*” (1 Thess. 5:10), “who gave himself *for us*” (Titus 2:14). Indeed, “One has died *for all*” (2 Cor. 5:14), “as a ransom *for all*” (1 Tim. 2:6). “Christ loved us and gave himself up *for us*” (Eph. 5:2). “Christ died *for the ungodly*” (Rom. 5:6), i.e., “Christ died *for us*” (v. 8). He was “delivered up *for our trespasses*” (Rom. 4:25), “becoming a curse *for us*” (Gal. 3:13). “He is the propitiation *for our sins*” (1 John 2:2). God “made Him who knew no sin to be sin *on our behalf*” (2 Cor. 5:21, NASB); as Caiaphas inadvertently prophesied: “It was expedient for one man to die *on behalf of the people*” (John 18:14, NASB; cf. John

Jesus used the same language concerning his own death: “This is *my blood* of the covenant, which is poured out *for many* for the forgiveness of sins” (Matt. 26:28).<sup>10</sup>

Jesus’ declaration during the Last Supper exemplifies the sacrificial presuppositions of the New Testament: 1) The blood of the Messiah was shed; 2) on behalf of many; 3) for the forgiveness of sins.<sup>11</sup> Divine forgiveness only happens on the basis of the sacrificial shedding of blood (Heb. 9:22), and consequently the apostolic proclamation of the forgiveness of sins through faith in Jesus (cf. Acts 2:38; 5:31; 10:43; 13:38; 26:18) also assumed a sacrificial interpretation. The idea that the earliest apostolic church, as revealed in the book of Acts, lacked a developed theology of atonement is groundless.<sup>12</sup> In light of the

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11:49). So Paul believed Jesus to be “the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself *for me*” (Gal. 2:20). Indeed, “Christ loved the church and gave himself up *for her*” (Eph. 5:25). So we should not sin against “the brother *for whom Christ died* (1 Cor. 8:11); cf. “the one *for whom Christ died*” (Rom. 14:15).

<sup>10</sup> Similarly, Jesus told his disciples before his death, “The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom *for many*” (Matt. 20:28; cf. Mark 10:45). Jesus likened his death to a good shepherd who “lays down his life *for the sheep*” (John 10:11)—prophesying, “I lay down my life *for the sheep*” (v. 15). And, “Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life *for his friends*” (John 15:13).

The atonement nature of these statements would have been commonly understood: “The idea that the righteous who suffer without being guilty, or who suffer more than their guilt requires, thereby atone for the sins of the people and ward off suffering from others, is very common among the Rabbis [Cf. Str.-B., II, 275ff]. The sufferings of the patriarchs, Moses, David etc., and the sufferings of more recent figures, especially the martyrs, are evaluated thus” (F. Büchsel, “*ἰλάσκομαι, ἰλασμός,*” *TDNT*, 3:313).

<sup>11</sup> As Joachim Jeremias states,

The oft-repeated assertion that it is inconceivable that Jesus should have ascribed atoning power to his death, that such statements belong rather to the “dogmatic” of the Early Church or of the apostle Paul, is astonishing to anyone who knows the Palestinian sources. Conceptions of the atoning power of death play a large part in the thought of Jesus’ contemporaries. Every death has atoning power—even that of a criminal if he dies penitent. An innocent death offered to God has vicarious power of atonement for others. The sources compel the conclusion that *it is inconceivable that Jesus should not have thought of the atoning power of his death.* (*The Eucharistic Words of Jesus*, trans. Norman Perrin [London: SCM Press, 1966], 231; italics in the original)

Note 4 Maccabees 17:21–22: “The tyrant was punished, and the homeland purified—they having become, as it were, a ransom for the sin of our nation. And through the blood of those devout ones and their death as an atoning sacrifice, divine Providence preserved Israel that previously had been mistreated” (NRSV). And 4 Maccabees 6:28: “Be merciful to your people, and let our punishment suffice for them. Make my blood their purification, and take my life in exchange for theirs” (NRSV).

<sup>12</sup> This idea has a long history, deriving primarily from C. H. Dodd, *The Apostolic Preaching and Its Developments* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1936); and Hans Conzelmann, *The Theology of St.*

temple and the sacrificial system, which was still operational at the time, the apostolic declaration concerning the forgiveness of sins would have been commonly understood as fundamentally sacrificial.

The forgiveness of sins and a sacrificial interpretation of the cross were predicated on a belief in the depravity of man in light of the holiness of God. Following the sin of Adam, “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Rom. 3:23). For “sin came into the world through one man” and “all sinned” (Rom. 5:12), which “led to condemnation for all men” (v. 18). Thus “by a man came death” (1 Cor. 15:21), and “in Adam all die” (v. 22).<sup>13</sup> Being “ungodly” (Rom. 4:5; 5:6; Jude 15) and “sinners” (Rom. 5:19; Gal. 2:17; 1 Tim. 1:15), all humans—Jew and Gentile alike—are “by nature children of wrath” (Eph. 2:3), and “sons of disobedience” (Eph. 2:2; cf. Rom. 11:32).<sup>14</sup> Because all are “alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds” (Col. 1:21), the Scriptures declare all to be “prisoners of sin” (Gal. 3:22, NLT) and “slaves to sin” (Rom. 6:20; cf. John 8:34).

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*Luke* (London: Faber, 1960). A Lucan vicarious atonement, more in line with Isa. 53 and OT sacrifice, is well articulated by I. Howard Marshall, *Luke: Historian and Theologian* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1970); and Darrell L. Bock, *Proclamation from Prophecy and Pattern: Lucan Old Testament Christology* (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Press, 1987).

<sup>13</sup> The assertion that “all sinned” (Rom. 5:12) and “in Adam all die” (1 Cor. 15:22) assumes the passing on of a *sinful disposition* (cf. Gen. 6:5; 8:21) to the progeny of Adam. Otherwise all would not have sinned. So Morris:

From such passages the idea of original sin is derived. The basic idea in this concept is that the nature that mankind inherits is not the innocent nature of the unfallen Adam, but that stained by sin as the result of the Fall. . . .

Men have always found the pursuit of virtue strenuous. It does not come to us naturally to do good, whereas sin is much easier. We can drift into sin, but we cannot drift into virtue. It is this which points us to the important truth that sin is part of our nature, and not simply the result of our environment. Basically we sin because we are the kind of people we are, and not simply because we see others sinning. The idea of original sin must be retained, for it corresponds both to the teaching of St. Paul, and to the facts of life. (Leon Morris, *The Cross in the New Testament* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965], 186–88)

<sup>14</sup> So Paul draws from the Psalms (written to the Jews) to emphasize the reality of universal depravity (not only Gentile depravity): “For we have already charged that all, both Jews and Greeks, are under sin, as it is written: ‘None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God. All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one’ [Pss. 14:1–3; 53:1–3]. ‘Their throat is an open grave; they use their tongues to deceive’ [Ps. 5:9]. ‘The venom of asps is under their lips’ [Ps. 140:3]. ‘Their mouth is full of curses and bitterness’ [Ps. 10:7, LXX]. ‘Their feet are swift to shed blood; in their paths are ruin and misery, and the way of peace they have not known’ [Isa. 59:7–8]. ‘There is no fear of God before their eyes’ [Ps. 36:1]. Now we know that whatever the law says *it speaks to those who are under the law*, so that every mouth may be stopped, and the whole world may be held accountable to God” (Rom. 3:9–19).

Such a depraved condition necessarily results in alienation and estrangement from our Creator, “the Holy One” (Ps. 89:18; Isa. 40:25; Hos. 11:9). Holiness and sinfulness cannot coexist. Therefore all are considered to be “under sin” (Rom. 3:9; 7:14) and “under condemnation” (James 5:12; cf. Rom. 5:16ff). Apart from God, we are metaphorically “dead in our trespasses” (Eph. 2:5; cf. 1 Tim. 5:6), and hence “alienated from the life of God” (Eph. 4:18). Because all are “hostile to God” (Rom. 8:7), all are deemed “God’s enemies” (Rom. 5:10, NIV).

However, the Scriptures declare that by faith in the sacrificial death of the Messiah our sins are forgiven and we are *reconciled* to God. Such reconciliation (Gk. *katallagē*) is also called “atonement,” which means “to bring together in mutual agreement,” for it was originally broken into two words: “at onement.”<sup>15</sup> To make at-one-ment is to make reconciliation, for “in the New Testament the basic idea of the Atonement is that of reconciliation.”<sup>16</sup> Various modern translations have sought to incorporate the word “atonement,” so as to emphasize this idea (cf. Rom. 3:25; 5:11; Heb. 2:17; 9:5; 1 John 2:2; 4:10).<sup>17</sup> Throughout the New Testament, this reconciliation was understood within the preexisting apocalyptic framework. Thus, in light of the day of the Lord, the apostles proclaimed that sinful humans could be reconciled to their holy Creator by means of faith in the sacrificial death of the Messiah (see figure 8.1).<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> G. W. Bromiley notes,

To atone is to bring together in mutual agreement, with the added idea, in theology, of reconciliation through the vicarious suffering of one on behalf of another.

The English word “atonement” traces its origin to the 16th century. The *New Oxford Dictionary* indicates that in the first instance it appeared as two separate words “at onement” (cf. Acts 7:26, AV; Gk *eis eirēnēn*), but it soon became a quasi-technical theological term. Sir Thomas More employed it in 1513, and in 1526 William Tyndale used it to translate Gk *katallagē* in 2 Cor. 5:18. In the Bible the idea of atonement occurs much more widely than the actual use of either *kāpar* or *katallagē* would seem to indicate. (“Atone, Atonement,” *ISBE*, 1:352)

<sup>16</sup> T. H. Hughes, *The Atonement: Modern Theories of the Doctrine* (London : Allen and Unwin, 1949), 312; quoted in Morris, *Apostolic Preaching*, 214.

<sup>17</sup> The NIV and NRSV also pick up the tradition of interpreting the Gk. *hilastērion* word group (“propitiate, propitiation”), used throughout the LXX to translate Heb. *kāphar* (“cover, covering”), as “atone, atonement.” Thus, for example, the various translations of Heb. 2:17: “to make propitiation” (ESV, NASB, NKJV), “to make atonement” (NIV, NRSV), “to make reconciliation” (KJV).

<sup>18</sup> Stott articulates well the relationship between the holiness of God, the depravity of man, and the messianic atonement:

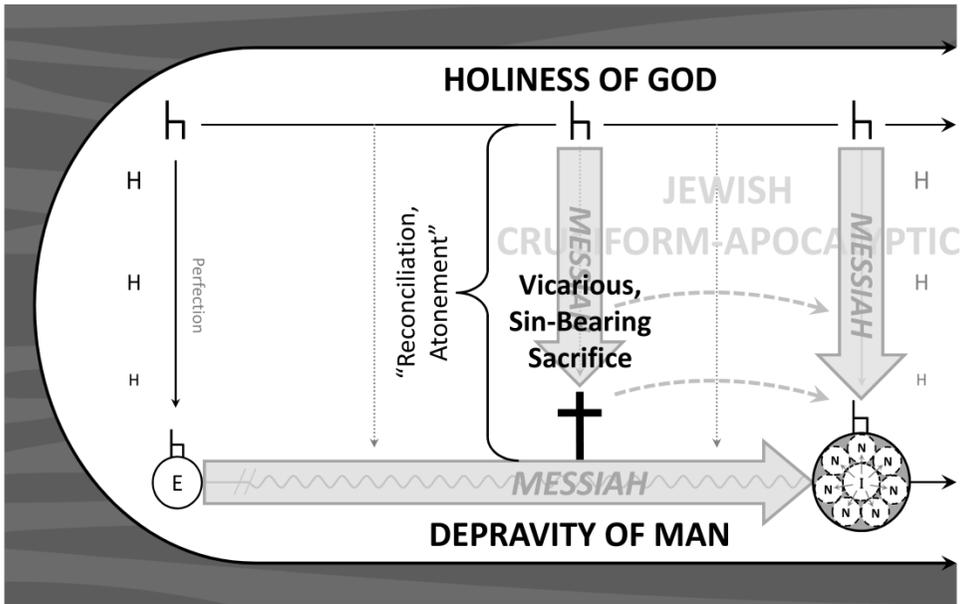


Figure 8.1 – The Reconciliation of God and Man by Means of the Messianic Sacrifice

For example, in the context of the Jewish apocalyptic “judgment seat of Christ” (2 Cor. 5:10), Paul declares, “The love of Christ controls us, because we have concluded this: that *one has died for all*, therefore all have died. . . . In Christ God was *reconciling the world* to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation” (vv. 14,19). Similarly, the apostle says, “You, who once were *alienated and hostile* in mind, doing evil deeds, he has now *reconciled* in his body of flesh *by his death*, in order to present you holy and blameless and above reproach before him” (Col. 1:21–22). So also, in Romans, Paul summarizes the sacrificial death of the Messiah unto our reconciliation with God and salvation from the coming wrath:

God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, *Christ died for us*. Since, therefore, we have now been justified *by his blood*, much more *shall we*

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All inadequate doctrines of the atonement are due to inadequate doctrines of God and man. If we bring God down to our level and raise ourselves to his, then of course we see no need for a radical salvation, let alone for a radical atonement to secure it. When, on the other hand, we have glimpsed the blinding glory of the holiness of God, and have been so convicted of our sin by the Holy Spirit that we tremble before God and acknowledge what we are, namely “hell-deserving sinners,” then and only then does the necessity of the cross appear so obvious that we are astonished we never saw it before. (*Cross of Christ*, 109)

*be saved* by him from the wrath of God. 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. (Rom. 5:8–10)

Though humanity seeks reconciliation with the divine in a multitude of ways, God has determined that there is only one way to assuage the hostility: through faith in the sacrificial death of his Messiah. In this way, Christ Jesus stands between the sin of humanity and the holiness of God: “For there is one God, and there is *one mediator between God and men*, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all, which is the testimony given at the proper time” (1 Tim. 2:5–6).

Though the idea of sacrifice is often revolting to modern ears (no one offers animals to appease the gods), it was the foundational reality by which the suffering of the Messiah was understood. A naturalistic bias deems sacrificial ideas to be “primitive.” And all attempts to “spiritualize,” “christologize,” or otherwise change the basic understanding of sacrifice, carried over from the Old Testament, are baseless.<sup>19</sup> Moreover, the marginalization of sacrificial realities as linguistic “metaphors,” “motifs,” or “figures of speech” do violence to the apostolic witness.<sup>20</sup> The Messiah’s death was *constitutionally sacrificial*, and thereby vicarious and sin-bearing.<sup>21</sup> Either Christ Jesus bears our sins before God on the last day, or we bear our own sins eternally.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> For example: “Equally, the favorite notion that sacrifice was ‘spiritualized’ (Wenschkewitz 1932:6–10) does not really fit the bill. It would be better to speak of its being ‘christologized’ and ‘pneumatized.’ Jesus’ saving death gives an entirely new meaning to sacrifice as a consequence of his resurrection and the sending of the Holy Spirit. He opened up a new dimension of reality. As a result sacrifice is reduced to its personal core from which ethical consequences can be drawn for Christian faith and life” (Hans-Josef Klauck, “Sacrifice and Sacrificial Offerings: New Testament,” *ABD*, 5:891).

<sup>20</sup> See Joel B. Green and Mark D. Baker, *Recovering the Scandal of the Cross: Atonement in the New Testament and Contemporary Contexts* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2000), 47–50; Stephen J. Patterson, *Beyond the Passion: Rethinking the Death and Life of Jesus* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2004), 69–101; and J. Denny Weaver, *The Nonviolent Atonement*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011), 69–82. “The sacrificial system of ancient Israel is another biblical motif frequently assumed to supply the model for satisfaction atonement. This section challenges that assumption and demonstrates that the correlation is more linguistic than substantial” (Weaver, *Nonviolent Atonement*, 69).

<sup>21</sup> The attempt by many in the liberal tradition (and some in the conservative) to strip the word “vicarious” of its substitutionary meaning is also unfounded; contrary to, e.g., Weaver, *Nonviolent Atonement*; Vincent Taylor, *The Atonement in New Testament Teaching* (London: Epworth, 1940); and

The messianic sacrifice is thus understood as the only means of escaping divine wrath and inheriting eternal life (cf. Rom. 8:1–24; Eph. 1:3–14; 2 Tim. 1:8–12; Titus 3:4–7; 1 Peter 1:13–21; 1 John 4:7–18; etc.). It is the means of *attaining* the long-awaited Jewish eschatological hope (cf. Acts 26:7; Rom. 9:30–32; Phil. 3:7–11). The apostolic writers (especially Paul) therefore refer to the Messiah’s sacrificial death in a shorthand style as “the gospel” (cf. Rom. 1:16; Gal. 1:11; Col. 1:23; 1 Tim. 1:11), since it is “the power of God *for salvation* to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek” (Rom. 1:16).<sup>23</sup>

## THE RIGHTEOUSNESS OF GOD IN THE SACRIFICIAL ATONEMENT

The language of “righteousness” in the New Testament rests upon sacrificial realities.<sup>24</sup> Simply put, the sacrifices of the Old Testament were given to rectify

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Horace Bushnell, *The Vicarious Sacrifice, Grounded in Principles of Universal Obligation* (New York: Charles Scribner, 1866).

<sup>22</sup> Though lacking a clear sacrificial focus, rightly, J. I. Packer and Mark Dever, eds., *In My Place Condemned He Stood: Celebrating the Glory of the Atonement* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2008).

<sup>23</sup> Analogous to a bankrupt, homeless man who is promised the good news of receiving a large sum of money. If he has no way of attaining that money, it becomes meaningless. However, if he is introduced to the right people and shown the tasks by which he may receive it, then that mediatorial relationship, in itself, becomes the good news.

<sup>24</sup> Since the publication of E. P. Sanders’ *Paul and Palestinian Judaism: A Comparison of Patterns of Religion* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977), the “righteousness of God” (Gk. *dikaïosunē theou*) has been the source of much controversy. Instead of a sacrificial reality with judicial implications (referencing moral standing), many have interpreted the phrase in an abstract relational manner, referencing “covenant faithfulness” (see Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*, 523–42; cf. James D. G. Dunn, *Romans 1–8*, WBC [Dallas: Word, 1991], 41–44; N. T. Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said: Was Paul of Tarsus the Real Founder of Christianity?* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997], 118–33; Wright, *Paul: Fresh Perspectives* [London: SPCK, 2005], 25–32).

Thus it is argued that the righteousness of God is primarily “membership language” (Wright, *What Paul Really Says*, 124) relating to ecclesiology in this age, rather than forensic language relating primarily to soteriology and eschatology. However, “covenant faithfulness” is an *implication* of moral righteousness, not the *denotation* of it. Paul often refers to God’s “faithfulness” (cf. Rom. 3:3; 1 Cor. 1:9; 10:13; 2 Cor. 1:8), but he rarely associates “righteousness” and “faithfulness” (cf. Rom. 3:3–5) because the former relates to judicial categories while the latter is inherently promissory.

Moreover, Paul speaks relatively little of “covenant” (Gk. *diathēkē*), except in relation to “promise” (cf. Rom. 9:4; Gal. 3:17; Eph. 2:12), and never in association with “righteousness.” So Stephen Westerholm concludes, “‘Righteousness’ itself does not *mean* ‘covenant faithfulness.’ And—botheration!—when Paul speaks of God’s promises he never speaks of God’s righteousness, and when he speaks of God’s righteousness he never speaks of God’s promises” (*Perspectives Old and New on Paul: The “Lutheran” Paul and His Critics* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004], 292). Though, of course, “There is no reason to drive a wedge between covenantal and forensic connotations of righteousness”

sin and make worshipers righteous in the sight of God. This remediation was accomplished by *the transference of sin* from the worshiper to the animal (cf. Lev. 5:6; 10:17; 16:22), while the innocence of the animal was “credited to him” (Lev. 7:18). The animal was accepted “on his behalf” (Lev. 1:4, NIV) *if* the worshiper offered it in faith and with repentance (note the cry of the prophets concerning sacrifices without repentance; see Isa. 1:11–20; Amos 5:21–27; Mic. 6:6–8). In this way the worshiper was *united with the animal*, which functioned vicariously—bearing his sin—while he himself was accounted “before the LORD” (Lev. 10:17; 16:30; 19:22) according to the innocence of the animal. Thus the conclusion, “He will be *forgiven* for any of these things he did that made him guilty” (Lev. 6:7, NIV).<sup>25</sup>

In such a light, the sacrifice of the Messiah was understood in the New Testament as a “sin offering” (Rom. 8:3, NIV).<sup>26</sup> Those who put their faith in him as a sacrifice will be “declared righteous” (Rom. 2:13, NIV; Rom. 3:20, NIV) in God’s sight. Based upon the mechanism of the transference of sin in God’s accounting, we are “counted as righteousness” (Rom. 4:5), and on the last day we will be qualified to inherit eternal life. This divine transference is “reckoned as a gift” (Rom. 4:4, NRSV)—that is, not of our own doing but “the gift of God” (Eph. 2:8), also summarized as “the free gift of righteousness” (Rom. 5:17).<sup>27</sup> In this way

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(Michael F. Bird, *The Saving Righteousness of God: Studies on Paul, Justification and the New Perspective* [Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2007], 37).

<sup>25</sup> This is a straightforward system designed for premodern, illiterate, agrarian peasants. It is only “complex” and “perplexing” to the modern mind, which seeks a deeper meaning beyond the simple transference of sin in the accountancy of God—e.g., “Scholars have long been perplexed over . . . the sacrificial system. On the one hand there is the feeling of responsibility toward the sacrificial material in the Bible—it must be organized, systematized, and understood—yet on the other hand there is the constant uncertainty as to its true religious significance. . . . Sacrificial practice remains a foreign and obtrusive element to the present-day interpreter” (Gary A. Anderson, “Sacrifice and Sacrificial Offerings: Old Testament,” *ABD*, 5:871).

<sup>26</sup> The phrase *περὶ ἁμαρτίας* refers to a “sin offering” in forty-four of its fifty-four LXX occurrences, as it does in Heb. 10:6,8; 13:11 (see chap. 11 of N. T. Wright, *The Climax of the Covenant: Christ and the Law in Pauline Theology* [Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992], 220–25). Note also the sacrificial implications on 2 Cor. 5:21, cf. Isa. 53:10 (see Ralph P. Martin, *2 Corinthians*, WBC [Dallas: Word, 1998], 157; and David E. Garland, *2 Corinthians*, NAC [Nashville: B & H Publishers, 1999], 300–302).

<sup>27</sup> “Unsurprisingly in both the Jewish Scriptures and in second-temple literature righteousness can be bestowed upon persons as a gift [Pss. 35:27–28; 106:31; Isa. 61:10; Jer. 23:5–6; 33:16; Bar. 5:2,9; Wis. Sol. 12:16; *Ep. Arist.* 280; *Jub.* 1.16; 16.26; 1QH 4.17–23; 14.1–17]” (Bird, *Saving Righteousness of God*, 33).

we have received “the righteousness that comes from God” (Rom. 10:3, NRSV).<sup>28</sup> So Paul stated his emphatic desire to “be found in him, not having a *righteousness of my own* that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, *the righteousness from God* that depends on faith” (Phil. 3:8–9).

Such reckoning and crediting of righteousness (or “imputing,” as in the older English), derives directly from the sacrificial system, which was the commonly understood framework for the death of the Messiah. Thus the revelation of “a righteousness from God” (Rom. 1:17, NIV) was simply the revelation of the sacrificial offering of the Messiah (see figure 8.2). In light of “the judgment seat of Christ” (2 Cor. 5:10), Paul summarized, “For our sake [God] *made him to be sin* who knew no sin, so that in him we might *become the righteousness of God*” (v. 21).<sup>29</sup> As the sacrificial animal was “made to be sin,” so to speak, on behalf of the worshiper, so also the Messiah was made to be sin on behalf of sinners that we might be declared righteous before God and therefore be “guiltless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Cor. 1:8; cf. Eph. 5:27; Phil. 1:10; Col. 1:22; 1 Thess. 3:13; 5:23).

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<sup>28</sup> “The righteousness from God” is here clearly contrasted with “their own righteousness” (Rom. 10:3, KJV, NKJV) and “our unrighteousness” (Rom. 3:5), cf. “a righteousness of my own” (Phil. 3:9; cf. Deut. 9:4ff; Dan. 9:18). This righteousness is simply a *moral uprightness*, in contrast to the immoral transgression of 1) Satan, et al., 2) Adam, and 3) all his progeny (cf. Rom. 3:9ff; 5:14ff). OT (Heb. *tsedeq*) and NT (Gk. *dikaïosunē*) “righteousness” is a moral/legal correctness, in contrast to “sin[ners]” (Ps. 1:5; Dan. 9:16; Matt. 9:13, par.; John 16:8; Rom. 3:25; 5:19ff; 6:13–20; 2 Cor. 5:21; 1 Peter 2:24; 3:18; 1 John 2:1), “iniquity” (Isa. 53:11; 64:6; Lam. 4:13; Ezek. 18:20; Dan. 4:27; 9:16; 2 Tim. 2:19–22), “wickedness” (Deut. 9:4f; Job. 35:8; Ps. 45:7; Ezek. 18:20; 33:12; Heb. 1:9), “condemnation” (1 Kings 8:32; Job 34:17; Ps. 34:21; Prov. 17:15; Rom. 5:18; 2 Cor. 3:9), etc. See H. G. Stigers, “1879 ῥῆμα (*ṣādēq*),” *TWOT*, 752–55; and “δικαίος-δικαίωσις,” *BDAG*, 246–50.

<sup>29</sup> “To be rejected is N. T. Wright, ‘Righteousness of God,’ 206, who identifies ‘we’ as the covenant minister, Paul himself” (Paul Barnett, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, NICNT [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997], 315, n. 69. See N. T. Wright, “On Becoming the Righteousness of God,” *Pauline Theology*, ed. David M. Hay (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 200–208. From the early church on, this verse has been understood substitutionally; see Thomas C. Oden, *The Word of Life: Systematic Theology*, vol. 2 (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1992), 384. Paul’s statement in 2 Cor. 5:21 is somewhat formulaic and “creedal” because he is summarily justifying his plea for reconciliation in vv. 11–20 (see Barnett, 2 *Corinthians*, NICNT, 312–15).

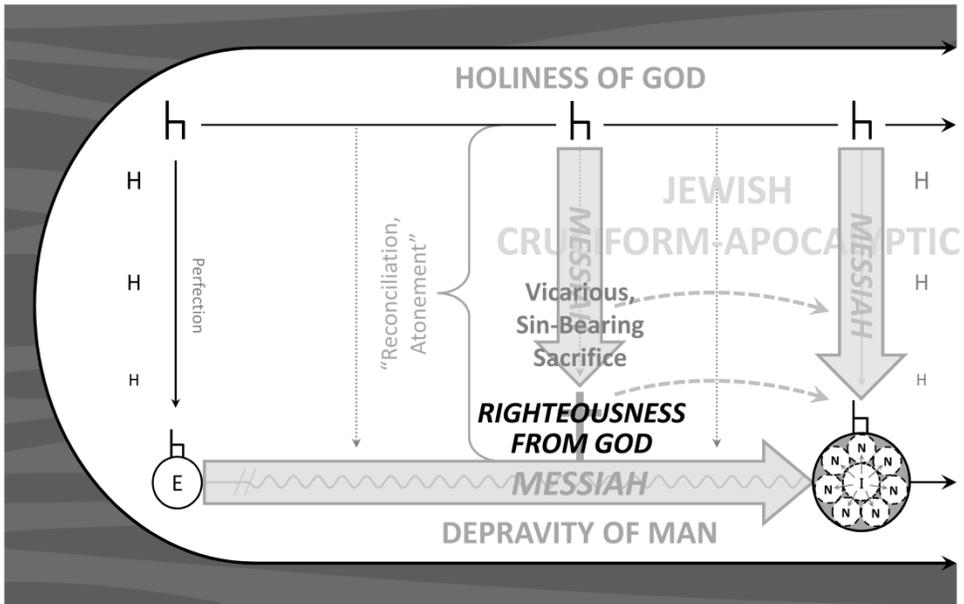


Figure 8.2 – Righteousness Reckoned by God through Faith in the Messianic Sacrifice

Similarly, Paul speaks in Romans 3:21–25 of “a righteousness from God” (v. 21f, NIV) that has been revealed “by his blood” (v. 25).<sup>30</sup> In light of the eschatological day (cf. 2:5,16; 3:5,6,19), Paul understands the messianic sacrifice to accomplish righteousness in three ways: propitiation, justification, and redemption. Note the integration of these realities within a sacrificial framework:

But now *the righteousness of God* has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it—the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction: for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are *justified* by his grace as a gift, through the *redemption* that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a *propitiation* by his blood, to be received by faith. (Rom. 3:21–25)

As we will see, these three words roughly represent royal, judicial, and economic realities within the character of God and redemptive history. However,

<sup>30</sup> Despite the rancorous objections of proponents of the so-called “new perspective on Paul” (see the discussion later in this chapter), a genitive of origin (“from God”), rather than a genitive of possession (“of God”), holds true to the context of the passage as a whole (cf. especially Rom. 4:1–5), and coincides with the parallel usage of the genitive of origin in Phil. 3:9 and Rom. 10:3.

they are all built upon vicarious sacrifice, accomplishing in each of these areas a righteous status. *By his blood* propitiation is made (Rom. 3:25; cf. 1 John 1:7; 2:2; 4:10). *By his blood* we are justified (Rom. 5:9; cf. Titus 3:7). *By his blood* redemption is achieved (Eph. 1:7; Heb. 9:14f; 1 Peter 1:18f). *By his blood* we are reconciled to God (Col. 1:20; cf. 2 Cor. 5:19; Eph. 2:13). The cumulative force of these passages cannot be overstated. Again, *all atonement realities build upon the foundation of substitutional sacrifice*.<sup>31</sup> Moreover, it is the sacrificial blood that enables and enacts all of the other aspects of the atonement, which establishes human beings as righteous in the sight of God.<sup>32</sup>

### *Propitiation*

The concept of propitiation is almost completely absent from modern culture and terminology. No one uses propitiatory language in everyday conversation; it has become Bible rhetoric with little meaning to the common believer. In fact, at the very mention of the word most people disengage, their eyes glazing over. Nevertheless, propitiation lies at the heart of biblical faith and thought.

Propitiation, more than any other atonement term, is associated with sacrifice. Though relatively rare in the New Testament (Luke 18:13; Rom. 3:25; Heb. 2:17; 9:5; 1 John 2:2; 4:10), the Greek word (*hilasmos*) and its cognates are used extensively in the Septuagint (some 150 times) to translate the Hebrew terms for atonement (*kippūr/kāphar*). Though commonly translated “make atonement,” verses like Leviticus 6:7 literally read, “The priest shall *make propitiation* for him before the LORD.”<sup>33</sup> Likewise, the sacrificial calendar culminated with the Day of Atonement (Lev. 16), or “Day of Propitiation,” wherein the wrath of God toward the sin of Israel was appeased.<sup>34</sup> This

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<sup>31</sup> As Stott says, “My contention is that ‘substitution’ is not a further ‘theory’ or ‘image’ to be set alongside the others, but rather the foundation of them all, without which each lacks cogency. If God in Christ did not die in our place, there could be neither propitiation, nor redemption, nor justification, nor reconciliation” (*Cross of Christ*, 168).

<sup>32</sup> Analogous to a car, wherein the engine (cf. sacrifice) enacts the functionality of the transmission, chassis, and suspension (cf. propitiation, justification, and redemption), unto the purpose of transportation (cf. reconciliation). This transportation, of course, finds its apocalyptic destination in the day of the Lord and the age to come.

<sup>33</sup> See Morris, *Apostolic Preaching*, 155–74.

<sup>34</sup> “Heb *yôm hakkippurîm*—lit ‘day of the covering over,’ i.e., ‘day of appeasement’ . . . Yom Kippur was the day above all others on which Israel, as a nation, sought the propitiation of the God against

relationship is seen in New Testament, where *hilasmos* is alternatively translated “atoning sacrifice” (1 John 2:2; 4:10, NRSV, NIV) and “sacrifice of atonement” (Rom. 3:25, NRSV, NIV).

The term “propitiation,” inside and outside the Scriptures, simply means “an appeasement of anger.”<sup>35</sup> Inherent to the term are royal connotations, for God is angry *in his gubernatorial role* (cf. Ps. 21:9; 110:5; Matt. 22:7; Rev. 6:16).<sup>36</sup> Because he is so disrespected among the nations (cf. Ps. 2:1; 46:6; Rev. 11:18) and because his righteous ways are disregarded (cf. Ezek. 22:26; 2 Peter 2:2), the nations are “storing up wrath against [themselves] for the day of God’s wrath” (Rom. 2:5, NIV).

The language of appeasement assumes the reality of divine wrath, an idea inherently offensive to many.<sup>37</sup> However, God is not like fallen angry humans,<sup>38</sup> nor like the pagan gods they worship.<sup>39</sup> He is not a “pitiless ogre” who lashes out

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whom they had sinned, together with the consequent blessing of His forgiveness and of reconciliation to Him” (W. Möller and J. B. Payne, “Atonement, Day of,” *ISBE*, 1:360).

<sup>35</sup> See “ἱλασμός,” BDAG, 474; and “ἱλάσμος,” LSJ, 828.

<sup>36</sup> Propitiation is commonly associated with temple and cultic sacrifice, rather than regal office. However, “Though ἱλάσκεσθαι is for the most part a cultic action, it can sometimes be applied to men and . . . can denote the placating of the emperor or his anger” (F. Büchsel, “ἱλάσκομαι,” *TDNT*, 3:314). The term is used in both contexts because of the assumption that *the gods rule over creation from temples*. So the Jerusalem temple was understood as God’s royal “footstool” (cf. 1 Chron. 28:2; Ps. 99:5; 132:7; Lam. 2:1), and the sacrifices offered there were made to appease the Great King (Ps. 47:2; 95:3; Mal. 1:14).

<sup>37</sup> C. H. Dodd is well known for his distain toward the concept of propitiation, preferring the more impersonal term “expiation.” Many modern exegetes have carried on this attitude, caricaturing divine wrath and propitiation as “divine child abuse” in sympathy to feminists (Weaver, *Nonviolent Atonement*, 155–305, passim), laden with images of “sacred violence” (Stephen Finlan, *Problems with Atonement: The Origins of, and Controversy about, the Atonement Doctrine* [Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2005], 18), which should be taken metaphorically since “wrath is not a divine property or essential attribute of God” (Green and Baker, *Recovering the Scandal*, 54). As Morris said, “Such citations could be multiplied almost indefinitely, for there are many modern writers to whom the concept of the wrath of God is anathema” (*Apostolic Preaching*, 208).

<sup>38</sup> See Matt. 5:21–26; Gal. 5:20; Eph. 4:31; Col. 3:8.

<sup>39</sup> As Morris notes,

Among the heathen, propitiation was thought of as an activity whereby the worshiper was able himself to provide that which would induce a change of mind in the deity. In plain language he bribed his god to be favourable to him. When the term was taken over into the Bible these unworthy and crude ideas were abandoned, and only the central truth expressed by the term was retained, namely that propitiation signifies the averting of wrath by the offering of a gift. But in both Testaments the thought is plain that the gift

arbitrarily.<sup>40</sup> Rather, he is *holy* in his anger, which is driven by *love* for that which he created and for that over which he rules.<sup>41</sup>

If my son beats his siblings, I should rightly get angry, because I love his siblings and desire their well-being. This idea is commonly termed “righteous anger” — that is, “a burning zeal for the right coupled with a perfect hatred for everything that is evil.”<sup>42</sup> So “the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men” (Rom. 1:18), for “the LORD is a *jealous* and *avenging* God; the LORD is *avenging* and *wrathful*; the LORD takes *vengeance* on his adversaries and keeps *wrath* for his enemies” (Nah. 1:2; cf. Deut. 4:24; 6:15).

For this reason the wrath of God “pervades the entire corpus” of the Old Testament.<sup>43</sup> Its references are too numerous to cite.<sup>44</sup> God hates sin, and he is in

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which secures the propitiation is from God Himself. He provides the way whereby men may come to Him. (*Apostolic Preaching*, 210–11)

However, rather than the idea of propitiation being “take over into the Bible,” it seems that the pagan practices were fallen perversions of the biblical standard, which predated the Mosaic Law (cf. Gen. 4:4f; 8:20f).

<sup>40</sup> See Stott, *Cross of Christ*, 150.

<sup>41</sup> “It is the combination of God’s deep love for the sinner with His uncompromising reaction against sin which brings about what the Bible calls propitiation” (Morris, *Apostolic Preaching*, 210).

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 209. Morris goes on to say,

It may be that wrath is not a perfect word to describe such an attitude, but no better has been suggested, and we must refuse to accept alternatives which do not give expression to the truth in question. Perhaps there is a certain anthropomorphism involved in the use of the term wrath, but it must not be forgotten that, “A false anthropomorphism is to be laid to the charge not of those who maintain that there is in the Biblical sense of the word, such a thing as the wrath of God. It is rather to be laid to the charge of those who encourage the idea that God is like an easy, good-natured, benevolent man.” (*Ibid.*, quoting Leighton Pullan, *The Atonement* [London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1907], 194)

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 174.

<sup>44</sup> Here are some examples: “fury” (Ex. 15:7; Lev. 26:28; Deut. 29:28; Ps. 2:5; 7:6; Isa. 10:5,25; 26:20; 30:27; 66:15; Jer. 21:5; Lam. 2:4; Ezek. 5:13,15; 6:12; 19:12; 21:17; 23:25; 24:13; Hab. 3:12); “wrath” (Ex. 32:11; Lev. 10:6; Num. 16:46; Deut. 9:7f,22; 29:23,28; 1 Sam. 28:18; 2 Kings 22:13,17; 23:26; 2 Chron. 12:7,12; 19:2,10; 24:18; 28:11,13; 29:8; 32:26; 34:21,25; 36:16; Ezra 7:23; 8:22; 10:14; Neh. 13:18; Job 20:28; Ps. 6:1; 21:9; 38:1; 56:7; 59:13; 78:21,59; 89:46; 110:5; Isa. 9:19; 10:6; 13:9,13; 51:17,20,22; Jer. 4:4; 6:11; 7:20,29; 10:10; 21:12; 23:19; 25:15; 30:23; 36:7; 42:18; 50:13,25; Lam. 2:2; 4:11; Ezek. 7:19; 9:8; 13:13; 20:33; 22:22,31; 25:14; 36:6; 38:18; Dan. 9:16; Hos. 11:9; Nah. 1:2; Hab. 3:2,8; Zeph. 1:18; Zech. 8:2,14); “anger/angry” (Gen. 18:30,32; Ex. 4:14; 34:6; Num. 11:1,10,33; 12:9; 14:18; 22:22; 25:3f; 32:10,13f; Deut. 1:37; 3:26; 4:21,25; 6:15; 7:4; 9:8,18ff; 11:17; 13:17; 29:20,23f,27f; 31:17,29; 32:16,21; Josh. 7:1,26; 22:18; 23:16; Judg. 2:12,14,20; 3:8; 6:39; 10:7; 14:19; 2 Sam. 6:7; 24:1; 1 Kings 11:9; 14:9,15; 15:30; 16:7,13,26,33; 22:53; 2 Kings 13:3; 17:11,17f; 21:6; 22:17; 23:19,26; 24:20; 1 Chron. 13:10; 2 Chron. 25:15; 28:9,25; 29:10;

“total opposition to every form of sin.”<sup>45</sup> Likewise, in the New Testament the anger and wrath of God lie as a backdrop to the drama of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus (cf. Matt. 3:7; 18:34; 22:7; Luke 14:21; John 3:36). Jesus understood the “cup” he was drinking (Matt. 26:39 and parallels)—that is, “the cup of [God’s] wrath” (Isa. 51:17; cf. Ps. 75:8; Jer. 25:15; 49:12; Rev. 14:10; 16:19).<sup>46</sup> Even now God is clearly angry with the sins of humanity (cf. Rom. 2:5; 3:5; 5:9; 12:19; 13:4f; Eph. 5:6; Col. 3:6; 1 Thess. 2:16; Heb. 10:27; Rev. 6:16f; 19:15). How then is his wrath appeased, his anger assuaged, and his fury placated? How does God become “propitious” toward us when we have so clearly sinned?

This cry for propitiation is universal. The tax collector literally prayed, “O God, *be propitiated* for me, the sinner” (Luke 18:13).<sup>47</sup> Deep within every human being is a longing that our Creator, in whose image we are made, would be *pleased* with us. He is pleased, however, with only one man—Jesus of Nazareth (cf. Matt. 3:17; 17:5)—and God has shown this to be so by raising him, and only him, from the dead (Acts 17:31). The fact that all human beings remain in the ground proves the divine disapproval of their lives. This is a depressing fact only for those who refuse to acknowledge their condition, turn, and bind themselves by faith to Christ crucified. For God has answered our cry for divine approval by putting forward his Son “as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith” (Rom. 3:25).

The propitiatory sacrifice of the Messiah to assuage the wrath of God was ultimately understood in light of the eschatological “day of wrath” (Zeph. 1:15;

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30:8; 33:6; 34:25; Neh. 9:17; Job 4:9; 9:13; 20:23; 21:17; 42:7; Ps. 6:1; 7:6; 27:9; 38:1; 74:1; 77:9; 78:21,31; 79:5; 80:4; 86:15; 103:8; 106:29,40; 145:8; Prov. 22:14; 24:18; Isa. 5:25; 9:17; 12:1; 13:9,13; 30:27,30; 54:8; 64:9; 66:15; Jer. 3:12; 4:8,26; 7:18,20; 8:19; 10:24; 11:17; 12:13; 18:23; 23:20; 25:6f,37; 30:24; 32:29f; 36:7; 42:18; 44:3,8; 49:37; 51:45; 52:3; Lam. 1:12; 2:1,22; 3:66; 4:11; Ezek. 5:13,15; 13:13; 25:14; 35:11; 38:18; Dan. 9:16; Hos. 11:9; Joel 2:13; Jonah 3:9; 4:2; Mic. 7:18; Nah. 1:3; Hab. 3:8; Zeph. 2:2f; 3:8; Zech. 1:2,12; 7:12; 10:3; Mal. 1:4).

<sup>45</sup> Morris, *Cross in the New Testament*, 192; italics added. Furthermore, contrary to the impersonal idea of wrath, “It is impossible to think that God is anything other than vigorously active in such a process as that described in Romans 2:5ff. . . . The words describe a positive revulsion. Moreover they speak of God’s activity in the day of judgment. That is to say, His personal, vigorous opposition is not exhausted in His present judgments on our sins. It continues to the very end of time and beyond” (Ibid., 188–89).

<sup>46</sup> “The agony in the garden opens a window on to the greater agony of the cross. If to bear man’s sin and God’s wrath was so terrible in anticipation, what must the reality have been like?” (Stott, *Cross of Christ*, 77).

<sup>47</sup> Morris, *Apostolic Preaching*, 144; italics added.

Rom. 2:5; cf. Ps. 110:5; Rev. 6:17). Though his anger has been appeased *presently* toward those in Christ—that is, “We have peace with God” (Rom. 5:1; cf. Eph. 2:13; Col. 1:20)—this present experience of peace with God is in *anticipation* of being saved “from the wrath to come” (1 Thess. 1:10; cf. Rom. 5:9). So John says that God “loved us and sent his Son to be *the propitiation for our sins*” (1 John 4:10); and as a result we have “confidence *for the day of judgment*” (v. 17). Thus we see the propitiatory relationship between the cross and the day of the Lord (see figure 8.3).

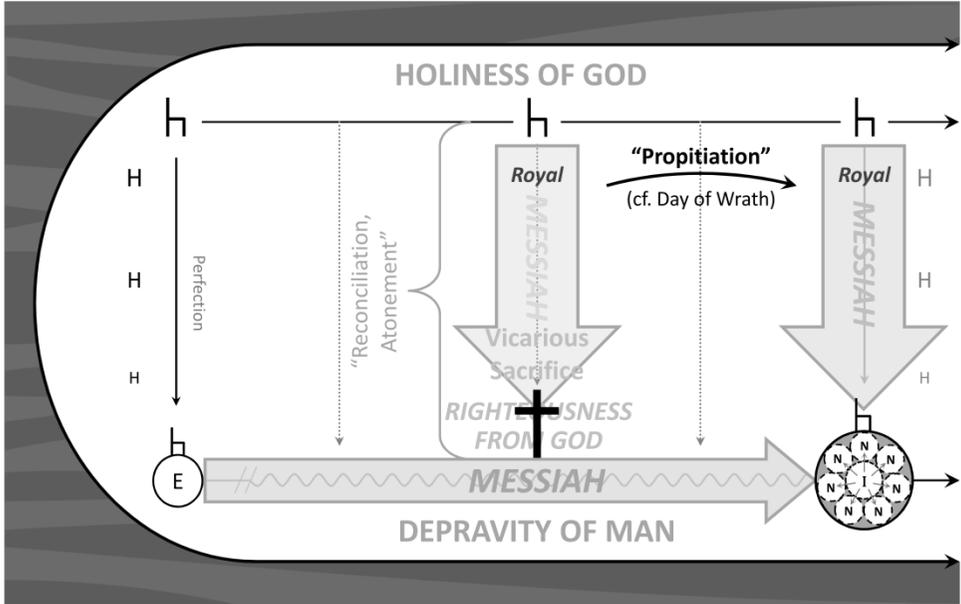


Figure 8.3 – The Propitiatory Nature of the Messianic Sacrifice

### Justification

Unlike “propitiation,” the term “justification” is quite common in modern English. We say things like “He was justified in what he did” and “How do you justify that?” Though ideas of necessity, reasonableness, and generic ethicality are assumed in the Scriptures, the biblical terms (Heb. *tsādēq* and Gk. *dikaios*, and their cognates) carry a fundamental *legal sense*.<sup>48</sup> Moreover, these words produce two different English word groups—“justified” and “righteous”—to which we

<sup>48</sup> See H. G. Stigers, “1879 פְּרָטָה (*ṣādēq*),” *TWOT*, 752–55; G. Schrenk, “δικαίος,” *TDNT*, 2:182–225; and “δικαίος-δικαίωσις,” *BDAG*, 246–50.

often assign different meanings.<sup>49</sup> This delineation is foreign to both Greek and Hebrew.<sup>50</sup> If you are “righteous,” then you are legally just; and if you are “justified,” then you are legally in-the-right (i.e., “innocent”), rather than legally in-the-wrong (i.e., “guilty”).<sup>51</sup>

The concepts of justice and righteousness are therefore bound up inextricably with legal and judicial concepts such as law, ordinances, charges, judgment, guilt, etc. Justice is the effect of judgment based upon law, which results in righteousness. So, throughout the Scriptures, righteousness and judgment are used in tandem, too many times to quote.<sup>52</sup> God is a “righteous

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<sup>49</sup> The same word group is translated “So one act of *righteousness* (Gk. *dikaiōma*) leads to *justification* (Gk. *dikaiōsis*) and life for all men” (Rom. 5:18; cf. Rom. 4:5), or “It is not the hearers of the law who are *righteous* (Gk. *dikaioi*) before God, but the doers of the law who will be *justified* (Gk. *dikaioō*)” (Rom. 2:13; cf. Gal. 3:11). In other words, “the righteousness of God” inherently speaks of “the justification of God”; and, conversely, to be “justified” can be translated “declared righteous” (Rom. 2:13; 3:20, NIV).

<sup>50</sup> “The position is complicated by the fact that, where in English we have two word-groups to express the concepts of ‘justice’ and ‘righteousness’ (which seem to us quite different ideas), in Hebrew and in Greek and for that matter in a number of other languages the one word does duty for both concepts” (Morris, *Atonement*, 177).

<sup>51</sup> Generally “justify” is used because we do not have an English verb for “make/declare right.” Some have suggested the Old English “to rightwise” (Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*, 439, 481, 526), or the British “to set to rights” (N. T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church* [New York: HarperCollins, 2008], 242; Wright, *Justification: God’s Plan & Paul’s Vision* [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2009], 88), but these have not caught on widely.

<sup>52</sup> The following examples will serve to illustrate the point: God sits on his throne, executing “righteous judgment” (Ps. 9:4; cf. Isa. 58:2), for “the heavens declare His *righteousness*, for God Himself is *judge*” (Ps. 50:6, NASB). “His work is perfect, for all His ways are *just*; a God of faithfulness and without injustice, *righteous* and upright is He” (Deut. 32:4, NASB). “The LORD of hosts will be exalted in *judgment*, and the holy God will show Himself holy in *righteousness*” (Isa. 5:16, NASB). For he says, “My *righteousness* draws near speedily, my salvation is on the way, and my arm will bring *justice* to the nations” (Isa. 51:5, NIV). For the Lord will “make *justice* the line, and *righteousness* the plumb line” (Isa. 28:17), because “when your *judgments* are in the earth, the inhabitants of the world learn *righteousness*” (Isa. 26:9).

Moreover, the foundation of God’s throne is “*righteousness* and *justice*” (Ps. 89:14; 97:2), because the Lord “loves *righteousness* and *justice*” (Ps. 33:5) and “works *righteousness* and *justice*” (Ps. 103:6; cf. Ps. 99:4). The Lord “practices steadfast love, *justice*, and *righteousness* in the earth” (Jer. 9:24). Moreover, he calls people to “*justice* and *righteousness*” (1 Kings 10:9; 2 Chron. 9:8; Eccl. 5:8; cf. Gen. 18:19; Ps. 106:3; 119:121; Prov. 2:9; 8:20; 21:3; Isa. 56:1; Jer. 4:2; 22:3; Ezek. 18:5; 45:9; Amos 5:24), which will culminate in the messianic rule when “a king will reign in *righteousness*, and princes will rule in *justice*” (Isa. 32:1). This messianic king will be “one who *judges* and seeks *justice* and is swift to do *righteousness*” (Isa. 16:5). He will be given the throne of his father David, “to establish it and to uphold it with *justice* and with *righteousness* from this time forth and forevermore” (Isa. 9:7), and “he will fill Zion with *justice* and *righteousness*” (Isa. 33:5). He is the “*righteous* Branch,” and he will “execute *judgment* and *righteousness* in the earth” (Jer. 23:5; 33:15, NKJV). For “with *righteousness* he shall *judge*

Judge” (Ps. 7:11; 2 Tim. 4:8), and he will indeed “judge the world with righteousness” (Ps. 98:9; cf. Ps. 9:8; 67:4; 72:2; 96:13). When applied to the greater apocalyptic narrative of the Scriptures, we see that God has “fixed a day on which he will *judge* the world in *righteousness* by a man whom he has appointed” (Acts 17:31)—“the day of wrath when God’s *righteous judgment* will be revealed” (Rom. 2:5; cf. 2 Thess. 1:5).<sup>53</sup> Thus we know that the earth is headed “for the day of *judgment*,” and “we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, the home of *righteousness*” (2 Peter 3:7,13, NIV).

In this way, the closest biblical synonym (or at least parallel) of “righteousness” is “justice.”<sup>54</sup> The legal and judgmental *sense* of biblical righteousness cannot be ignored or brushed aside.<sup>55</sup> So pervasive is the legal reality that God can rightly be spoken of as “a God of law,”<sup>56</sup> for “God works by the way of law.”<sup>57</sup> God administrates creation by “the fixed laws of heaven and

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the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth” (Isa. 11:4). Therefore the psalmist prays, “Give the king your *justice*, O God, and your *righteousness* to the royal son!” (Ps. 72:1).

<sup>53</sup> Note the Greek term *dikaiokrisia*, “righteous judgment” (Rom. 2:5), which literally combines the two concepts (see G. Schrenk, “δικαιοκρισία,” *TDNT*, 2:224–25) and is echoed in the intertestamental literature (cf. 2 Maccabees 12:41; *Sibylline Oracles* 3.704; *Testament of Levi* 3:2; 15:2).

<sup>54</sup> The synonym of righteousness is not “faithfulness,” per se, as is evident by the relative lack of association in the LXX (cf. Deut. 32:4; 1 Sam. 26:23; Ps. 110:7; Prov. 12:17; Isa. 1:21,26; Jer. 49:5; Hab. 2:4). The NT also reflects this lack of association (a point well made by Mark A. Seifrid, *Christ, Our Righteousness: Paul’s Theology of Justification* [NSBT 9; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2000], 38–45); contrary to Richard B. Hays, “Justification,” *ABD*, 3:1129–33.

<sup>55</sup> One of the problems of interpreting “justification” is the sheer volume of passages that must be addressed, which reflects the centrality of the judicial aspects of the day of the Lord (over the royal and economic aspects). So Morris,

We have noted that propitiation, although an important conception, is used with reference to the atonement only four times in all in the New Testament. Similarly reconciliation, in which some modern scholars are inclined to see the essential New Testament teaching with regard to the atonement, occurs in only five passages, all of them Pauline. By contrast, he who would expound justification is confronted with eighty-one occurrences of the adjective *δικαιος*, ninety-two of the noun *δικαιοσύνη*, two of the noun *δικαίωσις*, thirty-nine of the verb *δικαιόω*, ten of the noun *δικαίωμα*, and five of the adverb *δικαίως*. On examination much of this may prove to have little relevance to the atonement, but it remains that the bare enumeration of the number of passages to be considered indicates that we are here dealing with a conception of great importance for the evaluation of the atonement. (*Apostolic Preaching*, 251)

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 253, 293.

<sup>57</sup> Morris, *Atonement*, 180.

earth” (Jer. 33:25, NIV; cf. Jer. 31:35; Ps. 74:16), which are reflected in the laws given at Sinai (cf. Deut. 6; Ps. 78:5–8; 1 Tim. 1:8–11).

Because divine law dictates redemptive history, the day of judgment was expected to be an orderly event (though, of course, still apocalyptic). God would judge the nations according to his righteous laws (cf. Isa. 2:2–4; 42:4; 51:4; Joel 3:2) and make atonement for the sins of his people (cf. Deut. 32:43; Ps. 79:9; Dan. 9:24). This was reflected in every New Year celebration (Rosh Hashanah) leading up to the Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur).<sup>58</sup> God will charge humanity with the guilt of their crimes and they will receive their due punishment, which, as we saw in chapter 3, involves eternal conscious torment (Gehenna). As we also saw earlier in this chapter, God established sacrifice as the prescribed means to forgive and “pardon” (Heb. *sālah/nāsā*) transgression and iniquity (cf. Ex. 23:21; 34:9; Num. 14:19; Deut. 29:20; Job 7:21; Ps. 25:11; Isa. 40:2; 55:7; Mic. 7:18). In this way we are absolved of “guilt” (Heb. *’āšam*), another pervasive legal concept in the Scriptures.<sup>59</sup>

Those who are forgiven are thus “acquitted” (cf. Ex. 23:7; Deut. 25:1; Ps. 69:27; Isa. 5:23; Mic. 6:11), the same word in both Greek and Hebrew for “justify/declare righteous” — now applied to the sinner. To “justify” the guilty is to “acquit” them, which means they are “declared righteous.” First-century believers would have understood “justification” along such simple lines: *a legal term indicating the verdict of acquittal read by a judge, announcing the accused as “not guilty.”* These are the judicial categories into which the apostles placed the sacrificial death of the Messiah in relation to the apocalyptic day of judgment (see figure 8.4).<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> See chapter 7.

<sup>59</sup> See G. H. Livingston, “180 אָשָׁם (*āšam*),” *TWOT*, 78–80; and J. C. Moyer, “Guilt,” *ISBE*, 2:580–81.

<sup>60</sup> So Bird concludes, contrary to the tendencies of those holding to the so-called “new perspective on Paul,” “It is wrong to think that the verdict rendered in justification can be reduced to sociological descriptions of group-identity and self-definition. That would evacuate the language of righteousness of its apocalyptic and juridical sense” (*Saving Righteousness of God*, 33).

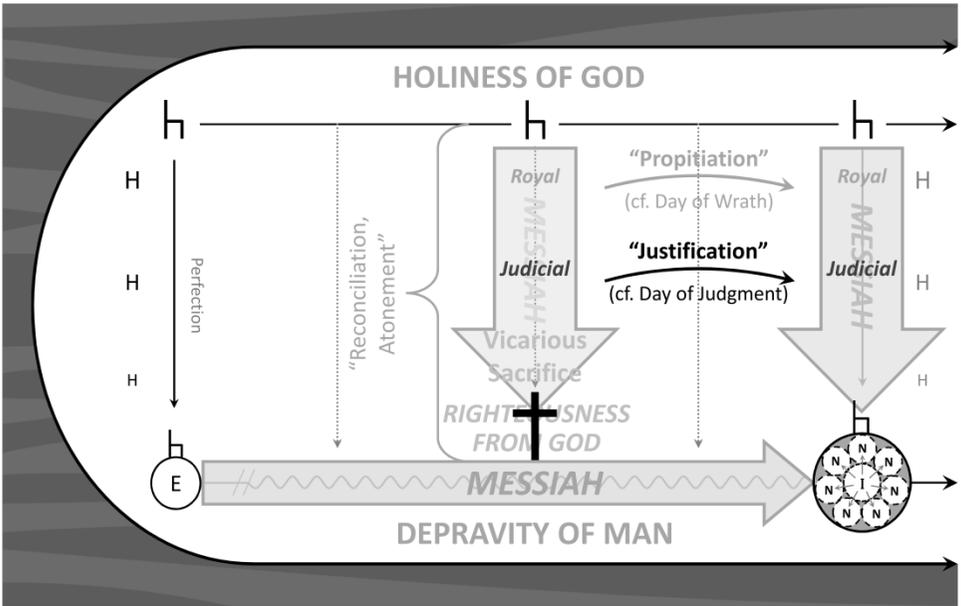


Figure 8.4 – The Justificative Nature of the Messianic Sacrifice

When we understand justification in the sense of legal acquittal, as Paul clearly does in 1 Corinthians 4:4,<sup>61</sup> many New Testament passages become much more straightforward (as seen by the addition of the bracketed language of acquittal in the following Scripture quotations). By faith in Jesus' death, "we seek to be *justified* [acquitted] in Christ" (Gal. 2:17, NIV). Since "we have now been *justified* [acquitted] by his blood, much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath of God" (Rom. 5:9). It is God who "*justifies* [acquits] the ungodly" (Rom. 4:5), "so that being *justified* [acquitted] by his grace we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life" (Titus 3:7). "Therefore, since we have been *justified* [acquitted] by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ" (Rom. 5:1). In light of the day of judgment, justification is a simple legal term, which is synonymous with acquittal when applied to the guilty. So Paul

<sup>61</sup> So Paul places his own life in the divine courtroom in anticipation of the day of judgment: "But with me it is a very small thing that I should be judged by you or by any *human court* [Gk. *hupo anthrōpinēs hēmeras*, lit., "by any human *day*"]. In fact, I do not even judge myself. For I am not aware of anything against myself, but I am not thereby *acquitted* [Gk. *dikaioō*; "justified," KJV, NKJV]. It is the Lord who judges me. Therefore do not *pronounce judgment before the time*, before the Lord comes, who will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and will disclose the purposes of the heart. Then each one will receive his commendation from God" (1 Cor. 4:3–5).

explains, in light of the various eschatological themes of Romans 8 (cf. vv. 11,18,23,29):

If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not withhold his own Son, but *gave him up for all of us*, will he not with him also give us everything else? Who will *bring any charge* against God's elect? It is God who *justifies* [acquits]. Who is to *condemn*? It is Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed *intercedes for us*. (Rom. 8:31–34, NRSV)

Here the Messiah is understood as a legal advocate in a trial interceding for a defendant who is accused and condemned—that is, declared guilty. Because of Christ's death, we have been acquitted of the charges against us, thus averting the judgment and punishment due us on the last day.

This reality is universal for Jew and Gentile alike. As a result of Adam's "transgression" (i.e., breaking of a law), "death reigned" (Rom. 5:14). "For the judgment following one *trespass* brought *condemnation*, but the free gift following many trespasses brought *justification* [acquittal]" (Rom. 5:16). Note Paul's straightforward logic:

Therefore, as one *trespass* led to *condemnation* for all men, so one act of *righteousness* leads to *justification* [acquittal] and life for all men. For as by the one man's *disobedience* the many were *made sinners*, so by the one man's *obedience* the many will be *made righteous*. Now the *law* came in to increase the *trespass*, but where *sin* increased, *grace* abounded all the more, so that, as *sin* reigned in death, *grace* also might reign through *righteousness* leading to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord. (Rom. 5:18–21)

This is the legal terminology into which the death of the Messiah is placed. By the sinful act of one man all are declared sinners. By the righteous act of one man all are declared righteous and acquitted of their sins, that on the day of Christ they might inherit the kingdom and eternal life.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> In this passage (Rom. 5:12–21) we see the clearest example of the forensic and imputed nature of justification. "The basis of our justification before God is a divine righteousness that comes to us in a way analogous to the way Adam's sin came to us. As we were in him and share in his sin, so we are in Christ and share in his righteousness. In this historic way of understanding the text, the parallel that Paul wants us to see and rejoice in is that just as Adam's sin is imputed to us because we were in him, so Christ's righteousness is imputed to us because we are in him" (John Piper, *Counted Righteous*

So we find ourselves at the heart of Paul's argument: *On what basis, in the sight of God, are we acquitted*—by our righteous acts or by the Messiah's righteous act in the cross? This is the context for the "sharp disagreement" (Acts 15:39) between Paul and his adversaries concerning the "works of the law" (Rom. 3:20,28; Gal. 2:16; 3:2,5,10).<sup>63</sup> These works of the law refer simply to "works of righteousness" (Titus 3:5, NRSV)—that is, generic obedience to the commands of the Mosaic Law, especially the Decalogue (cf. Rom. 2:17–23; 4:2–4; 7:7–12; 9:11; Gal. 3:10; 2 Tim. 1:9; Titus 3:5; James 2:14–26; etc.).<sup>64</sup>

On what basis will we be acquitted and forgiven of the charges against us on the day of judgment—upon our obedience to the divine statutes or upon faith in the obedience of the Messiah?<sup>65</sup> The apostle's assertion is that "it is no longer *on*

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*in Christ: Should We Abandon the Imputation of Christ's Righteousness?* [Wheaton: Crossway, 2002], 93–94).

<sup>63</sup> Those who hold to the so-called "new perspective on Paul" (see the discussion later in this chapter) claim "the works of the law" are simply the "badges of Jewish membership" (N. T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* [Minneapolis: Fortress; London: SPCK, 1992], 237; cf. 207, 335, 368; Wright, *Justification*, 76, 134, 138, 246)—i.e., observance of circumcision, Sabbath, and kosher dietary laws (cf. James D. G. Dunn, *The New Perspective on Paul*, rev. ed. [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008], 108–20; Dunn, *Romans 1–8*, lxxi–lxxvii). This has been vigorously refuted; see C. E. B. Cranfield, "The Works of the Law in the Epistle to the Romans," *JSNT* 43 (1991): 89–101; and Moisés Silva, "Faith versus Works of Law in Galatians," in *Justification and Variegated Nomism, Volume 2: The Paradoxes of Paul*, eds. D. A. Carson, Peter T. O'Brien, and Mark A. Seifrid (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004), 217–48. See a summary of the issues involved in Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 206–17.

<sup>64</sup> Concerning James 2:14–26 in particular, Stephen Westerholm states incisively,

Here we have, in the words of Friedrich Avemarie, "a very old perspective on Paul." It suggests that by the first-century critics, as by Augustine, Luther, and many others, Paul was deemed to have dismissed any role for (good) works in answering the perennial religious question of how a human being can be found acceptable by God. It makes very clear that an insistence that salvation is by faith and grace, not (good) works, was anything but self-evident and uncontroversial in Paul's day. And it underlines the novelty of the new perspective that would limit his concerns to issues deemed more pressing by the modern mind: ethnocentrism, racism, and nationalistic pride. (*Perspectives Old and New*, 407)

<sup>65</sup> Of course the so-called "ethnic boundary markers" were included in the consideration of moral righteousness and eschatological judgment. So Seifrid:

We may think of "works of the law" in general terms as including adherence to the prohibitions against murder, adultery, theft, idolatry and the like, along with circumcision, Sabbath-keeping and food laws (cf. Rom. 2:17–24).

Nevertheless, Paul obviously regards the "works of the law" as bearing an ethnic and national significance. Only a Jew may boast in "the works of the law" or be identified as one who is "of the works of the law." It was by "works" that Israel vainly sought to establish its righteousness before God (Rom. 9:30–10:3). Clearly, then, Paul rejects these

*the basis of works*; otherwise grace would no longer be grace” (Rom. 11:6), for “a person is *not justified* [acquitted] by works of the law but *through faith* in Jesus Christ” (Gal. 2:16). So Paul reasons: “For all who *rely on works of the law* are under a curse; for it is written, ‘Cursed be everyone who does not abide by all things written in the Book of the Law, and do them.’ Now it is evident that *no one is justified* [acquitted] before God *by the law*, for ‘The righteous shall live by faith’” (Gal. 3:10–11).

Since the whole world will be “held accountable to God” (Rom. 3:19), Paul says, “By works of the law no human being will be *justified* [acquitted] in his sight” (v. 20), a reference not only to God’s present eye upon humanity but also to his “appearing” (Ps. 102:16; Mal. 3:2; Titus 2:13) and our “seeing” God (Ps. 97:6; Isa. 52:8; 1 John 3:2). Justification and acquittal *cannot* happen on the basis of our works of righteousness, “for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Rom. 3:23). According to these sins alone, we will give account. (What murderer stands before a judge and argues his charity?)<sup>66</sup> Therefore, God has provided a means of justification/acquittal by the vicarious sacrificial death of the Messiah, which results in our being “justified [acquitted] by his grace as a gift” (Rom. 3:24).<sup>67</sup> This is the common-sense approach and interpretation of, arguably, the most debated passage in church history:

For by works of the law no human being will be *justified* [acquitted] in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin.

But now the *righteousness* of God has been manifested *apart from the law*, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it [by oracle and sacrificial system]—the righteousness of God *through faith* in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction: for all have *sinned* and fall short of the glory of God, and are *justified* [acquitted] by his grace as a gift, through the

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works as markers of “religio-national” identity, i.e. as signs of the people who are righteous, and not merely as signs of national privilege. (*Christ, Our Righteousness*, 100–101)

<sup>66</sup> The concept of “more good than bad” means nothing on the day of judgment. Our hypothetical 5 percent of bad (i.e., misdeeds in this age) will comprise 100 percent of the trial at the judgment seat of Christ. As a man who loved and served the poor his whole life merits nothing when he stands before the judge for a single murder, so also when humanity stands before its Maker on the last day. In this way “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Rom. 3:23).

<sup>67</sup> So Emil Brunner rightly highlights the two dominant themes of atonement, the legal one with Christ’s death as penalty and the cultic one with Christ as sacrifice (*The Mediator: A Study of the Central Doctrine of the Christian Faith*, trans. O. Wyon [London: Lutterworth Press, 1934], 435–535).

redemption that is in Christ Jesus, 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 3:20–25)<sup>68</sup>

This approach to Romans 3 is confirmed in Romans 4, which is Paul's point when he introduces the passage: "What then shall we say that Abraham, our forefather, discovered *in this matter*?" (Rom. 4:1, NIV). As Abraham "believed God" and it was "reckoned to him as righteousness" (v. 3, NRSV), so also "to one who *without works* trusts him who *justifies* [acquits] the ungodly, such faith is *reckoned as righteousness*" (v. 5, NRSV). This "reckoning" (Gk. *logizomai*), or "counting" (ESV, KJV), or "crediting" (NASB, NIV), is applied in anticipation of the day of judgment, when we will be considered righteous in the eyes of the Judge, and declared as such before his court.<sup>69</sup> Hence we will be acquitted of our sins and "declared righteous in his sight" (Rom. 3:20, NIV).

Elsewhere Paul summarizes our present justification in anticipation of the day of the Lord and eternal life:

For we ourselves were once foolish, disobedient, led astray, slaves to various passions and pleasures, passing our days in malice and envy, hated by others and hating one another. But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, he *saved us* [from eschatological judgment, cf. 1:2; 2:11–13], not because of *works done by us* in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that *being justified* [acquitted] by his grace we might become heirs according to the hope of *eternal life*. (Titus 3:3–7)

Lack of clarity and simplicity concerning the idea of justification is largely due to a failure in understanding the forensic nature of the day of the Lord. We are not justified from a theological concept of human depravity into a nebulous

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<sup>68</sup> Regarding this passage, I am in basic agreement with Moo, *Romans*, NICNT, 218–43; and Thomas R. Schreiner, *Romans*, BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 178–99; though both seem to lack an adequate emphasis on the day of the Lord and the apocalyptic framework, which gives ultimate context to the passage.

<sup>69</sup> Note the definition of *logizomai*: "1. to determine by mathematical process . . . 2. to give careful thought to a matter . . . 3. to hold a view about something" (BDAG, 597).

theological system of atonement. Rather, we are justified from real sins that have done real damage to a real creation before a real Judge in anticipation of a real day of judgment. That day will not be “like” a law court; it will be a *real courtroom*, with real charges brought against real transgressions, which have really angered a real King and Judge. In this real future context, this will be clear to everyone: “No one living is righteous before you” (Ps. 143:2). The only means of justification and acquittal before God will be faith in the messianic sacrifice, that he might bear our sins and punishment in our stead.<sup>70</sup> Thus will the oracle be ultimately fulfilled:

But he was pierced *for our transgressions*,  
he was crushed *for our iniquities*;  
the *punishment* that brought us peace was *upon him*, . . .  
the LORD has laid *on him*  
the *iniquity* of us all. . .  
After the suffering of his soul,  
he will see the light of life and be satisfied;  
by his knowledge my righteous servant will *justify many*,  
and he will *bear their iniquities*. (Isa. 53:5,6,11, NIV)

### *Redemption*

Like justification, “redemption” is an English word that is still in common usage. In the financial realm, we seek the redemption of bonds, vouchers, or coupons. We might ask, “Can we redeem this situation?” We speak of honor

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<sup>70</sup> The popular concept of *imparted* righteousness, common in much of Protestantism, has little to do with the biblical concept of *imputed* righteousness. God imputes (Gk. *logizomai*) righteousness by declaring, accounting, and reckoning the guilty innocent. He does not, as N. T. Wright is known for saying, transfer righteousness as a moral quality like “a substance or a gas which can be passed across the courtroom” (*What Saint Paul Really Said*, 98). So Stott:

On the one hand, God declined to “impute” our sins to us, or “count” them against us (2 Cor. 5:19), with the implication that he imputed them to Christ instead. On the other, God has imputed Christ’s righteousness to us. Many are offended by this concept, considering it both artificial and unjust on God’s part to arrange such a transfer. Yet the objection is due to a misunderstanding. . . . What was transferred to Christ was not moral qualities but legal consequences: he voluntarily accepted liability for our sins. That is what the expressions “made sin” and “made a curse” mean. Similarly, “the righteousness of God” which we become when we are “in Christ” is not here righteousness of character and conduct (although that grows within us by the working of the Holy Spirit), but rather a righteous standing before God. (*Cross of Christ*, 148–49)

being redeemed or tell “stories of redemption.” Though the word has a marginal secular usage, for many Christians redemption remains almost entirely a religious concept. “Redemption” is viewed as just another Bible word representing the whole of the Christian life and experience in a generic sense. When a deeper meaning is applied, it is usually seen as little more than a synonym for “deliverance.”<sup>71</sup> While deliverance and redemption in the Scriptures are related concepts (cf. Ex. 6:6; Job 6:23; Isa. 50:2; Jer. 15:21), deliverance is the *implication* of redemption, not its *equivalent*. The release from bondage is accomplished by redemption.

“Redemption” (Gk. *lutrōsis*) and “to redeem” (Gk. *lutroō*) are based upon the idea of “ransom” (Gk. *lutron*)—that is, a *payment price* for the release of something.<sup>72</sup> Though the term “redemption” is sometimes used in the Scriptures without direct reference to a ransom payment (e.g., Luke 21:28; Rom. 8:23; Eph. 4:30), the fact that a ransom has been paid is implied and assumed.<sup>73</sup> Redemption is inherently an economic idea, wherein payment is made or a debt is repaid.<sup>74</sup> This was commonly understood both inside and outside the Scriptures.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> This truncated view of redemption is the result of the trickling down of liberally minded scholarship that rejects the objectivity of economic payment and exchange (inherent to the word group) in favor of the generic idea of deliverance. “The original, etymologically grounded sense is thus watered down in biblical usage, and only a very general sense remains. The true rendering, then, is ‘redemption’ or ‘liberation,’ not ‘ransom.’ ‘Release’ is also possible in Hb. 11:35 and ‘remission’ in Hb. 9:15. In primitive Christianity the word was used to express a religious content, and it thus took on a special sense which is not found elsewhere” (F. Büchsel, “ἀπολύτρωσις,” *TDNT*, 4:355). All of this, of course, is ridiculous, since Paul would never “take a word with a known significance, give it a new meaning all his own, and use it occasionally in the new sense without explanation” (Morris, *Apostolic Preaching*, 51).

<sup>72</sup> See “λύτρον-λύτρωσις,” *BDAG*, 605–6.

<sup>73</sup> See Morris, *Apostolic Preaching*, 11–64; Morris, *Atonement*, 106–31.

<sup>74</sup> See L. Morris, “Ransom,” *ISBE*, 4:44–45; W. Mundle and C. Brown, “λύτρον,” *NIDNTT*, 3:189–200.

<sup>75</sup> As Morris observes,

The idea of the payment of a price (the “ransom”) is basic to all the redemption words. . . . There is always the thought of deliverance at cost. Sometimes it is deliverance from slavery and sometimes from a sentence of death. But both inside and outside the Bible that is the usage. As far as I am able I have searched the literature of antiquity and my conclusion is that redemption, apart from some metaphorical uses which depend on the normal usage, always denotes deliverance from a state of captivity (the prisoner of war), or from slavery, or from a death sentence. And always it is deliverance in a particular way, by the payment of a price. The idea of the payment of a price is fundamental to redemption. (*Atonement*, 118)

In the Old Testament redemption is variously associated with the buying back of family property and/or slaves by the payment of money (cf. Lev. 25:29ff,47ff; Jer. 32:7–12), the receiving of firstborns by the payment of sacrifice and offerings (cf. Ex. 13:11–16; Lev. 27:26f; Num. 18:15ff), and the purchasing of Israel by the payment and cost of God’s exertion of power and effort (cf. Ex. 6:6; Deut. 7:8; Ps. 77:14f). Much theological wrangling surrounds these passages, but the bottom line is that “redemption consistently signifies deliverance by payment of price. . . . As a stubborn substratum in every case there is the basic price-paying conception.”<sup>76</sup>

So if the quote isn’t from just one sentence, I think we need to revise. In biblical thought this price-paying conception of redemption is ultimately applied to the broad redemptive narrative. Humanity has rebelled against God and broken his laws, which has caused objective, measurable damages to creation. In response, God has handed human beings over to the slavery of their sin until their debt should be repaid. This recompense ultimately takes place on the day of the Lord, when all people are judged according to their deeds and either make restitution for their wrongs or pay the debt with their very lives—that is, in Gehenna. Only when that debt is paid are individuals redeemed from their miserable circumstances.<sup>77</sup>

This narrative is assumed in the New Testament and applied to the death of Jesus. God attributes value to the sacrifice of the Messiah, which is then counted toward the debt of humanity to purchase and liberate them from their bondage and slavery.<sup>78</sup> When seen through the lens of apocalyptic salvation history, the redemption passages of the New Testament become clearer (see figure 8.5). For those who put their faith in Christ crucified, the day of recompense will become “the day of redemption” (Eph. 4:30), because “in him we have redemption

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<sup>76</sup> Morris, *Apostolic Preaching*, 26; contrary to, e.g., C. M. Tuckett, “Atonement in the NT,” *ABD*, 1:520–21.

<sup>77</sup> From Origen there has been debate concerning the recipient of the ransom—esp. God versus Satan (cf. Gustaf Aulén, *Christus Victor: An Historical Study of the Three Main Types of the Idea of Atonement*, trans. A. G. Hebert [New York: Macmillan, 1969], 47–55). It is often charged that for God to receive payment from Himself (in Christ) is an illogical transaction. Why take money out of one pocket and put it in the other? However, was not God the source of the offering in the OT (Lev. 17:11), which he received as a ransom for sin? When everything belongs to you (cf. Ps. 24:1; 50:12; 89:11)—i.e. “from him and through him and to him are all things” (Rom. 11:36)—how else is restitution to be made?

<sup>78</sup> On the cost of the messianic sacrifice, see esp. Stott, *Cross of Christ*, 179–82.

through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace” (Eph. 1:7).

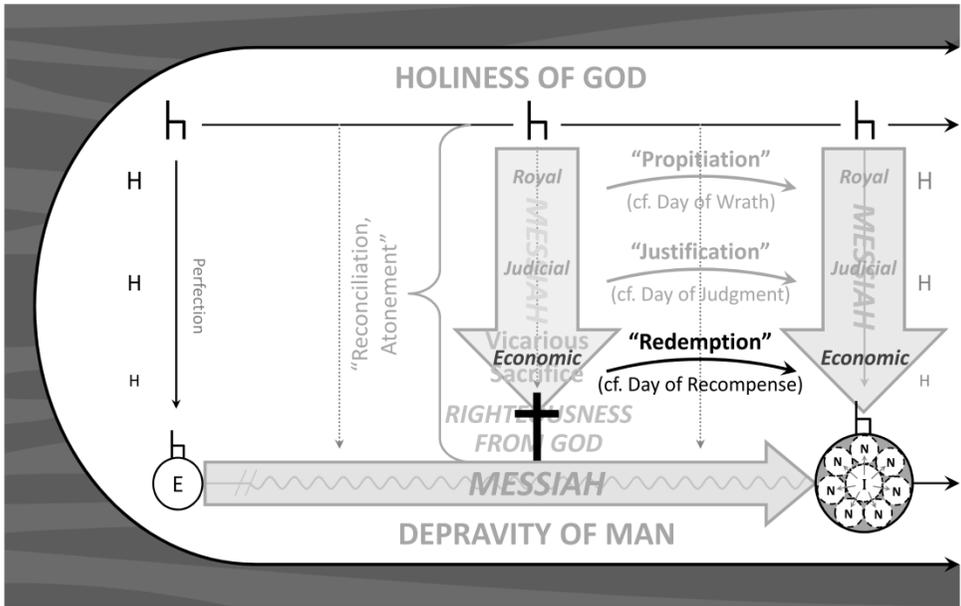


Figure 8.5 – The Redemptive Nature of the Messianic Sacrifice

As with justification and propitiation, the present redemptive payment of our debt has been made in anticipation of our future deliverance. Thus the heavenly song expounds: “Worthy are you to take the scroll and to open its seals, for you were slain, and *by your blood you ransomed people for God* from every tribe and language and people and nation, and you have made them a kingdom and priests to our God, and *they shall reign on the earth*” (Rev. 5:9–10).<sup>79</sup> Likewise Peter explains:

If you call on him as Father *who judges impartially* according to each one’s deeds, conduct yourselves with fear throughout *the time of your exile*, knowing that you were *ransomed* from the futile ways inherited from your forefathers, not with perishable things such as silver or gold, but with *the precious blood of Christ*, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot. (1 Peter 1:17–19)

<sup>79</sup> The association of the *lutrōsis* word group with the *agorazō* word group (cf. 1 Cor. 6:20; 7:23; Gal. 3:13; 4:5; 2 Peter 2:1; Rev. 5:9; 14:4), i.e., “buy in the market” (LSJ, 13), further reinforces the economic ideas inherent to redemption.

We see the sacrificial “blood of Christ” being counted by God as “precious,” and hence applied in anticipation of the judgment to come toward the debt of our “futile ways.” So “there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself *as a ransom* for all, which is the testimony given at the proper time” (1 Tim. 2:5–6).<sup>80</sup> Such a mediation is in the context of “those who were to believe in him *for eternal life*” (1 Tim. 1:16). Thus we wait for “our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us *to redeem us* from all lawlessness and to purify for himself a people for his own possession” (Titus 2:13–14).

This apostolic interpretation is derived from Jesus’ own declaration that “the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life *as a ransom* for many” (Mark 10:45). Jesus clearly understood his death in terms of a payment *for the transgressions* of “the many” (cf. Isa. 53:11f). The eschatological orientation of redemption is also seen when Jesus references “the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory” (Luke 21:27), saying, “When these things begin to take place, straighten up and raise your heads, because *your redemption* is drawing near” (v. 28).<sup>81</sup>

Likewise Paul, in speaking of “the glory that is to be revealed to us” (Rom. 8:18), eagerly awaits our “adoption as sons, *the redemption* of our bodies” (v. 23). And by the sacrifice of Christ we have “obtained *eternal redemption*” (Heb. 9:12, NASB), for “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” (v. 15).

Of course this eternal redemption, inheritance, and salvation is understood in light of the Israelocentric vision of the Old Testament, therefore corresponding to “the redemption of Jerusalem” (Luke 2:38; cf. Isa. 52:3), wherein Jesus is “the

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<sup>80</sup> Here we see the only use of *antitutron* in the Scriptures: “a strong compound meaning ‘substitute-ransom.’” (L. L. Morris, “Atonement,” *NBD*, 103). Combined with *huper pantōn*, “on behalf of all,” we have a radical declaration of substitutionality spoken somewhat formulaically (lodged between a petition for peaceful ecclesiology [1 Tim. 2:1–4] and the assertion of apostolic appointment [v. 7]), as though it were common knowledge. Such formulae are indicative of the common hermeneutical culture in the early church (see chapter 7, n. 60).

<sup>81</sup> Note 2 *Clement* 17:4: “For the Lord said, ‘I am coming to gather together all the nations, tribes, and languages.’ Now by this he means the day of his appearing, when he will come and redeem us, each according to his deeds” (Michael W. Holmes, *The Apostolic Fathers: Greek Texts and English Translations*, updated ed. [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999], 125).

one to redeem Israel” (Luke 24:21; cf. Acts 1:6).<sup>82</sup> Those who disintegrate redemption by separating the redemption of creation and the body from the redemption of Israel and the nations fall into no small error. Jesus will indeed “restore *everything*, as he promised long ago through his holy prophets” (Acts 3:21, NIV).

Our being “bought with a price” (1 Cor. 6:20; 7:23) and “purchased with his own blood” (Acts 20:28, NASB) is the driving force behind our being “justified by his grace as a gift, *through the redemption* that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward *as a propitiation* by his blood, to be received by faith” (Rom. 3:24–25). So the three atonement realities are interrelated and cooperative. The redemptive payment of the blood of Jesus justifies/acquits us of our sins and propitiates/assuages the wrath of God toward us. As sin creates the threefold progression of emotive anger unto penal charges unto fiscal retribution, so the substitutional sacrifice satisfies the debt, allowing the charges to be dropped, and thus resolves the wrath of the King/Judge/Creator.<sup>83</sup> In this way the substitutional nature of the death of the Messiah is multifaceted (see figure 8.6).

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<sup>82</sup> “Just as the Jews of that day (and of all succeeding ages right down to our own) looked forward to a ‘redemption,’ so did the Christians. One day their Messiah would return to the earth and thus there would be a great ‘redemption’ which would be of the greatest concern to them all. The resemblances to the Jewish conception are striking. The wording, the assurance of deliverance, the association of the deliverance with the Messiah, the earnest looking forward to it, in all these points we have resemblance to the Jewish idea” (Morris, *Apostolic Preaching*, 47).

<sup>83</sup> Though the cross was more than just penal, see the excellent survey and defense of substitutionary atonement by Steve Jeffery, Michael Ovey, and Andrew Sach, *Pierced for Our Transgressions: Rediscovering the Glory of Penal Substitution* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2007).

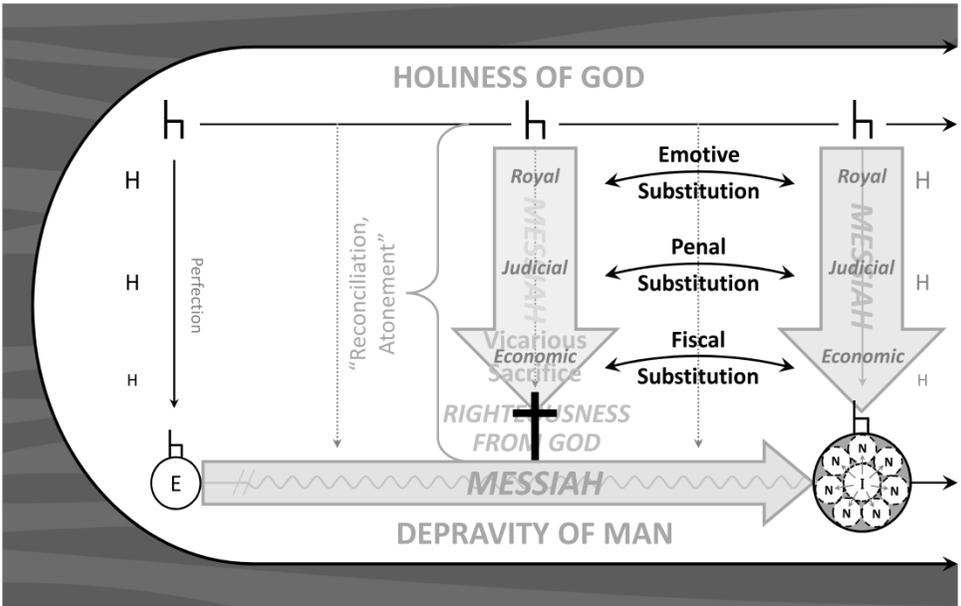


Figure 8.6 – The Threefold Substitutional Nature of the Messianic Sacrifice

As stated above, the various royal, judicial, and economic aspects of the cross are based upon the foundational interpretation of the death of the Messiah as a vicarious sacrifice. Moreover, the different aspects of the cross are based upon the apocalyptic realities of the day of the Lord (see chapter 3). They are not mere metaphors, images, or figures of speech. They are different aspects of real history, based upon real events, involving real persons, culminating in a real day.<sup>84</sup> At two points in redemptive history are the wrath, judgment, and retribution of God satisfied: the cross and the day of the Lord. Righteousness is fulfilled only at Calvary and in Gehenna. Where humanity will be found on that day is the great choice facing each individual.

### THE CHALLENGE OF FAITH

Nothing has been more challenging to the modern mind than the *Jewish apocalyptic* nature of Jesus' second coming (discussed in chapters 3–6) and the

<sup>84</sup> Without the day of the Lord as a real reference point, discussion of the atonement often devolves into a "kaleidoscopic" mishmash of different ideas that ultimately speak of nothing; cf. Joel B. Green, "Kaleidoscopic View," in *The Nature of the Atonement: Four Views*, ed. James Beilby and Paul R. Eddy (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2006), 157–185.

*sacrificial* nature of his first coming. Both have been deemed “embarrassing,” the product of “primitive” religion. These two defining characteristics of the apostolic witness have been either avoided or ridiculed by most within the modern academy. Through Platonism, realized eschatology, supersessionism, a naturalistic approach to the Old Testament, and the rejection of sacrificial atonement, the modern church continues to drift from its apostolic moorings.

Though human depravity surely plays a role, God has intentionally made the gospel challenging to confront human pride and strength. For this reason, the New Testament proclaims the death of the Messiah as a sin-bearing sacrifice in light of the judgment to come as a reality to be received “by faith” (Rom. 3:25; 5:1; 9:30–32; Gal. 2:16; 3:8,22–26). Unfortunately, “faith” is another one of those Bible words that has lost much of its original meaning in modern times. It is commonly associated with abstract “belief” (the same Greek word translates both), which in turn is assumed to be little more than mental assent to cognitive categories that often have little impact on everyday life.<sup>85</sup> This could not be further from the biblical understanding of faith.

In the Scriptures, faith (Gk. *pistis*, Heb. *’āman*) involves a heart-level commitment that expresses itself in faithfulness to the One to whom it is committed.<sup>86</sup> Because the day of the Lord will begin with a revealing of people’s hearts (cf. Rom. 2:16; 1 Cor. 4:5) and proceed to a judgment of their words (cf. Matt. 12:36; Jude 15) and deeds (cf. Rom. 2:6; 2 Cor. 5:10), issues of the heart demand the utmost attention (Prov. 4:23). Indeed, sin begins within the heart in the form of pride (Isa. 14:13; 1 Tim. 3:6), diversifying to other forms of iniquity (James 1:15; 4:2), proceeding from the mouth into every area of life (Matt. 15:18f;

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<sup>85</sup> James tenaciously combated this gnostic tendency in the early church (cf. 2:14–26). Some, like Luther (cf. *Preface to the Epistles of St. James and St. Jude*, in *LW*, 35:395–96), pit James and Paul against each other in the struggle over justification by faith. However, Paul never says we are justified by faith *alone*. This phraseology is used only by James (2:24). Though Paul was accused of promoting such antinomian perversions (Rom. 3:8), he clearly fought against them (cf. Rom. 6:1f,15; Gal. 2:17; 5:13; Titus 1:16). In response to such accusation, Paul preached that Jew and Gentile alike “should repent and turn to God, *performing deeds in keeping with their repentance*” (Acts 26:20), a statement functionally identical to James 2:22 (cf. Rom. 13:9f; 1 Cor. 13:2; 2 Cor. 9:8; Gal. 5:6; Eph. 2:10; 2 Thess. 1:11; etc.).

“For Paul, ultimately the issue is not works versus faith, but law-works (whereby one tries to gain or retain God’s approval) versus faith-works (which flow out of an already extant approval in Christ; Gal. 5:6)” (Dan G. McCartney, *James*, BECNT [Grand Rapids: Baker, 2009], 161, n.16). For a comprehensive introduction to the issues involved, see pp. 161–71 and 272–79.

<sup>86</sup> See “πίστις,” BDAG, 818–20; and J. B. Scott, “116 אָמַן (’āman),” *TWOT*, 51–53.

James 3:5f). Because our lives generate from the heart, so the reckoning of our lives in the eyes of God, and the accounting of our sins, will begin with the heart. Likewise, the accounting of the divine provision of sacrifice unto atonement will be based upon the heart response: “*For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved*” (Rom. 10:10).

Because of its “heart-felt” nature, biblical faith carries the connotation of “trust” and “reliance.”<sup>87</sup> So Paul argues concerning the faith of Abraham: “To the one who does not work *but trusts* [Gk. *pisteuō*] him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness” (Rom. 4:5). The force of Romans 4:1–8 is hard to overstate. Those who trust their very selves to divine mercy are the ones “to whom God counts righteousness” (v. 6). Those who trust God’s provision of sacrifice are “those whose lawless deeds are forgiven, and whose sins are covered” (v. 7), for “the Lord will not count [their] sin” (v. 8). It is the wholehearted entrusting of oneself to God that will result in pardon on the day of judgment.

This kind of faith is quite confrontational, because it requires a heart response. Comparing faith in Christ’s sacrifice to those living under the sacrificial system of the Old Testament, it took faith to actually believe that God accounted one’s sin to the animal. Imagine standing over a young bull with a repentant heart concerning sins common to humankind. After laying your hands upon the animal and killing it, what has changed? The memory of the sin still remains. The effect upon family and friends still remains. Faith was demanded of the worshiper to trust and believe that God truly accounted the sin forgiven.

The same applies to every atonement circumstance in the Scriptures. Judgment is coming at midnight (Ex. 12:12)—Will God really pass over us on account of a little blood on the door? Snakes are biting, and people are actually dying (Num. 21:6)—Will God really heal us if we look at the snake on the pole? The same dynamics apply to the greater redemptive narrative (cf. Luke 22:15f; John 3:14f). So Paul relates the hope of salvation from the wrath of God to our faith in the sacrifice: “Therefore, since we have been justified *through faith*, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access *by faith* into this grace in which we now stand. . . . God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, *Christ died*

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<sup>87</sup> See G. W. Bromiley, “Faith,” *ISBE*, 2:270–73; and O. Michel, “πίστις,” *NIDNTT*, 1:593–605.

for us. Since we have now been justified *by his blood*, how much more shall we be saved from God's wrath through him!" (Romans 5:1–2,8–9, NIV)

Inherent to atonement faith is identification and participation. The worshiper must identify with the object of atonement and *participate with it by faith*. This is the intent of Communion, a regular "remembrance" for the purpose of identification and participation in the event of the cross. So Paul states explicitly, "The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a *participation* in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a *participation* in the body of Christ?" (1 Cor. 10:16). Because it is a participation in the death of Jesus, "whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of sinning against the body and blood of the Lord" (1 Cor. 11:27, NIV). Thus they will "eat and drink judgment against themselves" (v. 29, NRSV).

Such participatory language ultimately derives from the sacrificial system. Those who offered sacrifices were united with the sacrifice by faith. The animal experienced death on behalf of the worshiper, and the worshiper died with the animal, so to speak. So Paul, in light of the sacrificial death of the Messiah (cf. Rom. 5:6–21) declares,

Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were *baptized into his death*? We were *buried therefore with him* by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have been *united with him* in a death like his, we shall certainly be *united with him* in a resurrection like his. (Rom. 6:3–5)

Such participatory thought defines much of the language of atonement in the New Testament. As Paul continues in Romans 6, "If we have *died with Christ*, we believe that we will also live with him" (v. 8). Likewise, he tells the Colossians, "*You have died*, and your life is *hidden with Christ* in God. When Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory" (Col. 3:3–4). As one offering a sacrifice sought to be found in the animal before the eyes of God, so Paul sought to be "*found in [Christ]*, not having a righteousness of my own" (Phil. 3:9). Therefore he sought to "know Christ," to become "like him in his death," so as to "attain the resurrection from the dead" (vv. 10–11).

The drive to live this life by atonement faith, so as to inherit eternal life, lies behind the apostle's classic declaration: "I have been *crucified with Christ*. It is no

longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live *by faith* in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me” (Gal. 2:20). So participation in the sacrifice by faith in this age was understood as the means of participation in the resurrection in the age to come.

Real events evoke real participatory faith. Unfortunately, the Platonic delusion robs people of the reality of redemptive history, for when life’s ultimate end is immaterial heaven, accountability for sin and deeds done in materiality are diminished and the gravity of sin is lifted. When faith is uprooted from its historical context and bound in an unholy union to theological abstractions, the human heart quickly disengages. Rather, God calls us to *trust him* in light of a real history of human sin, its real consequences, and the real day when humanity will be judged.

In life’s volatile situations, we call to others, “Trust me, and I will lead you through this!” Similarly, our faith and trust are in God, who calls to us, “*Trust me*, that when my Son comes and consumes the heavens and earth in fire, I will pass over you on the basis of faith in his blood!” We have real historical events—creation, the cross, and the day of the Lord—in which our hearts can trust and engage.

Moreover, these real events are every bit as challenging as they are encouraging. In a time and culture in which personal accountability is diminished by relativistic thinking, the message of the day of the Lord smacks of brash primitivism. Just like every generation before us, we question, “Where is the God of justice?” (Mal. 2:17). We live in a wicked culture that renounces God and says in its heart, “You will not call to account” (Ps. 10:13). We are like complacent people “who say in their hearts, ‘The LORD will not do good, nor will he do ill’” (Zeph. 1:12). Indeed we are the scoffers to come in the last days who say, “Where is the promise of his coming? For ever since the fathers fell asleep, all things are continuing as they were from the beginning of creation” (2 Peter 3:4). In the midst of the grinding “cares of this life” (Luke 21:34), true belief and faith in the day of the Lord is indeed “difficult” (Mark 10:24).<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> Thus most theologians reinterpret the literalistic, futurist eschatology of the Scriptures, as typified by Rudolf Bultmann. “It is not easy in the twentieth century to imagine an imminent end of the world at which angels fly down with trumpet blasts from heaven, while the sun is darkened and the stars cease to shine. Consequently many theologians felt it to be a liberation when Bultmann showed the presence of a quite different eschatology in the New Testament—an individual, wholly personal

Even more difficult to believe is that the judgment of God on that day will be determined by faith. Maybe God *will* judge the wicked; surely people who commit heinous sins, like Jeffrey Dahmer, deserve his judgment! As seen in the common reaction to Dahmer’s conversion, however, many say to themselves, *How can God not judge people like Jeffrey Dahmer?*<sup>89</sup> How can God forgive upon the basis of faith alone? To the broken and repentant, this is wonderful news. But to the haughty and self-righteous, this is *impossible to accept*. Thus, the twofold confrontation of faith concerning the cross and the day of the Lord faces every human being (see figure 8.7). The whole world is under sin (Rom. 3:9; Gal. 3:22); Jesus will judge the living and the dead (Acts 10:42; 2 Tim. 4:1); but those who put their faith in Christ crucified will find mercy (Rom. 3:24; Gal. 2:16). Those who “set aside the grace of God” (Gal. 2:21, NIV) “will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction” (2 Thess. 1:9).

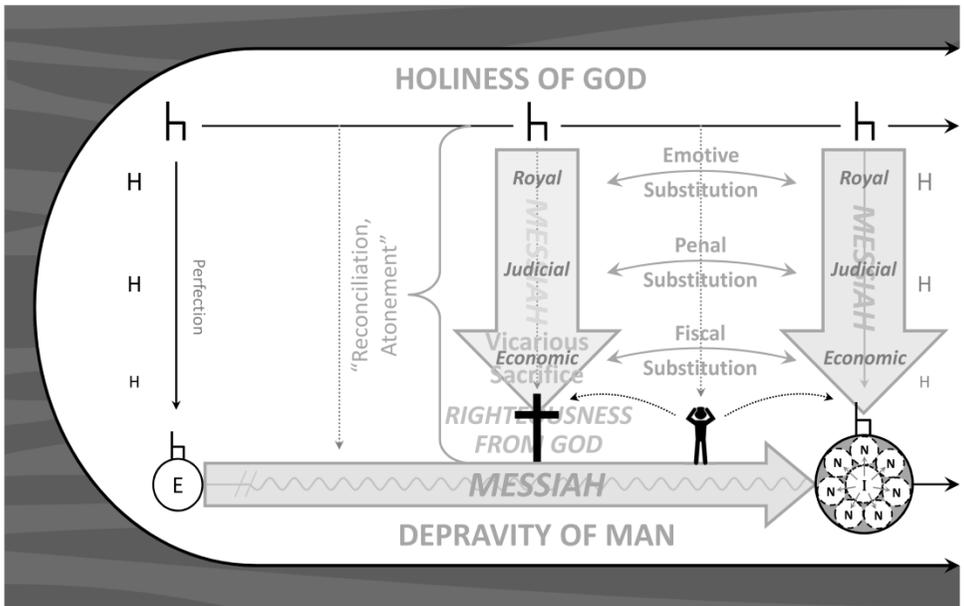


Figure 8.7 – The Twofold Confrontation of Faith Concerning the Cross and the Day of the Lord

eschatology, bound up with the moment of truth—the eschatology of detachment from the world; and when Bultmann expounded this as being the real eschatology meant by Paul and John and the others” (Klaus Koch, *The Rediscovery of Apocalyptic* [London: SCM Press, 1972], 67).

<sup>89</sup> See Roy Ratcliff, *Dark Journey Deep Grace: Jeffrey Dahmer’s Story of Faith* (Abilene, TX: Leafwood Publishers, 2006).

This tension of faith concerning the imputed righteousness of the cross in anticipation of the judgment of the day of the Lord defined the life and functioning of the early church. Perseverance in justification by faith was at the heart of all apostolic exhortation. Being found in Christ, “not having a righteousness of my own” (Phil. 3:9), was the “one thing” that Paul sought to obtain:

Not that I have already obtained *it* [i.e., atonement faith, vv. 7–11] or have already become perfect [in atonement faith], but I press on so that I may lay hold of *that* [faith in the cross] for which also I was laid hold of by Christ Jesus [cf. 1 Tim. 1:12–17; Titus 3:3–7; etc.]. Brethren, I do not regard myself as having laid hold of *it* yet; but one thing *I do*: forgetting what *lies behind* [i.e., self-righteous faith, vv. 4–6] and reaching forward to what *lies ahead* [i.e., resurrection, v. 11], I press on [in atonement faith] toward the goal, for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. (Phil. 3:12–14, NASB)

Perseverance of faith in Christ crucified defines most of the New Testament’s controversies (cf. 1 Cor. 1:23; Gal. 3:1) and exhortations (cf. 1 Cor. 1:8; Phil. 1:6). Life lived by faith in Christ’s sacrifice is therefore analogous to a “race” (cf. 1 Cor. 9:24; Gal. 5:7; 2 Tim. 4:7), wherein conversion is the starting line and the day of the Lord is the finish line. How you start is not as important as how you finish, though obviously you cannot finish without starting. Who puts blood on their door at dusk, but then goes down to frolic in the Nile before midnight? Who looks at the snake on the pole once, but then goes about tending to his wounds? The dead man does. The atonement only applies if it is held *unto the time of judgment*. The Scriptures leave no room for the popular idea of “once saved, always saved.”<sup>90</sup>

Thus Paul projects upon the church his personal drive to take hold of Christ crucified, forgetting his former life of self-righteousness: “I am sure of this, that he who began a good work [faith in Christ crucified] in you will *bring it to completion* at the day of Jesus Christ” (Phil. 1:6). Likewise, Paul labored for the gifts of the Holy Spirit to strengthen the church in the way of the cross: “I always

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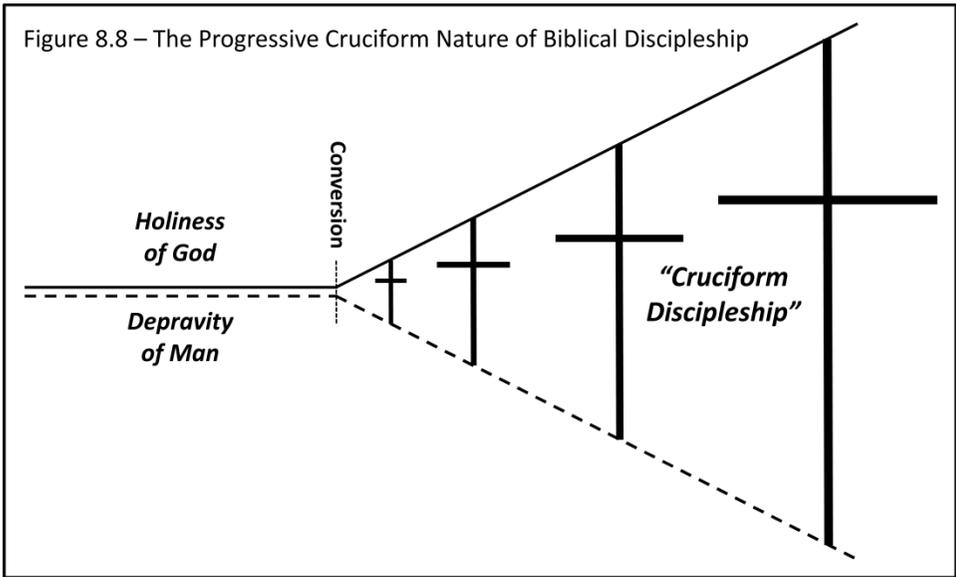
<sup>90</sup> For popular rebuttals of the doctrine, see Daniel D. Corner, *The Believer’s Conditional Security: Eternal Security Refuted*, 3rd ed. (Washington, PA: Evangelical Outreach, 2000); and David Pawson, *Once Saved, Always Saved? A Study in Perseverance and Inheritance* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1996).

thank God for you because of *his grace* given you in Christ Jesus. . . . You do not lack any *spiritual gift* as you eagerly wait for our Lord Jesus Christ to be revealed. He will *keep you strong to the end*, so that you will be *blameless* on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Cor. 1:4–8, NIV).

Moreover, Paul declares to the Colossians that in light of their having been "alienated and hostile" toward God, Christ "has now reconciled *in his body of flesh by his death*, in order to present you holy and blameless and above reproach before him, *if indeed you continue in the faith*, stable and steadfast, not shifting from the hope of the gospel that you heard, which has been proclaimed in all creation under heaven" (Col. 1:22–23). The only guarantee of salvation is *persevering atonement faith*, which depends not on human strength but casts itself continually upon God's mercy unto the day of Christ Jesus. So we see why Paul so emphasizes the life of faith lived "in the flesh" (Gal. 2:20)—that is, in this age before the resurrection.

In this way, New Testament discipleship is also understood to be cruciform, for our whole life is meant to be conformed to the cross. Those who embark upon the journey of faith in Christ crucified endure its complexities. In the cross is revealed God's righteousness and human depravity. Why did God deem it necessary to crush his Servant? Because of the punishment that was due us. "Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: *Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners*—of whom I am the worst" (1 Tim. 1:15, NIV). This "trustworthy saying" is meant to serve as a theological summary. The crucifixion happened in order to save sinners from the wrath of God (which, of course, was understood within the Jewish apocalyptic framework of redemptive history).

Before receiving a revelation of the cross, all human beings assume a general righteousness and a lack of need for atonement. Ask someone on the street, "Will you go to heaven when you die?" (or some question of acceptability in the sight of God), and you will usually get a confident "Yes." The assumption is a basic correspondence between the righteousness of God and the righteousness of humankind. At conversion comes a revelation of sin, depravity, and the need for divine mercy. God is understood as holy, while we are wicked—the cross being the solution. However, this is not a one-time revelation. It is a progressive disclosure of the holiness of God and the depraved state into which we have all been born (see figure 8.8).



Thus we have a pattern for understanding the Christian life as exemplified by the apostle Paul, who before conversion was “a Pharisee, a son of Pharisees” (Acts 23:6)—“the strictest party of [the Jewish] religion”—(Acts 26:5) and “as to righteousness under the law, blameless” (Phil. 3:6, NRSV). The cross, however, reveals our being “foolish, disobedient, led astray, slaves to various passions and pleasures, passing our days in malice and envy, hated by others and hating one another” (Titus 3:3). So Paul can declare at the end of his life, “I was shown mercy so that in me, *the worst of sinners*, Christ Jesus might display his *unlimited patience* as an example for those who would believe on him and receive eternal life” (1 Tim. 1:16).

If we overlay figure 8.8 with the previous figures of redemption history (see figure 8.9), we see the process of the delusion of human righteousness being broken in light of the day of the Lord, when “the haughtiness of man shall be humbled, and the lofty pride of men shall be brought low” (Isa. 2:11) and when “God will judge men’s secrets through Jesus Christ, as my gospel declares” (Rom. 2:16, NIV).



Lev. 4:2; 5:15; Num. 15:24; Heb. 9:7).<sup>92</sup> Intentional sins — such as idolatry, adultery, murder, rebellion, and the like — resulted in being “cut off” from the people of Israel (Lev. 7:20; 17:4; 18:29; etc.) and/or death (Lev. 20; 24:14–23; Deut. 17:1–7).<sup>93</sup>

Likewise, excommunication (Matt. 18:17; 1 Cor. 5:2) and/or divine judgment (1 Cor. 11:29; Rev. 2:23) is the New Testament standard. So Paul threatens believers who *continue willfully* in their sin: “Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God?” (1 Cor. 6:9; cf. Gal. 5:21; Eph. 5:5).<sup>94</sup> Thus he quotes from the Law: “Purge the evil person from among you” (1 Cor. 5:13; cf. Deut. 13:5; 17:7; 21:21; 22:21–24). Because those who willfully sin will be disqualified in the end, Paul’s injunction is considered merciful: “You are to deliver this man to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord” (1 Cor. 5:5).

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substitution of one’s property or wealth — for such violations, whether they were perpetrated against other individuals or against God Himself. In those cases, the law dealt directly with the offender, imposing real punishments and acting to prevent recurrences. The entire expiatory system ordained in the Torah must be understood in this light. Ritual expiation was restricted to situations where a reasonable doubt existed as to the willfulness of the offense. Even then, restitution was always required where loss or injury to another person had occurred. The mistaken notion that ritual worship could atone for criminality or intentional religious desecration was persistently attacked by the prophets of Israel, who considered it a major threat to the entire covenantal relationship between Israel and God. (*Leviticus*, JPS Torah Commentary [Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1989], 2–3)

<sup>92</sup> “The nom. (אָגַג) occurs 19× and conveys two basic meanings. First, it may signify an inadvertent error or mistake arising from the routine experiences of daily living. . . . Second, the word together with the vb. אָפַּח, sin (#2627), functions as a legal and liturgical term in the priestly prescriptions for the guilt offering that atoned for inadvertent sin (Lev 4:2,22,27; 5:15,18; Num 15:24–29)” (A. E. Hill, “אָגַג [šāgag],” *NIDOTTE*, 4:42).

<sup>93</sup> The difference between unintentional and intentional sin is most clearly defined in Num. 15:27–31:

If one person *sins unintentionally*, he shall offer a female goat a year old for a sin offering. And the priest shall make atonement before the LORD for the person who makes a mistake, when he sins unintentionally, to make atonement for him, and *he shall be forgiven*. You shall have one law for him who does anything unintentionally, for him who is native among the people of Israel and for the stranger who sojourns among them. But the person who *does anything with a high hand* [sins defiantly, NIV], whether he is native or a sojourner, reviles the LORD, and that person shall be cut off from among his people. Because he has despised the word of the LORD and has broken his commandment, that person shall be utterly cut off; *his iniquity shall be on him*.

<sup>94</sup> The common accusation that forensic justification promotes licentiousness, or that it cannot account for verses such as these, generally fails to account for *intentionality* in sacrifice and atonement.

The very purpose of this age is to bring to light the gravity of human sin. Therefore when we “realize our guilt” (cf. Lev. 4:13,22,27; 5:2; 6:4) and repent of our sin, God forgives according to the sacrifice. Intentional sin becomes to us, and to God, unintentional—We hate it and *intend not to do it again*. So God forgives and relents from impending judgment, a common theme throughout the Scriptures (cf. 1 Kings 21:29; Ps. 106:45; Jer. 18:8; Jonah 3:10; 1 John 1:9). However, “If we go on *sinning deliberately* after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a fearful expectation of judgment, and a fury of fire that will consume the adversaries” (Heb. 10:26–27). So “no one who abides in [Christ] *keeps on sinning*; no one who *keeps on sinning* has either seen him or known him” (1 John 3:6; cf. 1 John 5:18). The call of God is thus a continually repentant heart before God unto the day of Christ Jesus (cf. Phil. 1:6; Heb. 12:1–4; 2 Peter 1:10)—or, in other words: “Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling” (Phil. 2:12).

Hence there is no place among believers for the all-too-common Western phenomenon of “Sunday Christianity.” Those who think they can deliberately sin throughout the week and go to church on the weekend to find forgiveness will find their guilt remaining on the day of judgment. Hear the fearful indictment of Hebrews 6:

For it is impossible, in the case of those who have once been enlightened . . . and then have *fallen away* [Gk. *parapipto*, “to fail to follow through on a commitment”<sup>95</sup>], to restore them again to repentance, since they are crucifying once again the Son of God to their own harm and holding him up to contempt. For land that has drunk the rain that often falls on it, and produces a crop useful to those for whose sake it is cultivated, receives a blessing from God. But if it bears thorns and thistles, it is *worthless* [Gk. *adokimos*] and near to being cursed, and its end is to be burned. (vv. 4–8)

Though we do indeed wrestle continually with a body of death in this age (cf. Rom. 7:7–25), the answer is not to give in and resign to compromise. Rather, we must continually cast our sin upon the sin offering (cf. Rom. 8:1–4). Though we sin against God a thousand times, he will yet forgive us, *if* we repent at a heart level (cf. Matt. 18:22; Col. 3:13). However, it is the thousand-and-first time

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<sup>95</sup> “παράπλιτω,” BDAG, 770.

that we sin and do not repent which results in disqualification. Therefore, “*Examine yourselves* as to whether you are in the faith. *Test yourselves*. Do you not know yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you? —unless indeed you are *disqualified*” (2 Cor. 13:5, NKJV). Let us continue to run the race faithfully unto the day of Christ Jesus.

## THE CIRCUMCISION GROUP

It was commonly assumed in the New Testament that the openly unrepentant and disobedient would not inherit eternal life (cf. 1 Cor. 6:9; Gal. 5:21; Eph. 5:5). Less obvious, however, was the disqualification of many who were outwardly obedient and righteous yet *inwardly unrepentant*. This was the plague that consumed the Pharisaical movement (cf. Matt. 23:25ff; Luke 16:14f). Those who lack inward repentance are excluded from atonement and acquittal in the eyes of God.

This plague entered into the early church, unfortunately, primarily through a distinct group called “the circumcision party” (Acts 11:2; Gal. 2:12; Titus 1:10). So Paul describes them, “For there are many rebellious people, mere talkers and deceivers, especially those of *the circumcision group*” (Titus 1:10, NIV). Moreover, “both their minds and their consciences are defiled” (v. 15), for though they “profess to know God,” they are “detestable, disobedient, *unfit* [Gk. *adokimos*] for any good work” (v. 16). Though their good works give the outward “appearance of godliness” (2 Tim. 3:5), they are, literally, “*disqualified* with reference to any good deed.”<sup>96</sup>

Whether referenced directly (Acts 11:2; Gal. 2:12; Eph. 2:11; Titus 1:10) or indirectly (Acts 15:5; 21:20; Rom. 2:17–29; 3:8; 16:17f; Gal. 6:12; Phil. 3:2f; Col. 2:11–19; 1 Tim. 1:3–7; 2 Tim. 3:5), the circumcision group was the primary human enemy of the gospel in the New Testament (the Gnostics were only a budding movement at the time). Though calling themselves followers of Christ, they were in truth “severed from Christ” (Gal. 5:4), having “lost connection with the Head” (Col. 2:19, NIV). They “belonged to the party of the Pharisees” (Acts 15:5) and demanded of Gentile believers, “Unless you are circumcised according to the

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<sup>96</sup> Literal translation of Titus 1:16b by Philip H. Towner, *The Letters to Timothy and Titus*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 711; italics added.

custom of Moses, *you cannot be saved*" (Acts 15:1).<sup>97</sup> They were influential enough that both Peter and Barnabas were "led astray" (Gal. 2:13). Pictured in Acts 15 as a minority sect within the larger Jewish Christian church, it appears (according to Paul's descriptions) that most of them contradicted the core message of the gospel and hence were "enemies of the cross of Christ" (Phil. 3:18).

In all the debate about who the circumcision group was and what their motivations were, Galatians 6:12 gives us a clear window into their world.<sup>98</sup> The first part of the verse says that they were "trying to compel [believers] to be circumcised" (NIV), which could only reasonably happen within "the household of faith" (v. 10; cf. 2:12). Thus we know they were Christians, albeit "false brothers" (Gal. 2:4) led by "false apostles, deceitful workmen, disguising themselves as apostles of Christ" (2 Cor. 11:13). The first part of Galatians 6:12 also reveals their unholy motivations, as Paul refers to them as "those who want to make a good impression outwardly" (NIV), which parallels v. 13: "They desire to have you circumcised that they may boast in your flesh."

Such outward evidences of success are highly motivating to the unregenerate (cf. Matt. 23:15; Gal. 4:17) and fit well with Paul's other descriptions of the circumcision group: serving "their own appetites" (Rom. 16:18), preaching Christ "from envy and rivalry" (Phil. 1:15), "teaching for shameful gain" (Titus 1:11), etc.<sup>99</sup> The second part of Galatians 6:12—where Paul says the false teachers forced the Galatian believers to be circumcised "only in order that they may not be persecuted for the cross of Christ"—reveals the social dynamics between the circumcision group and unbelieving Jews. Paul's emphasis on their avoidance of persecution as the "sole" or "only" (Gk. *monon*) motivation should not be taken literally, but it should be appreciated as their *defining social feature*.

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<sup>97</sup> The common reference to the circumcision group as "Judaizers" ("Judaizer" being derived from the Greek verb *ioudaizō*, "to live as Jews," found only in Gal. 2:14) seems misleading, since Judaism itself is not an enemy of the cross. It is only the perversion of Judaism that Paul rejected, for "we know that the law is good if one uses it properly" (1 Tim. 1:8, NIV).

<sup>98</sup> See a comprehensive history of the debate by Richard N. Longenecker, "The Identity of the Opponents," *Galatians*, WBC (Dallas: Word, 1998), lxxxix–xcvi.

<sup>99</sup> "Such 'ecclesiastical statistics' would furnish evidence of the success of their proselytizing mission as well as evidence of their zeal for the law. More important still, this would provide ground for boasting before God, since God would (supposedly) be pleased with their success in winning so many converts to Judaism" (Ronald Y. K. Fung, *The Epistle to the Galatians*, NICNT [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988], 304–5).

The circumcision group was based in Jerusalem (Gal. 2:1–12), highly connected to the party of the Pharisees (Acts 6:7; 15:5). Unlike Paul, it seems they were afraid to tell the religious leaders in Jerusalem that they were destined for Gehenna apart from faith in Christ crucified, for persecution concerning the message of the cross was an ever-present threat (cf. Acts 5:17f; 8:1; 1 Thess. 2:14ff). The tension between Paul and the church in Jerusalem is clearly evident from passages such as Galatians 2.<sup>100</sup>

This tension is most clearly seen in Acts 21 when Paul and his companions arrive in Jerusalem. Being warmly received by the brothers (v. 17), they were taken to James and the elders (v. 18). After hearing Paul's account of the work of God among the Gentiles (v. 19), the elders all praised God (v. 20). Yet they warned Paul concerning the rumors assumedly spread by the circumcision group: "You see, brother, *how many thousands* there are among the Jews of those who have believed. They are all zealous for the law, and *they have been told about you* [assumedly by the circumcision group] that you teach all the Jews who are among the Gentiles to forsake Moses, telling them not to circumcise their children or walk according to our customs" (vv. 20–21). Paul and his companions were encouraged to engage in purification rites to prove their obedience to the law (v. 24), which they did for seven days (26).<sup>101</sup> However, unbelieving Jews stirred up a riot against Paul (v. 27ff), with a notable absence of a Jewish Christian presence.

The circumcision group's avoidance of persecution revolved around the "offense of the cross" (Gal. 5:11). To understand the theology behind this offense, it is useful to rehearse a few prominent ideas and address some issues previously untouched. The offense essentially involved *how we are acquitted* on the day of judgment.<sup>102</sup> Like many unbelieving Jews, those within the circumcision group "rely on works of the law" (Gal. 3:10) for eschatological vindication, for unless

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<sup>100</sup> The heart of the issue lies in how many members of the church in Jerusalem were considered to be part of the circumcision group. If it was a small portion, as Acts 15:5 might indicate, then we have a marginal tension affecting a relative few. If it was a large portion, as Galatians 2 and Acts 21 seem to indicate, then we have a massive tension affecting the whole of the early church (of course, the proportions could have changed over time).

<sup>101</sup> Concerning the exact nature of this purification, four options are detailed by Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007), 647–48.

<sup>102</sup> See esp. Simon J. Gathercole, *Where Is Boasting? Early Jewish Soteriology and Paul's Response in Romans 1–5* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 197–215.

you “obey the law” (Rom. 2:25) you “cannot be saved” (Acts 15:1). This heart-reliance concerning the basis of forgiveness is the crux of the contention. Those “trying to be justified *by law* have been alienated from Christ” (Gal. 5:4, NIV), “for *by works* of the law no human being will be justified in his sight” (Rom. 3:20).<sup>103</sup> This was Paul’s battle line which created much of the offense: “For we hold that one is justified *by faith* apart from works of the law” (Rom. 3:28).

We know that both believing and unbelieving Jews held “the same hope” (Acts 24:15, NIV) concerning salvation (cf. Rom. 11:26ff; Heb. 9:28; etc.). The contention of the New Testament simply concerned the basis of attaining that hope. Everyone knew righteousness before God was the door to eternal life (cf. Ps. 24:3ff; Isa. 33:14f; 56:1f). But how was righteousness to be attained? Was it by faith in the sacrifice provided by God, or was it by faith in “our works” (2 Tim. 1:9)—that is, “works of righteousness” (Titus 3:5, NRSV), or “works of the law” (Rom. 3:20,28; Gal. 2:16; 3:2,5,10)?<sup>104</sup> Was salvation at the day of the Lord “on the basis of works” (Rom. 11:6), or was it “through faith in Jesus Christ” (Gal. 2:16)? Was it not “by Christ’s physical body through death” (Col. 1:22, NIV)—that is, “through his blood” (Eph. 1:7)? Indeed, it is not “human will or exertion” which determines our destiny, but rather “God, who has mercy” (Rom. 9:16).

At the heart of the offense lay the question of how to relate to the Mosaic law (in the narrow sense of a body of commands) in light of eschatological salvation. We know the law was designed to reveal, condemn, and discipline sin (cf. Rom. 3:20; Gal. 3:24; 1 Tim. 1:9). It was not designed, however, to establish a righteous standing before God unto the inheritance of eternal life. This was the purpose of the sacrificial system (cf. Acts 13:38f; Heb. 9:13ff). So Paul asserts, “If a law had been given that could *give life*, then *righteousness* would indeed be by the law” (Gal. 3:21). Rather, the law “imprisoned everything under sin, so that the

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<sup>103</sup> Commenting on Rom. 3:20, Moo states,

“Works of the law,” then, as most interpreters have recognized, refers simply to “things that are done in obedience to the law.” Paul uses the phrase “works of the law” instead of the simple “works” because he is particularly concerned in this context to deny to Jews an escape from the general sentence pronounced in v. 19. But, since “works of the law” are simply what we might call “good works” defined in Jewish terms, the principle enunciated here has universal application; nothing a person does, whatever the object of obedience or the motivation of that obedience, can bring him or her into favor with God. (*Romans*, NICNT, 209)

<sup>104</sup> See above, n. 63.

promise [of eternal life] by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe" (Gal. 3:22). Obedience to the commands of the law was never meant to be the basis of acquittal before God. Conversely, the law was given "because of transgressions" (v. 19), functioning as a "disciplinarian" (v. 24, NRSV) to curb our tendencies toward sin in this age. Thus "the law is good if one uses it properly" (1 Tim. 1:8, NIV), for it is "profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness" (2 Tim. 3:16).

Instead of "rightly handling the word of truth" (2 Tim. 2:15), the circumcision group (and unbelieving Jews) perverted the law, relying on it for a righteous standing before God in light of the eschatological judgment. This defies the fundamental relationship between God's "mercy" and human sinfulness (cf. Rom. 9:14–29). When this relationship is healthy, our "pursuit" (Gk. *diōkō*; cf. Rom. 9:30; Phil. 3:14) of righteousness is regulated and channeled toward substitute-justification (based upon sacrifice) rather than self-justification (based upon works). So Paul relates the general difference between Jew and Gentile in their pursuit of righteousness:

What shall we say, then? That Gentiles who *did not pursue righteousness* have attained it, that is, a righteousness that is *by faith*; but that Israel who *pursued a law that would lead to righteousness* did not succeed in reaching that law. Why? Because they did not pursue it *by faith*, but as if it were *based on works*. (Rom. 9:30–32)

This pursuit of righteousness is clearly carried out with the ultimate goal of being "saved" (Rom. 10:1,9,10,13), since there is no indication of a break in thought between chapters 9 and 10. Paul can testify that the Jews in their pursuit of righteousness "have a zeal for God," but it is not "according to knowledge" (Rom. 10:2). "For, being ignorant of the righteousness that comes from God, and *seeking to establish their own*, they did not submit to God's righteousness. For Christ is *the end of the law for righteousness* to everyone who believes" (vv. 3–4). Here Christ as the "end" (Gk. *telos*) of the law refers simply to his sacrifice as the attained goal in humanity's pursuit of righteousness.<sup>105</sup>

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<sup>105</sup> There has been great dispute over the meaning of Rom. 10:4 (see Moo, *Romans*, NICNT, 636–43), but the context of the argument favors the simple fulfillment of a guiltless moral state in light of eschatological judgment (cf. Thomas R. Schreiner, "Paul's View of the Law in Romans 10:4–5," *WTJ* 55, no. 1 [Spring 1993]: 113–35). "Paul is speaking experientially in this text, so that his point is that

Though the circumcision group self-identified as Christians, Paul places them in the same category as the unbelieving Jews (though maybe even worse since they claimed to have knowledge of Christ crucified). They are “false brothers” (Gal. 2:4), “deceitful workmen” (2 Cor. 11:13), “dogs” and “evildoers” (Phil. 3:2). They are “empty talkers and deceivers” (Titus 1:10), who “want to be teachers of the law, but they do not know what they are talking about or what they so confidently affirm” (1 Tim. 1:7, NIV). They “proclaim Christ out of selfish ambition” (Phil. 1:17, NRSV). They “disqualify” others from the prize, because they have an “unspiritual mind” that “delights in false humility” (Col. 2:18, NIV).<sup>106</sup> They have “minds set on earthly things” (Phil. 3:19), flattering with words as a “pretext for greed” (1 Thess. 2:5).<sup>107</sup> They are “peddlers of God’s word” (2 Cor. 2:17), “teaching for shameful gain” (Titus 1:11; cf. 2 Cor. 11:20). They “practice cunning” and “tamper with God’s word,” employing “disgraceful, underhanded ways” (2 Cor. 4:2). They practice hypocrisy (Gal. 2:13), enslaving people (2 Cor. 11:20; Gal. 2:4), throwing them into confusion (Gal. 1:7; 5:10), and causing divisions (Rom. 16:17; 1 Tim. 1:4). Because their god is their “appetite,” their future is “destruction” (Phil. 3:19, NASB).<sup>108</sup> Since they try to “pervert the

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Christ is the end of using the law to establish one’s own righteousness. . . . Paul is countering here a form of works-righteousness in which the Jews thought that they could attain right standing with God by their works. This is the most natural way of understanding the statement that ‘they were seeking to establish their own righteousness’” (pp. 121–22).

<sup>106</sup> There is also great dispute concerning the nature of the “Colossian heresy” addressed in Col. 2 (see Peter O’Brien, *Colossians, Philemon*, WBC [Dallas: Word, 1998], xxx–xxxviii). However, the references to “elemental spirits” (v. 8,20; cf. Gal. 4:3,9), “circumcision made without hands” (v. 11; cf. Eph. 2:11), the passing of judgment “in questions of food and drink” (v. 16; cf. Gal. 2:12) and “with regard to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath” (v. 16; cf. Gal. 4:10), and “not holding fast to the Head” (v. 19; cf. Gal. 5:4) seem conclusive concerning a reference to the circumcision group.

<sup>107</sup> The language of 1 Thess. 2:1–12 seems to indicate that Paul is contrasting the motivations of his ministry with that of the circumcision group (cf. 2 Cor. 5:20; 11:7–21; 12:14–19; Phil. 1:15–18). Of course, his reference to unbelieving Jews (vv. 2 and 14ff; cf. Acts 17:5ff) would not be unrelated in Paul’s mind. Contrary to this is the idea of Greek itinerant “heathen missionaries” (F. F. Bruce, *1 and 2 Thessalonians*, WBC [Dallas: Word, 1998], 26; cf. A. J. Malherbe, “‘Gentle as a Nurse’: The Cynic Background to 1 Thess. 2,” *NovT* 12, no. 2 [1970]: 203–17).

<sup>108</sup> Phil. 3:2–21 makes most sense as a single, cohesive argument against the circumcision group. The crude translation of Gk. *koilia* (v. 19) as “belly” (KJV, NKJV, NRSV, ESV) or “stomach” (NIV) makes no sense in context (except maybe as a reference to Jewish food laws). It is the same *koilia* as Rom. 16:18, which is commonly translated “appetites” or “personal interests” (NLT). The offense of the cross ultimately derives from a corrupt “inward life, of feelings and desires” (“κοιλία,” BDAG, 550).

gospel of Christ,” Paul’s wish is that they will be “eternally condemned” (Gal. 1:7–9, NIV). “Their end will correspond to their deeds” (2 Cor. 11:15).<sup>109</sup>

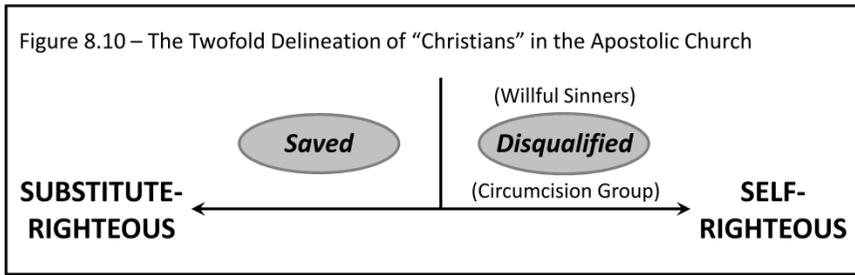
Such aggressive language would scarcely be tolerated, much less received, by modern hearers, but it reflects the severity of divine judgment concerning self-righteousness. Like their unbelieving Pharisaical counterparts, those of the circumcision group were ultimately concerned with exalting themselves (cf. Matt. 23:12; 2 Cor. 11:17), winning the approval of others (cf. Matt. 23:5; Gal. 4:17), and lining their pockets with money (cf. Matt. 23:25; 2 Cor. 2:17). On the day of the Lord, however, they will be “sentenced to hell” (Matt. 23:33; cf. Gal. 1:8; Phil. 3:19).

In the final analysis, there are only two groups of people: those who will inherit “eternal punishment” and those who will inherit “eternal life” (Matt. 25:46). The latter will have their names written in the book of life (Phil. 4:3; Rev. 20:12), based upon faith in the cross, while the former will be thrown into the lake of fire (Rev. 20:15), based upon unforgiven sin. For this reason, the issues become both *black and white* and *life and death*.

Thus Paul draws a sharp line between faith in Christ crucified and faith in works of the flesh—that is, substitute-righteousness versus self-righteousness (see figure 8.10). In the same vein, Paul contrasts “the one who works [for] his wages” (Rom. 4:4) with “the one who does not work but trusts him who justifies the ungodly” (v. 5). The circumcision group was the primary threat to Paul’s presentation of the death of the Messiah as the necessary vicarious sacrifice for human sin. The rejection of this belief was the effective *nullification* of the grace of God, for “if justification were through the law, *then Christ died for no purpose*” (Gal. 2:21). So there are two groups of people associated with the name of Christ whose sin will remain at the day of the Lord: those who presume upon the sacrifice and those who set aside the sacrifice.

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<sup>109</sup> All such language is reminiscent of the early church fathers’ condemnation of the Ebionites. Though there may be a relationship between the two (see esp. Daniel H. King, “Paul and the Tannaim: A Study in Galatians,” *WTJ* 45, no. 2 [Fall 1983]: 340–70), there is no clear evidence (see S. Goranson, “Ebionites,” *ABD*, 2:260–61).



## FAITH AND BOASTING

Because faith involves the entrusting of one’s very being to another, the natural result is “boasting” (Gk. *kauchaomai*, *kauchēsis*).<sup>110</sup> Whatever you commit yourself to is the thing in which you will boast, as commonly seen in such things as knowledge, money, career, relational connections, social impact, etc. The circumcision group boasted in their righteous deeds, while Paul boasted in the cross (cf. Rom. 3:27f; Gal. 6:13f; Eph. 2:9ff). The boasting of the former was common in first-century Judaism,<sup>111</sup> as is evident in Jesus’ parable concerning “some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous” (Luke 18:9; cf. Luke 7:41–47). The justifying of self (cf. Luke 10:29; 16:15), based upon pride (cf. Matt. 23:12; Rom. 11:17–23), is at the heart of all self-righteous boasting. The condemnation of, and condescension toward, fellow Jewish “sinners” (cf. Matt. 11:19; Mark 2:15ff; Luke 7:39; 15:2) was indicative of the culture (see especially Luke 19:7).

This self-righteous boasting—that is, becoming “arrogant” (Rom. 11:18)—resulted in the “breaking off” (vv. 17,19) of many Jews from the covenants and the hope of the resurrection. Such arrogant boasting was not limited to Jews, however, but was understood as a *universal reality*, common to Jew and Gentile alike. So Paul warns the Gentiles in Rome:

But if some of the [Jewish] branches were *broken off*, and you [Gentiles], although a wild olive shoot, were grafted in among the others and now share in the nourishing root of the olive tree, *do not be arrogant* [Gk. *katakauchaomai*;

<sup>110</sup> See Hans-Christoph Hahn, “Boast,” *NIDNTT*, 1:226–29.

<sup>111</sup> For a survey of the concept of boasting in second-temple Judaism, see Gathercole, *Where Is Boasting*, 37–194.

“boast,” KJV, NKJV, NRSV, NIV] toward the branches. . . . They were broken off because of their unbelief [in the cross], but you stand fast through faith. So do not become *proud*, but stand in awe. For if God did not spare the natural branches, *neither will he spare you*. (Rom. 11:17–21)

Paul goes on to say, more or less, that redemptive history is directed by God according to the responses of pride and humility in the human heart. When the Jews repent of their arrogance toward the cross, they will be “grafted back into their own olive tree” (v. 24). Moreover, they have experienced such a “hardening” (v. 25), or “blindness” (KJV, NKJV), for the purpose of God extending mercy to the Gentiles (vv. 30–32).<sup>112</sup> However, such self-righteousness will indeed be reversed, “and in this way all Israel will be saved” (v. 26).

The cross inherently militates against pride and self-righteous boasting. In the eyes of the haughty, the cross represents both weakness and failure. As Paul summarized, “We preach Christ crucified, a *stumbling block* to Jews and *folly* to Gentiles” (1 Cor. 1:23). Nevertheless, it was designed by God to be this way:

God chose what is *foolish* in the world to shame the wise [cf. Gentile pride];  
God chose what is *weak* in the world to shame the strong [cf. Jewish pride];  
God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, *so that no human being might boast* in the presence of God. (1 Cor. 1:27–29)

Christ Jesus has become *for us* “righteousness and sanctification and redemption” (v. 30), so that the Scripture might be fulfilled, “Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord” (v. 31, cf. Jer. 9:24). Though the circumcision group did technically “boast in God” (Rom. 2:17), this was by vicarious reliance upon the law.<sup>113</sup> It was an unrighteous boasting, perverting the gift of God for self-exaltation (cf. Matt. 6:5; John 5:39). Their “boasted mission” (2 Cor. 11:12) sought to “boast about outward appearance” (2 Cor. 5:12)—that is, “boast according to

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<sup>112</sup> Note that the blindness metaphor is in reference to the cross being a “stumbling stone” (Rom. 9:32f), implying that pride causes blindness to the truth. Jesus likewise labeled the Pharisees “blind guides” (Matt. 15:14; 23:16ff), and said, “For judgment I came into this world, that those who do not see may see, and those who see may become blind” (John 9:39).

<sup>113</sup> The “Jew” in Romans 2 only makes sense if he claims to be a believer, for how would an unbeliever cause division *within* the church? In light of the other references to internal ecclesiastical conflict (cf. 3:8; 6:1; 16:17f), the affiliation is most likely with the circumcision group.

the flesh" (2 Cor. 11:18; cf. Gal. 6:13). Paul saw this as contrary to the character of God. Thus he sought to "boast of the things that show my weakness" (2 Cor. 11:30), the greatest being his gospel of Christ crucified. Because God revealed the path to righteousness by the cross, all boasting is "excluded" (Rom. 3:27), for if we are "justified by works," then we have "something to boast about, *but not before God*" (Rom. 4:2).

Hence Paul, out of a fear of God, summarized his letter to the Galatians: "Far be it from me to boast *except in the cross* of our Lord Jesus Christ" (6:14). Similarly, he told the Corinthians: "I decided to know nothing among you *except Jesus Christ and him crucified*" (1 Cor. 2:2). The relationship between Paul's theology and his cruciform boast is spelled out explicitly in his letter to the Ephesians: "For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, *so that no one may boast*" (Eph. 2:8–9).<sup>114</sup>

Within this tension between self-righteousness and substitute-righteousness, the gift of the Holy Spirit is understood. Because the Spirit was sent to lead us into all truth (John 15:26; 16:13), so that we might inherit eternal life (1 John 2:24–27), *walking according to the Spirit in the New Testament is understood as walking according to the cross and justification by faith*. Though Paul, like the circumcision group, had "reason for confidence in the flesh" (Phil. 3:4), he sought to "worship in the Spirit of God and boast in Christ Jesus and have no confidence in the flesh" (v. 3, NRSV). Note the relationship between the Spirit, the flesh, and boasting. This is how we worship God: by casting ourselves continually upon the cross unto the day of Christ Jesus, putting no confidence in "a righteousness of my own" (v. 9). When we boast in the cross, we are walking according to the Holy Spirit, for it is assumed that the Spirit himself boasts in Christ crucified alone: "These things [concerning the cross, cf. 1 Cor. 1:18–2:5] God has revealed to us *through the Spirit*. For the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God" (1 Cor. 2:10).

In Romans 8, Paul outlines in detail what it means to walk "according to the Spirit" (vv. 4,5). If we assume that the circumcision group are those who "set

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<sup>114</sup> Paul explains the purpose of this grace: "so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus" (v. 7). Note here the placement of "seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus" (v. 6), both followed "by grace you have been saved" (v. 5) and preceded "by grace you have been saved" (v. 8). The idea is that we have been united *with Christ crucified*, and therefore we are confidently "seated . . . with him" (v.6) in anticipation of "the coming ages" (v. 7).

their minds on the things of the flesh” (v. 5), the message of verses 3–5 stands out clearly:

God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do [i.e., attain righteousness before God]. By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin [“to be a sin offering,” NIV], he condemned sin in the flesh, in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us [i.e., vicarious righteousness], who walk not according to the flesh [to attain righteousness] but according to the Spirit [to attain righteousness]. For those who live according to the flesh [i.e., the circumcision group] *set their minds on the things of the flesh* [cf. Gal. 6:13; Phil. 3:18], but those who live according to the Spirit *set their minds on the things of the Spirit* [cf. 1 Cor. 2:12–16; Col. 3:2]. (Rom. 8:3–5)<sup>115</sup>

Similarly, Paul questioned the Galatians, who had been “bewitched” (Gal. 3:1) by the circumcision group (cf. 2:12): “Did you *receive the Spirit* by works of the law or by hearing with faith?” (3:2). This “hearing with faith” clearly concerned “Jesus Christ . . . publicly portrayed *as crucified*” (v. 1). So Paul reasons, “Having started with *the Spirit*, are you now ending with *the flesh*?” (v. 3, NRSV). Walking according to the Spirit meant faith in Christ crucified; walking according to the flesh meant reliance on “observing the law” (v. 10, NIV).<sup>116</sup> If we sow to the flesh, we will ultimately “reap destruction”; but if we sow to the Spirit, we will “reap eternal life” (Gal. 6:8, NIV). Let us then “fight the good fight of the faith,” so as to “take hold of the eternal life to which [we] were called” (1 Tim. 6:12).<sup>117</sup>

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<sup>115</sup> The amplifications in the brackets help keep in mind that the attainment of righteousness before God in light of the day of wrath is the overarching theme and purpose of Paul’s letter to the Romans. Such an approach should likewise be considered when reading the narrative of Acts. The very outpouring of the Spirit in Acts 2 was upon *only those with faith in Christ crucified*. Thus it was God’s sign that only those who believed in him as such (v. 38) would be saved from the great and glorious day (v. 20).

<sup>116</sup> The working of miracles by the Spirit (v. 5) is complicated by those of the circumcision group who claimed to have angelic visitations (1:8; cf. Col. 2:18). The Pharisees believed in angels and spirits (Acts 23:8) *for a reason*. Far from today’s popular characterizations, the Pharisees commonly drove out demons (cf. Matt. 12:27, par.; Luke 9:49; Acts 19:13) and sought signs, wonders, and miracles (Matt. 12:38, par.; cf. “attested to you,” Acts 2:22), though for perverse motivations (cf. Matt. 7:15–23).

<sup>117</sup> Note Paul’s use of “the faith” in the sense of “the body of Christian truth implied in faith” (G. W. Bromiley, “Faith,” *ISBE*, 2:270). NT writers had a simple body of theological truth that revolved around a sacrificial understanding of the Messiah’s first coming in light of an apocalyptic

## CHRISTOPLATONIC RIGHTEOUSNESS

As Paul made clear, pride and self-righteousness are universal to humanity (cf. Rom. 3:9; 1 Cor. 1:23), deriving from our forefather Adam (cf. Rom. 5:12; 1 Cor. 15:21) and affecting every generation (cf. Rom. 3:23; Gal. 3:22). It was a problem for both Jew and Gentile in the first century, and it is a problem for both Jew and Gentile today. One's hope and eschatology may encourage or deter pride and self-righteousness, but the two can function somewhat independently. Many throughout history have held a highly perverted Christoplatonic hope, yet remained markedly repentant and humble. Others have held more closely to the biblical revelation when it comes to eschatology, yet reeked of self-aggrandizement (the Pharisees serving as the model).

That being said, one's view of redemptive history *inevitably affects* the response of the heart. When judgment and reward are perverted, or altogether removed from the picture, issues of righteousness are affected. Given our fallen state, we will always tend toward self-exaltation, self-justification, self-righteousness, etc. But the severity of God in the day of the Lord is meant to curb such tendencies. For example, my children may love me and generally seek to please and obey me. Yet every parent *knows* that without the ever-present persuasion of reward for good behavior and punishment for bad behavior, children will tend to run wild.

So also does the history of Christianity unfold. As the biblical view of the day of the Lord is transformed into a spiritualized, universalized, or realized eschatology, our view of both the severity and kindness of God are mitigated, and the church generally loses its spiritual focus and fervor. Both the reward of eternal life and the punishment of eternal fire are designed to awaken the human heart to the realities of righteousness, sin, and judgment. Thus self-righteousness latent in the human heart went unchecked in the early church as it progressively broke from its Jewish eschatological moorings. So Leon Morris describes,

Even in the early church it was not long before some people began to speak of Christianity as "the new law" and to subject themselves to a legalism every bit as trying as that of which the New Testament writers complained in

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understanding of his second coming within the overarching framework of Jewish election (cf. Rom. 1:5; Gal. 1:23; 1 Tim. 4:1,6; Jude 3).

Judaism. And this has continued in the history of the church. Again and again it is not liberty in Christ which has characterized believers, but strict conformity to some new rule they have made or found. This may involve a rigorous asceticism or the firm conviction that the way forward is by observance of some sacramental discipline or the like. . . . Mankind has a fiendish ingenuity in discovering ways of bringing itself into bondage. Paul's words are far from being out of date.<sup>118</sup>

In both its monastic and Christendom expressions, Christoplatonic Christianity increasingly suffered from self-justification. Monasticism generally sought self-justification by asceticism and its corollary "righteous" deeds, while Christendom self-justified its worldly power and wealth (for the glory of God, of course) based upon that age-old principle, "might is right."<sup>119</sup>

Over time monasticism became the dominant expression of what righteousness was understood to mean in the Western church. As it developed and spread from the Egyptian deserts to the European countryside, it began to codify its way of life. This codification took the form of a "rule,"—that is, a rule of religious life. The most influential rule was that of Saint Benedict (Latin, *Regula Benedicti*), written about 540. Radical self-discipline was the foundation of all monastic rules, unto the production of personal and corporate holiness. The stated goal of this holiness was the attaining of eternal life, as the Rule of Saint Benedict makes clear in its closing lines:

Now, we have written this Rule that, observing it in monasteries, we may show that we have *acquired at least some moral righteousness*, or a beginning of the monastic life. . . . Thou, therefore, who *hastenest to the heavenly home*, with the help of Christ fulfil this least rule written for a beginning; and then thou shalt with God's help attain at last to *the greater heights of knowledge and virtue* which we have mentioned above.<sup>120</sup>

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<sup>118</sup> Morris, *Atonement*, 126.

<sup>119</sup> As seen in Plato's characters Thrasymachus (*Republic*, 336–54) and Callicles (*Gorgias*).

<sup>120</sup> *The Holy Rule of Our Most Holy Father Benedict: With Declarations and Constitution of the American-Cassinense Congregation*, trans. Boniface F. Verheyen, (Atchison, KS: Abbey Student Press, 1949), chap. 73; italics added; available online at <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/benedict/rule>.

Throughout the Middle Ages, monasticism generally sought the attainment of moral righteousness in this life unto entrance into immaterial heaven at death. The former often rose to fever pitch, and it was against such abuses of monastic self-righteousness that the Augustinian monk, Martin Luther, primarily reacted.<sup>121</sup> After fifteen years of ardent moral pursuit, Luther found himself crushed by legalism and plagued by a guilty conscience, crying out, “How may I find a gracious God?”<sup>122</sup> The answer came by a “theological breakthrough” (c. 1515) concerning “the righteousness of God.”<sup>123</sup> Luther realized that when Paul spoke of the righteousness of God (e.g., Rom. 1:7; 3:21f; 10:3; Phil. 3:9) he meant “a righteousness which is a gift from God, rather than a righteousness which belongs to God.”<sup>124</sup> The judgmental righteousness of God spoken of throughout the Scriptures (e.g., Ps. 50:6; 98:9; Isa. 5:16; 51:5) was *bad news* for the sinner, but the atonemental righteousness of God spoken of by Paul was *good news* for the sinner. Though still couched within a redemptive framework of heavenly destiny, Luther found peace with God and recovered the essential substitutional heart of the gospel (see figure 8.11). People are acquitted of their sins and saved from the wrath of God by faith in God’s sacrifice.

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<sup>121</sup> Theological historian Alister E. McGrath observes,

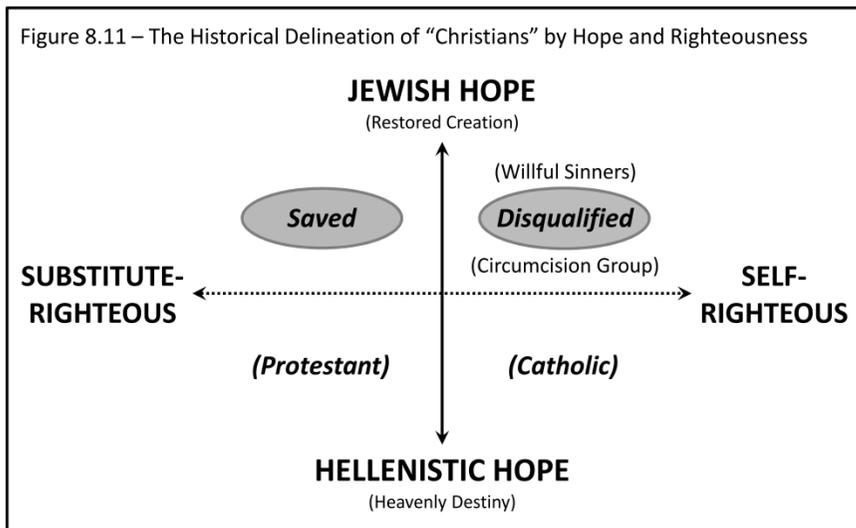
In a passage written toward the end of his career, Luther relates how he tried with all his might to do what was necessary to achieve salvation, but found himself more and more convinced that he could not be saved. *If ever a monk could get to heaven through monastic discipline, Luther remarked, he was that monk.* Yet he kept doubting: “‘You didn’t do that right. You weren’t contrite enough. You left that out of your confession.’” It seemed to Luther that he simply could not meet the precondition for salvation. He did not have the resources needed to be saved. There was no way that God could justly reward him with salvation—only with condemnation. (*Reformation Thought: An Introduction*, 4th ed. [Chichester, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012], 119; italics added)

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.*, 119. Ecclesiastical abuses, as seen in Luther’s Ninety-Five Theses, were understood as products of the church’s theological abuses; so this question (which drove his theological conclusions) was “the central question on his personal agenda” (*Ibid.*).

<sup>123</sup> See Alister E. McGrath, *Luther’s Theology of the Cross: Martin Luther’s Theological Breakthrough*, 2nd ed. (Chichester, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), esp. 127–60.

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.*, 155; italics in the original.

Figure 8.11 – The Historical Delineation of “Christians” by Hope and Righteousness



Of course, not all Catholics during the time of the Reformation were self-righteous, just as there were believers within Pharisaical movement during Paul’s day.<sup>125</sup> However, the general spiritual culture of Catholicism during the time of the Reformation had clearly degenerated into a meritorious system of works-righteousness (technically faith *plus* works), which had crippled the gospel and the church’s witness.<sup>126</sup> Within such an arid spiritual climate, Luther’s theology of the cross (justification by faith *alone*) spread like wildfire, disrupting the structures of the Catholic Church and the very fabric of European society.<sup>127</sup>

<sup>125</sup> Luther, however, was generally vitriolic in his critique of the pope; e.g., “You see how woefully those err who try to escape eternal damnation by means of their monkeries, cowls, and tonsures. Moreover, such people even offer their supererogatory works for sale and transfer them to others. This, I regret to say, is how we lived in the papacy. You young people, be grateful to God for your better insight, and learn these words well. For death and the devil are in league with the pope and with the Turks’ Koran to delude the people into relying on their foul works for salvation” (LW, 22:360–61).

<sup>126</sup> Especially in light of the common practice of selling indulgences (a major source of papal revenue) for justification and the forgiveness of sins; that is, “The eternal penalties resulting from sinful actions could be reduced, if not eliminated, by payment of an appropriate sum of money to the appropriate ecclesiastical figure” (McGrath, *Reformation Thought*, 123). So, “Luther’s doctrine of justification by faith, with its associated doctrine of the ‘priesthood of all believers,’ thus assumed an importance which far transcended the sphere of academic theology. . . . No payment of any kind was required to receive divine forgiveness” (Ibid., 124).

<sup>127</sup> Concerning monasticism as a whole, Luther believed it to be antithetical to justification by faith (cf. “The Judgment of Martin Luther on Monastic Vows [1521],” LW, 44:243–400; and “Avoiding the Doctrines of Men [1522],” LW, 35:125–53)—even saying, “Would to God that all monks and nuns

Over time, the theology of the Reformation was codified and dogmatized many times over in various forms, providing a defined platform for Protestant missions and evangelism for the next four hundred years. As historical and archeological evidence began to mount in the early twentieth century, however, Protestants began to grapple with the Jewish background of the gospel. With the rediscovery of apocalyptic eschatology (Schweitzer, et al.) and the proposal of its “realization” at the first coming of Jesus (Dodd, et al.), the centrality of the cross began to veer.<sup>128</sup> As inaugurationalism (whether full or partial) came into vogue, many of the traditional categories for interpreting the cross began to be redefined.

Since Paul is the most prominent interpreter of the cross in the New Testament, this redefinition centered on his writings and came to be known as “the new perspective on Paul.”<sup>129</sup> This so-called New Perspective (also referred to as NPP, for New Perspective on Paul) found its roots in the Jewish studies of the

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could hear this sermon and properly understand this matter and would all forsake the cloisters, and thus all the cloisters in the world would cease to exist; this is what I would wish” (“Third Sermon, March 11, 1522, Tuesday after *Invocavit*,” *LW*, 51:80)

Therefore, “In modern history, monasticism suffered a substantial diminution at the time of the Protestant Reformation. Generally, the leaders of the Reformation believed that monastics did not in fact conform to a simple gospel rule of life, that their repetitive prayers, fasts, and ceremonies were meaningless, and that they had no real value to society. In Protestant thought, the pious family tended to replace the monastery as the ideal style of Christian life. Wherever the Reformation was triumphant, the monasteries were disestablished” (C. T. Marshall, “Monasticism,” in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology: Second Edition*, ed. Walter A. Elwell [Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001], 786).

<sup>128</sup> As Schweitzer is known for saying, “The doctrine of righteousness by faith is therefore a subsidiary crater, which has formed within the rim of the main crater—the mystical doctrine of redemption through the being-in-Christ” (*The Mysticism of Paul the Apostle*, trans. W. Montgomery [London: A. & C. Black, 1931], 225). Such marginalization of the doctrine of justification has been taken up by many following Schweitzer, including E. P. Sanders, who prefers “participationist” language instead of mystical union (cf. *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*, 434–42).

<sup>129</sup> The phrase “new perspective” in relation to Pauline studies was originally used by N. T. Wright (“The Paul of History and the Apostle of Faith,” *TynBul* 29 [1978]: 61–88), but J. D. G. Dunn popularized the well-known phrase (“The New Perspective on Paul,” in *Jesus, Paul and the Law* [London: SPCK, 1990; orig. pub. 1983])—both owing to E. P. Sanders and his book *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1977). These make up “the three musketeers of the so-called ‘New Perspective’” (Gathercole, *Where Is Boasting*, 16). Though holding many commonalities, Wright describes the internal reality: “There is no such thing as *the* new perspective. . . . There is only a disparate family of perspectives, some with more, some with less family likeness, and with fierce squabbles and sibling rivalries going on inside” (*Justification*, 28).

early twentieth century,<sup>130</sup> and it developed in the wake of the Holocaust.<sup>131</sup> Though concerning itself with every area of theology and history, the New Perspective focused its attention on Martin Luther's supposed *anachronistic misreading* of Paul.<sup>132</sup> It is said that Paul did not have an "introspective conscience," as did Luther, characteristic of "late medieval piety and theology."<sup>133</sup> Instead, he had a robust conscience, fundamentally in line with his previous Pharisaical life.<sup>134</sup> In fact, Judaism as a whole had been misconstrued by Luther as a legalistic religion of works-righteousness, rather than as a religion of grace with provisions for sin.<sup>135</sup> Moreover, Paul was not primarily concerned, as was Luther, with issues of personal salvation (i.e., soteriology and eschatology), but rather he was concerned with "the place of the Gentiles in the Church" (i.e., sociology and ecclesiology).<sup>136</sup>

Within this framework, Paul's references to "justification by faith" are reinterpreted to answer the question, "On what grounds can Gentiles participate in the people of God in the last days?"<sup>137</sup> Furthermore, the "works of the law"

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<sup>130</sup> See esp. G. F. Moore, *Judaism in the First Centuries of the Christian Era: The Age of the Tannaim*, 3 vols. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1927–30).

<sup>131</sup> See H. J. Schoeps, *Paul: The Theology of the Apostle in the Light of Jewish Religious History* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1961); cf. Westerholm, *Perspectives Old and New*, 101–200.

<sup>132</sup> Originally and most incisively stated by Krister Stendahl, "The Apostle Paul and the Introspective Conscience of the West," *HTR* 56 (1963): 199–215; reprinted in Krister Stendahl, *Paul Among Jews and Gentiles* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976), 78–96. All of the major lines of New Perspective thought are found in this article.

<sup>133</sup> Stendahl, *Paul Among Jews and Gentiles*, 82.

<sup>134</sup> As per Dodd's pupil, W. D. Davies, *Paul and Rabbinic Judaism: Some Rabbinic Elements in Pauline Theology*, 2nd ed. (London: SPCK, 1955).

<sup>135</sup> Broadly labeled by E. P. Sanders as "covenantal nomism" (from Gk. *nomos*, i.e., "law"): "Briefly put, covenantal nomism is the view that one's place in God's plan is established on the basis of the covenant and that the covenant requires as the proper response of man his obedience to its commandments, while providing means of atonement for transgression" (*Paul and Palestinian Judaism*, 75). Thus the implication is that "election and ultimately salvation are considered to be by God's mercy rather than human achievement" (*Ibid.*, 422). "In short, this is what Paul finds wrong with Judaism: it is not Christianity" (*Ibid.*, 552). This assessment ignores Jesus' condemnations of Pharisaical pride (cf. Matt. 23:12; Luke 16:15; 18:9) and Paul's clear characterization of many Jews in the first century as "arrogant" (Rom. 11:18).

<sup>136</sup> Stendahl, *Paul Among Jews and Gentiles*, 84.

<sup>137</sup> "Paul's discussion [concerning 'righteousness by faith'] cannot be understood unless we know the topic that he and his opponents were debating. The subject matter is not 'how can the individual be righteous in God's sight?', but rather, 'on what grounds can Gentiles participate in the people of God

(i.e., circumcision, Sabbath observance, and food laws) are understood to be simply Jewish “identity markers” or “ethnic badges,” which kept the Gentiles excluded from the covenant community.<sup>138</sup> According to this view, Paul never really experienced a “conversion,” as such, but was simply called as an apostle to take the gospel beyond the Jewish confines.<sup>139</sup> Additionally, since Paul is not primarily concerned with issues of salvation, there is no need to read into his writings a substitutional righteousness. Instead, the “righteousness of God” is simply “God’s faithfulness” to his covenants, thus speaking of the qualities that God *possesses* rather than the status that he *imputes* as a gift to sinners.<sup>140</sup> Therefore Luther’s fundamental “theological breakthrough” is overturned.

Such a radical dismissal of traditional Lutheran and Reformed theology obviously created a firestorm of controversy, drawing heavy criticism at both the academic level<sup>141</sup> and the popular level.<sup>142</sup> Though recent debate has degenerated into something of a “quagmire,”<sup>143</sup> one thing is for certain: The New Perspective has been greatly “overstated.”<sup>144</sup> Some aspects of the New Perspective are helpful, but Paul’s primary emphasis is soteriological, not sociological.<sup>145</sup> It is the vertical relationship between God and persons that dominates Paul’s thinking,

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in the last days?’” (E. P. Sanders, *Paul: A Very Short Introduction* [New York: Oxford University Press, 2001], 58).

<sup>138</sup> See above, n. 63.

<sup>139</sup> “There is not—as we usually think—first a conversion, and then a call to apostleship; there is only the call to the work among the Gentiles” (Stendahl, *Paul Among Jews and Gentiles*, 84–85). See a rebuttal by Seyoon Kim, *Paul and the New Perspective: Second Thoughts on the Origin of Paul’s Gospel* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002).

<sup>140</sup> For example, James D. G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 334–89; Dunn, *New Perspective on Paul*, 193–212, 367–80; N. T. Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said*, 118–33; and Wright, *Paul: Fresh Perspectives*, 110–22.

<sup>141</sup> See A. Andrew Das, *Paul, the Law, and the Covenant* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000); Seifrid, *Christ, Our Righteousness*; Westerholm, *Perspectives Old and New*; and D. A. Carson, Peter T. O’Brien, and Mark A. Seifrid, eds., *Justification and Variegated Nomism*, 2 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001, 2004).

<sup>142</sup> See John Piper, *The Future of Justification: A Response to N. T. Wright* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2007); cf. Wright’s response in *Justification*.

<sup>143</sup> Bird, *Saving Righteousness of God*, 89.

<sup>144</sup> See G. K. Beale’s review of *Justification and Variegated Nomism* in “The Overstated ‘New’ Perspective?” *BBR* 19, no. 1 (2009): 85–94.

<sup>145</sup> Mediating voices between the new and old perspectives include Bird, *Saving Righteousness of God*; Gathercole, *Where Is Boasting*; and Francis Watson, *Paul, Judaism, and the Gentiles: Beyond the New Perspective*, Rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007).

rather than the horizontal relationship between person and person.<sup>146</sup> Moreover, Judaism, like Christianity, is a religion of grace, yet the ideal is easily perverted in both by the same prideful self-righteousness derived from the fall.<sup>147</sup>

Paul clearly characterized the unbelieving Jews of his day as “arrogant” (Rom. 11:18), a condition likewise plaguing the Gentiles (cf. Rom. 1:30; 1 Cor. 4:18f). Jesus too condemned many of the Jews of his day for exalting themselves (Matt. 23:12; Luke 14:11), for justifying themselves (Luke 10:29; 16:15), for acting in pretense (Matt. 23:5; Luke 20:47), and for being confident in their own righteousness (Luke 18:9). It is pride that ultimately determines our salvation — that is, our being “broken off” or “grafted in” (Rom. 11:19). And it is salvation that remains the driving question of the apostolic witness: “What must I do to be saved?” (Acts 16:30; cf. Acts 2:21,37f; 3:19f; 4:12; 10:42; 11:14; 15:1,11; 16:17; 17:31; 24:25).

The New Perspective has two major problems. First, in line with its liberal leanings, it generally rejects a sacrificial interpretation of the cross, and thus any reference to substitutional atonement is anathema. Second, it generally holds to a highly inaugurational approach to Jewish eschatology.<sup>148</sup> Therefore both the cross

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<sup>146</sup> “Sadly, reformed exegetes seem to have ignored the horizontal aspects and those in the NPP over-emphasize to an inordinate degree the horizontal dimensions. A denial of the corporate dimension of God’s saving action means that justification is artificially removed from the social context in which Paul rigorously prosecuted justification by faith as a mandate for Gentile inclusion. The status of the individual before God and the status of individuals within a group setting are not mutually exclusive categories... when viewed this way the ‘Lutheran’ and NPP approach to Paul are hardly contradictory in what they want to affirm.” (Bird, *Saving Righteousness of God*, 153)

<sup>147</sup> So Moisés Silva:

It would be folly to deny that (exclusivistic) national and sociological commitments on the part of Paul’s Jewish contemporaries were an integral part of the attitudes the apostle was combating. It is no less ill-advised, however, to deduce that first-century Judaism was free from the universal human tendency to rely on one’s own resources rather than on God’s power. Why should it be thought that ethnic pride and (personal) self-confidence are mutually exclusive factors? The attempt to work for, or at least contribute to, one’s own salvation by means of good deeds was hardly absent in the Jewish communities with which Paul interacted. (“Faith Versus Works of the Law,” 246)

<sup>148</sup> Wright, being the most articulate and readable of those within the New Perspective, summarizes the concept of covenant, relating it to inaugurationalism:

The “covenant,” in my shorthand, is not something other than God’s determination to deal with evil once and for all and so put the whole creation (and humankind with it) right at last. When will it become clear to the geocentrists [condescending reference to traditional Lutheran and Reformed thinkers? *Dealing with sin, saving humans from it*,

and the day of the Lord are perverted, resulting in the same old liberal conclusion: Salvation and the kingdom are established now through the church and social justice.

The New Perspective is somewhat the logical consequence of inaugurationalism; and to the degree that it is embraced, sociological and ecclesiological issues become prominent. Thus extreme inaugurationalism produces extremely sociologically oriented interpretations.<sup>149</sup> Since the majority of Paul's discussion concerning the cross takes place in an eschatological context, those who embrace *the realization of eschatology in this age* logically place Paul's thought in the context of ecclesiology in this age.<sup>150</sup> Those who hold more closely to a future realization/judgment tend to interpret Paul's thought along more traditional lines (see figure 8.12).<sup>151</sup>

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*giving them grace, forgiveness, justification, glorification—all this was the purpose of the single covenant from the beginning, now fulfilled in Jesus Christ. . . .*

Paul's retrieval of this underlying story, and his dialectical engagement with other contemporary Jewish versions of and theories about it, and his rethinking (but not abandoning) of it in the light of Jesus, the Jewish Messiah, the denouement-in-person of the single-plan-through-Israel-for-the-world, the one through whom at last the one God would fulfill the one plan to accomplish the one purpose, to rid the world of sin and establish his new creation—and of the Holy Spirit, the operating power of the single-saving-plan-through-Israel-for-the-world-now-fulfilled-in-the-Messiah, Jesus. (*Justification*, 95–96; italics in the original)

<sup>149</sup> For example, Heikki Räisänen, *Paul and the Law* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986); and John G. Gager, *Reinventing Paul* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

<sup>150</sup> Thus one will notice at a broad level very little eschatological emphasis in Sanders, some in Dunn, and yet more in Wright. However, "Both Wright and Dunn recognize the relationship of justification to the final judgment; the problem is that they minimize this aspect and subordinate it beneath the application of justification to covenantal membership" (Bird, *Saving Righteousness of God*, 101).

<sup>151</sup> See Westerholm, *Perspectives Old and New*, 352–407; see also Westerholm's concise (and satiric) article, "Justification by Faith is the Answer: What is the Question?" *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 70 (2006): 197–217.

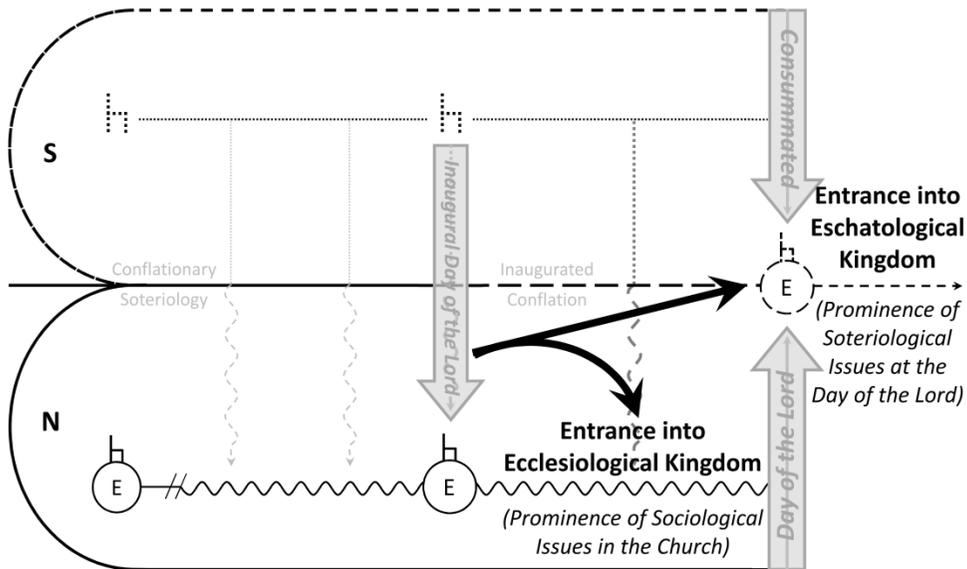


Figure 8.12 – The Inaugurational Framework behind the New Perspective

Though Luther’s theology lacked an apocalyptic framework for redemptive history, culminating in the day of the Lord and the resurrection of the body, his fundamental “theological breakthrough” of substitutional righteousness based upon sacrificial atonement remains sound.<sup>152</sup> On the last day when God opens the books of history and charges each and every human being with the crimes they committed while in the body, only those whose names are written in the book of life (by faith in the God’s sacrifice on their behalf) will be acquitted. Those without faith in Christ crucified will bear their own sin, and thus they will be thrown into the lake of fire. Then the acquitted will inherit eternal life and will be rewarded according to their righteous deeds. But all of the righteous deeds of the guilty will be for naught, since they will be disqualified.

<sup>152</sup> “It is high time that we eschew false dichotomies. The NT does reflect certain sociological concerns not fully appreciated by the Reformers, but it hardly follows from this fact that other elements they saw in the text are false. Again, we may readily agree that Protestantism has often caricatured rabbinic Judaism and that, in the process, it has failed to provide a complete picture of Paul’s thought. None of that means, however, that the traditional doctrine of justification by faith is in need of overhauling” (Silva, “Faith Versus Works of the Law,” 247).