

- d. Appropriate to his understanding of the gospel's nature and purpose, Paul ended this short context on the gospel by insisting upon its entire *Theocentricity*. That is, the biblical gospel reveals a salvation for men that is absolutely unilateral from first to last. In every respect, salvation depends solely upon the sovereign intention, power, and work of the triune God.

*“This was to demonstrate His righteousness, because in the forbearance of God He passed over the sins previously committed; for the demonstration, I say, of His righteousness at the present time, that He might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.” (3:25b-26)*

- 1) The first thing to observe about this final sub-context is that Paul specifically attributed Christ's propitiation to God's intention to demonstrate His own righteousness (3:25b). It was noted at the outset of the larger context that it finds its central theme in God's righteousness, Paul making mention of it twice at the beginning (3:21-22) and twice at the end of the passage (3:25b-26a).

It was further noted that Paul's reference to the “righteousness of God” is particularly concerned with God's justifying action on behalf of men and how it reflects upon His own righteous character. His emphasis in 3:21-26 is foremost upon righteousness as a divine *gift* by which God justifies men. As such, he was speaking of God's righteousness from the vantage point of its being the marrow of the *gospel*: the fact that the *righteousness of God* comes to men through faith (3:21, 22) demonstrates *God's righteousness* - His integrity in upholding His justice and in keeping His word of promised grace - thereby showing Him to be “*just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus*” (3:25, 26).

This reconsideration of Paul's emphasis is important because, in interpreting 3:25b-26, most commentators embrace one of two positions:

- The first is that Paul was here using the phrase, *His righteousness*, in reference to God's just character; His innate attribute of righteousness. If this view is correct, then Paul's point was that Christ's propitiation at Calvary demonstrates that God is just, for at the appointed time He satisfied His justice with respect to the sins previously committed and held in forbearance.
- The second view is that God's righteousness has reference to His integrity in honoring His ancient and ongoing promise to accomplish His redemption of the fallen created order, and specifically mankind. This being the correct interpretation, Paul was stating that Christ's propitiation demonstrates the fulfillment of God's promise to bring His salvation, and with it the cleansing and forgiveness of the sins previously committed.

Both views are supportable, but the context makes it unnecessary to decide absolutely between the two. For while the first view seems to better capture Paul's meaning, the second one is also clearly implicated. That is, in vindicating His own justice and satiating His wrath by Christ's death, God also fulfilled His long-standing promise to bring salvation to men solely through the exercise of His own power and prerogative.

It has been observed that the theme of the *Day of the Lord* is central to the Old Testament promise of the kingdom, and this motif is notably characterized by two parallel ideas related to God's righteousness. The first is the *vindication* of His righteousness in the outpouring of His wrath against sin and unbelief, and the second is the *exaltation* of His righteousness in His sovereign, saving mercy toward His people. As Christ's cross is the essential fulfillment of the Day of Yahweh, so both of the above aspects of divine righteousness were fulfilled by it.

- 2) Second, it is noteworthy that Paul associated the propitiation in Christ's blood with God's forbearance in "passing over" of the sins of humanity (3:25c). The verb rendered *passed over* occurs nowhere else in the New Testament, but it carries the basic sense of disregarding or overlooking something. In extra-biblical usage, in relation to legal offenses it signifies postponed punishment for a crime. Here Paul was using it in reference to God's forbearance in withholding punishment for sin. More specifically, he was indicating that the demonstration of God's righteousness that came through the propitiation in Christ's blood was necessary because God had previously left human sin unpunished.

By this assertion Paul was not denying any divine punishment of sin whatsoever prior to Calvary. Clearly God did, in various ways throughout history, exercise His just indignation against human unrighteousness, beginning with His expulsion of Adam and Eve from the garden. Paul's statement concerns, not God's just punishment of sin *per se*, but rather the *atoning satisfaction* of sin. That is to say, from the beginning of redemptive history God had promised to judge all unrighteousness in such a way that it would be forever destroyed and everlasting righteousness would be ushered in. Through the mouths of His prophets and through all of His providential interactions with men Yahweh continued to testify of His determination to enter into final judgment with the world and, thereby, overcome and reverse the curse that lay heavy upon it.

In this way God's forbearance did not indicate that He was overlooking sin, much less that He took no real offense with it. *Rather, it spoke of His sovereign restraint exercised for the sake of His predetermined timing in accomplishing His eternal purpose to redeem the fallen cosmos.* God previously "passed over" human sin in anticipation of the coming of the Redeemer, which forbearance served at least three revelatory purposes:

- a) The first was His intention to continue “building the case” and preparing the way for His sovereign salvation in Christ. The upward movement of redemptive history, and especially the theocratic kingdom governed by Old Covenant, served a specifically and comprehensively Christological purpose. The unrighteousness of Israel was “managed” through a sacrificial system that, while it portrayed and promised atonement, did not itself accomplish it (Hebrews 7:11-10:18). The perpetuity of the Israelites’ sacrifices alone made this painfully evident, and served to press upon them their continual guilt. But at the same time, they also pointed with hope and anticipation to the one true, final, and everlasting sacrifice to be accomplished by their faithful God.

But the sacrifices were not alone in their prophetic disclosure; God spoke clearly and constantly of what He was going to do. For even as He postponed His punishment generation after generation - all the while openly declaring the sin and increasing guilt of men - He continued to proclaim through His prophets that the day was coming when He would resolve the problem of their uncleanness, culpability, and estrangement.

- b) The second is closely related to the first. That is, this postponement testified to Israel, and more generally to the world at large, that there was no hope for men apart from God’s intervention. In other words, God’s delay in exacting due punishment not only revealed *what* He was going to do to overcome sin, it revealed *why* He was going to do it. The passing of endless centuries marked by God’s call to repentance and faith and man’s failure to meet the divine charge served to cement in human consciousness the *necessity* of divine intervention. If men were to live as the image-bearers they were created to be, God Himself would have to renew and empower them (Jeremiah 31:31-34; Ezekiel 36:16-29, 37:1-14). The problem of sin and the condemnation it incurred would not be addressed until the appointed time in which God would accomplish what man could not. He would overcome sin, death and hell for mankind in the Man whose name means “Yahweh saves.”
- c) But the most important point of revelation in God’s forbearance is its attestation of His eternal determination to *redeem* and not simply *punish*. If judgment and punishment were alone God’s purpose for the world, there was no reason to withhold them for a later day. But because His judgment of the world had its ultimate goal in its redemption and recovery, the punishment of sin awaited the appointed day of redemption when Yahweh the Redeemer would come to Zion. (cf. Isaiah 41:1-44:23, 46:1-49:13, 59:1-60:3; also Jeremiah 31:1-33:26; Daniel 2:1-45; Micah 3:9-5:5; etc.).

- 3) In His forbearance God was not “looking the other way” with respect to sin; quite the opposite, He was testifying to the world that He would *personally* address it. Furthermore, He would do so not simply by judging and punishing it, but by overcoming and destroying it and reversing its effects upon His creation in a new heavens and earth (Isaiah 64:1-65:25; cf. 11:1-10). God’s forbearance had as its purpose the glorious demonstration of His own righteousness, power, goodness and mercy at the preordained time of His great and final work of redemption: “...*for the demonstration, I say, of His righteousness at the present time, that He might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus*” (3:26).

After millennia of announcement and methodical preparation, “*when the fulness of the time came, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the Law, in order that He might redeem those who were under the Law, that we might receive the adoption as sons*” (Galatians 4:4-5). Thus the language of Christ’s work and its fruit is the language of fulfillment and even consummation (ref. 1 Corinthians 10:11; Galatians 4:1-5; Hebrews 1:1-4, 9:18-26, 11:39-40; also 1 Peter 1:3-21).

In a marvelous economy of words Paul summed up not only the present context, but also the whole of the gospel he preached. God’s eternal intention is that, when men consider Him and what He is like, they are to view Him as *just* and the *one who justifies* all who have faith in Jesus. Far from being a complacent deity who can tolerate unrighteousness, in His holiness God is a consuming fire who cannot and will not set aside justice. But because of His infinite love, He has exercised His grace and mercy by *taking upon Himself* His own just retribution in order that men should be forgiven and restored to their true humanity as image-bearers. ***God became Man for the sake of men***; hence Paul’s reference to Christ simply as *Jesus* - the one true Man whose very name means “Yahweh saves.”

And so Paul’s argumentation in 3:21-26 can be summarized as follows: God’s ultimate end in setting forth a propitiation in Christ’s blood was the demonstration to the world of His own righteousness, both in punishing unrighteousness and in delivering men from it. Because His goal was *redemption* and not merely *retribution*, the sins committed before the coming of the Redeemer were necessarily held in forbearance against the appointed day when, in redeeming the fallen creation, He would bear the punishment for sins “*once for all, the just for the unjust*” (1 Peter 3:18), thereby reconciling all things to God (Colossians 1:19-20). In the glorious shame of Christ’s cross God fully vindicated His righteousness in such a way that “*we should become the righteousness of God in Him*”; by the propitiation in Christ’s blood He showed Himself in the sight of every creature to be singularly “*just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.*”

The divine glory so long ago revealed to Moses had at last found its promised fulfillment: “*The Lord, the Lord God, compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in lovingkindness and truth; who keeps lovingkindness for thousands, who forgives iniquity, transgression and sin; yet He will by no means leave the guilty unpunished...*”