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Why did Jesus have to Die?

Careful Bible reading shows how a verse in one chapter of Romans fits in with the rest of Scripture to reveal a hugely important truth – the reason for the death of the Lord Jesus Christ. This is something that really matters to us because the Bible insists that Jesus died for our sins. The fundamental problem that faces all of us is that of sin and its inescapable consequence death.

Here is the verse from Romans that will start our exploration into the reason for the death of Jesus:

*“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. This was to show God’s righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins**” (Romans 3:22-25).*

The words shown in bold text comprise verse 25 but it is important to look at a verse in its setting or context. It’s easy to take a verse out of its context to support a point of view. However, to see what the Bible *really* teaches, you have to look at each verse in its own context, as part of the overall argument.

❖ “Redemption in Christ Jesus”

Verses 24-26 are so full of information that we need to slow down and think hard about what they are saying. This is another thing to note about Bible reading. Sometimes you need to read an entire book or several chapters at a stretch to get the flow of the argument. At other times you need to slow right down and look carefully at every word.

We are going to do that now, first by looking at these verses overall and then, in the next two chapters, by examining in more detail the way we can receive God’s salvation, through the death of Jesus. We have already learned that a

step-by-step approach can help us to unlock things, so let's try that again.¹

Verses	Teaching
3:19-20	No one could keep God's commandments, so God's Law serves the purpose of showing us how wrong we are. But keeping God's law can't make us right with God, because we just can't keep it perfectly; ²
3:21	God has found another way of declaring that He is against Sin in all its aspects, without in any way lowering His standards or seeming to compromise with sin. This new way – which is outside the scope of the law that God gave through Moses – was anticipated in the Law and the Prophets; ³
3:22	It requires men and women to believe in Jesus Christ, so that they can be counted "right" with God, or "just" in His holy sight.
3:23-24	This righteousness is not something we can achieve by ourselves, it comes about as God's free gift (an act of His "grace" or divine favour).
3:25	God can redeem (or rescue) mankind from the power of sin and death because of what Jesus has done. God gave Jesus to redeem us. If we want to be saved we must do something as well – we must believe these things and act upon them.

¹ Here is another chance for you to write down the key points in this argument and then compare your list with the summary that follows, if you want to develop your analytical skills. But it's not compulsory!

² The Bible term for being right with God is "righteous" and the term Paul uses for being found "Not Guilty" in God's law court is "justified".

³ We should therefore find some indications in the Law itself that it would eventually fail to achieve the object of bringing people to God and that another arrangement would be needed, and those pointers are indeed to be found there, as the Letter to the Hebrews explains in some detail.

❖ **God's Right – We're Wrong!**

Here's one further technique we can use to get things crystal clear in our minds. Those various points can be summarised in just a few key statements, as follows:

- ✓ God is right about everything – His law is righteous; His acts and attitudes are perfect.
- ✓ When we break God's law we are shown up as sinners, and we are in the wrong.
- ✓ God's wants to put us in the right, but He can't do that by putting Himself in the wrong. So He has chosen another way to show right from wrong: He gave His Son to die on our behalf.
- ✓ If we recognise the rightness of God, by accepting the death of Jesus on our behalf, we can be forgiven.

These are vitally important issues. God wants to save mankind from sin, for He is against sin in all its forms, and always will be. That is the sort of God He is and always must be, as we saw earlier.⁴ Just as God cannot lie and cannot sin, He cannot compromise His righteousness – He has always been "right" or "righteous" and He always will be. But now there is a way of forgiveness made possible by God's great love for us and by the full and willing cooperation of the Lord Jesus, God's only begotten Son.

❖ **God's Law of Love**

The law defined God's righteousness in a particular way by explaining what was best and worst for Israel as a nation.⁵ It defined what was "right" and "wrong", being based upon two key principles:

- Those who sought to keep the law should put God at the centre of their lives. They should love Him first and foremost and thus be willing to do whatever He asked of them; and

⁴ Chapter 6 pages 68-69.

⁵ The Law also introduced principles of hygiene and social justice which were far in advance of the times, but here we are concentrating on the way the Law showed right from wrong.

✎ They should put others before themselves and care for them as much as they cared for themselves.

Those key principles were explained by the Lord Jesus when, on one occasion, he was asked which was the greatest commandment in the law.⁶ His answer was:

“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbour as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets” (Matthew 22:37-40).

Keeping the law was a way of demonstrating love for God and for other people. Breaking the law was a failure to love and live acceptably before God. Yet when we fail to love, that never diminishes God’s love for us. His love is like that of a mother for her children: she still loves them even when they don’t seem to show any love back. So it was that God wanted, and still wants, to save sinners from sin and to rescue them from death, but He could not do that by compromising His righteousness.

God couldn’t ignore sin and its awful effects. To do so would be like declaring that a life of sin wasn’t that bad after all. God is absolute perfection, total goodness, and complete purity of being. The Bible shows this whenever it describes His character. He is light, with no darkness in it; He is the God of truth, and so He cannot lie.⁷ God is right and can never compromise about what is right and wrong:

*“Are you not from everlasting, O LORD my God, my Holy One? ... **You who are of purer eyes than to see evil and cannot look at wrong**” (Habakkuk 1:12,13).⁸*

❖ Sin and Sinfulness Exposed

We have seen already that when Jesus lived on earth the righteousness of God was shown by the way he lived every

⁶ Jesus said the two key principles are to be found in Deuteronomy 6:4-5 and Leviticus 19:18 – to love God and to love one’s neighbour. Love is therefore the overriding principle.

⁷ See 1 John 1:5; Isaiah 65:16 and Titus 1:2.

⁸ This verse does not say that God cannot pass judgement upon what is wrong; it says that He cannot do anything wrong. Any form of wrongdoing would be contrary to His holiness and righteousness.

day. He demonstrated the character of God, which is why some people marvelled at the loveliness of his behaviour and the wonderful words he spoke.⁹ But this demonstration of righteousness in action was not to everyone’s taste: his enemies hated him for it. For Jesus showed them up for what they truly were. They were playing at being holy without really facing up to the demands of holiness.¹⁰

It often happens in Scripture, as in life, that you come to appreciate the qualities of one person by seeing the deficiencies of someone else. King David, for example, was appreciated as a good king because his predecessor King Saul had been awful. In the same way, Jesus is seen to be so much better than people like Judas Iscariot, who betrayed him. The best and the worst are presented side-by-side as a deliberate contrast to one another. The lovely life that Jesus lived was cruelly brought to an end by the wicked scheming of men who should have acted so much better. The apostle John makes that point many times in his account of the life of Jesus, starting with the comment that Jesus was the light of the world and his opponents preferred darkness to light.¹¹ He describes the way that Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead, and immediately mentions the scheming of those who opposed Jesus, saying that now they not only wanted to kill Jesus, but Lazarus as well!¹²

Their evil thoughts and plans eventually came to fruition when Jesus was cruelly put to death on the cross. This act was the clearest possible demonstration that sin was sinful. If you want to know what sin is really like, look at what it did to Jesus. If you want to know whether God was right to condemn sin – look at the cross of Christ. That is what Paul was saying when he declared that God’s righteousness was shown by what happened to Jesus. In his life and in his death, Jesus showed how right God is to hate sin, how dangerous and deadly sin is to us, and how important it is that we should try to live in a way which is right with God. The apostle Peter made precisely the same point when he explained the meaning of the death of Jesus on the day of

⁹ See, for example, John 6:68 and 7:46.

¹⁰ Jesus called his opponents “hypocrites” a word which really means ‘play-actors’ (see Matthew 23:13-29).

¹¹ John 3:19-21.

¹² John 11:45-53; 12:9-10.

Pentecost:

*“Men of Israel, hear these words: Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with mighty works and wonders and signs that God did through him in your midst, as you yourselves know – **this Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men**” (Acts 2:22,23).*

❖ God’s Purposeful Plan

Notice that Peter assures the population of Jerusalem that nothing had gone wrong with God’s purpose. Everything that happened was according to His “*definite plan and foreknowledge*”. It had to be like this: there was no other way. From the very beginning God had instructed mankind about the dangers of Sin.

- There was that one law in Eden, about not eating from the fruit of the tree.
- Then there was a more detailed code of laws given to Israel through Moses, which spelled out right from wrong.
- God had required sacrifices in which an animal or animals had to be offered to show that a life must be surrendered before sin could be forgiven.¹³
- In both the Tabernacle and the Temple, worshippers were kept at a distance from the things that were holy, to show that there was a great difference between the holiness of God and the natural sinfulness of people.
- God had then instituted a Priesthood which was given a limited right of approach into His presence, to show that there was a way into His favour and fellowship, a way which required sacrifice and the shedding of blood.
- He arranged Feasts to commemorate and celebrate certain key events. For example, the Feast of Passover

¹³ *The shedding of blood (resulting from the taking of a life) was an important element in the instruction that God gave by the institution of sacrifice (see Leviticus 17:11 and Hebrews 9:22).*

reminded Israel that they were delivered from slavery because of the shed blood of a lamb.¹⁴

These various arrangements served at least two purposes. First, they showed the difference between right and wrong – between God and mankind. Second, they indicated that there was a way to find favour with God – a way into His presence. If you could keep the law; find an acceptable sacrifice; become a priest, or celebrate the prescribed feast, you could get near to God. Or if someone could do that for you, then that would open up a new way of approach into the presence of God. The great news given us in the New Testament is that Jesus has done all these things for us.

- ✓ Jesus kept the law of God absolutely, never once being in breach of its demands;
- ✓ He offered himself as a sacrifice for sins and surrendered his own life for us;
- ✓ By living with us he showed us what godliness is like in practice;
- ✓ He became a Priest who acts as a go-between for us;
- ✓ He fulfilled what the Feasts pointed forward to, by delivering us from bondage¹⁵ and gaining access into the presence of God and making reconciliation for our sins.¹⁶

❖ “Propitiation”

Sometimes the Bible uses words with a very particular meaning which we don’t often use. One verse in Romans chapter 3 contains such a word. Here is the verse again, in which the apostle says about the death of the Lord Jesus:

¹⁴ *The Passover clearly pointed forward to the work of Jesus, as the New Testament makes clear (John 1:29, 1 Corinthians 5:7 and 1 Peter 1:18-20).*

¹⁵ *The Feast of the Passover (details in Exodus 12) was, in particular, a feast that was associated with Israel’s freedom from slavery in Egypt.*

¹⁶ *The Letter to the Hebrews carefully explains the way in which Jesus was the fulfilment of those things that had been included in the Old Testament. Jesus himself said that he was the Way into the Father’s presence (John 14:6).*

“... 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” (3:25).

When Jesus died on Calvary his life was given and his blood was shed. The apostle John carefully records both those happenings. Blood as a *physical substance* has no special significance or importance in Scripture. Because it carries the life force around a body, blood is seen to be a powerful **symbol of life**, which belongs to God, not to us.¹⁷ This was why God instructed the Jews not to eat blood. So, when we read about the shed blood of Jesus, we should think about the wonderful life he lived and the marvellous way in which he chose to lay down that life for us.

Paul says that God put Jesus forward “as a propitiation by his blood” and we need to work out just what that means. Notice that our Bible reading has narrowed down from one verse to just one word, and a difficult word at that. If we were to look it up in a dictionary, we would be told that “propitiation” means:

- ✓ winning somebody’s favour; or
- ✓ appeasing or conciliating somebody of something.

It’s about making amends or putting something right that was previously wrong. But what does it mean in the Bible? The Bible can act as its own interpreter. If the same Greek word is used elsewhere in the Bible that is going to give us more help than anything. For how a word is used elsewhere in the Bible is the best possible way of finding out what it really means.

Of course the way the word is translated into English also helps and sometimes different translations may throw light upon a difficult verse, even those versions which are more paraphrases than translations. Here is the same verse in a few different versions:

“God presented him as **a sacrifice of atonement**, through faith in his blood. He did this to demonstrate his justice, because in his forbearance he had left the sins

¹⁷ Noah was commanded: “You shall not eat flesh with its life, that is, its blood” (Genesis 9:4) and later that was included in the Law of Moses (Leviticus 17:11,14).

committed beforehand unpunished” (New International Version);

“God appointed him as **a sacrifice for reconciliation**, through faith, by the shedding of his blood, and so showed his justness ...” (New Jerusalem Bible);

“**God offered him**, so that by his blood he should become the means by which people’s sins are forgiven through their faith in him” (Today’s English Version: The Good News Bible);

“Whom God put forward [before the eyes of all] **as a mercy seat and propitiation by his blood** [the cleansing and life-giving sacrifice of atonement and reconciliation, to be received] through faith ...” (Amplified Bible);

“Whom God put forward as **a sacrifice of atonement (or: a place of atonement)** by his blood, effective through faith ...” (New Revised Standard Version).

❖ Sacrifice for Reconciliation

God wanted to forgive sinners but could not do that unless His righteous demands had been met. He had condemned sin and sinners to death and there was no going back on that judicial sentence unless someone achieved ‘atonement’ or ‘reconciliation’ for others. This is what God and Jesus did.

Notice that Paul says it was God who ‘presented’, ‘appointed’, ‘offered’ or ‘put forward’ His Son. If God had not taken the initiative, there would have been no Jesus. It was a wonderful act of divine love and mercy that the Father caused a Son to be born and that had him live in our world, subject to all its evil and malice. It must have been painful to stand by while His Son was cruelly treated and publicly executed. God knew from the outset what would happen; yet He graciously and marvellously provided His Son.

Jesus voluntarily laid down his life as a sacrifice ‘of atonement’, or ‘for reconciliation’: giving his life so that we can have life. Jesus died as our representative so that we can live. In his death he showed even more clearly than he had done in his life that sin is exceedingly sinful and he showed, as never before, how wonderful love is. For the gift

of Jesus was an act of unsurpassed love on the part of both Father and Son. They worked together to achieve the salvation that the death of Jesus has made possible for us.

Without this statement of God's position with regard to sin, the only alternative would have been to punish sinners, as God had said would happen. You sin – you die and remain in the grave for ever! But in His great mercy, God had forgiven people in the past in anticipation of the work that would be accomplished through Jesus. In His divine forbearance *“he had passed over former sins”* (Romans 3:25). The death of Jesus put things right retrospectively. It was to be effective both for the future and for the past. We shall learn more about the significance of this sacrifice as Paul develops the argument in Romans, especially as it affects us and what we must do to gain advantage from it. For the moment we note that the death of Christ made it possible for God to forgive without in any way compromising His holiness.

❖ Place of Atonement

The word *“propitiation”* can be translated in many different ways, as we have seen. But does it occur anywhere else in Scripture and, if so, what do we learn from that? To find that out either you need a very helpful cross-reference in the margin of your Bible or a way of tracing the occurrences of Greek or Hebrew words.¹⁸ This is what we would discover in this particular case.

The Greek word here translated *“propitiation”* only occurs in one other place in the New Testament, and that is in Hebrews 9:5 which reads:

*“Above the Box were the winged creatures representing God's presence, with their wings spread over **the place where sins were forgiven**. But now is not the time to explain everything in detail”.*¹⁹

The Box of which the apostle speaks is the Ark of the Covenant which was found in the Most Holy Place in the Temple. This Box was the very symbol of the glorious pres-

¹⁸ These Bible aids are called analytical concordances: they list the occurrences of English words and then show how the same original word (in Hebrew for the Old and Greek for the New Testament) is translated differently in English.

¹⁹ This quotation is from the Good News Bible (Today's English Version)



ence of God and it was into this Most Holy Place that the high priest went just once each year, with the blood of sacrifices, to make atonement for the nation. He sprinkled that blood on the mercy seat beneath the cherubim, whose wings were spread out above it, and there God met with His people through the ministrations of the high priest.

This Mercy Seat – the lid of the Ark of the Covenant – was *“the place where sins were forgiven”*. Both this phrase, in Hebrews 9:5 and the word *“propitiation”* in Romans 3:25 are translations of the same Greek word. However, Hebrews adds the important thought that the death of Jesus makes it possible for us to meet with God. Once we were far away from Him, separated by His holiness and righteousness because of our sin. But the work of Father and Son has closed that gap. As Paul wrote elsewhere:

*“Now, in union with Christ Jesus, you who used to be far away have been **brought near by the blood of Christ**. For Christ himself has **brought us peace** by making Jews and Gentiles one people ... Christ came and preached the Good News of peace to all – to you Gentiles, who were far away from God, and to the Jews, who were near to him. It is through Christ that all of us, Jews and Gentiles, **are able to come in the one Spirit into the presence of the Father**”* (Ephesians 2:13-18).

❖ No Longer Angry

God is angry with the wicked every day and the time will soon come when that anger is shown towards men and women in our world, because it has forsaken Him. We saw that in Romans 1:18 and 2:5. But God's anger can be turned away from us and we can receive His love and mercy instead. His anger derives from his constant and

unchangeable opposition to sin in all its forms: that is His absolute position. But once Christ died to demonstrate that God is totally right to oppose sin, the forgiveness of our sins became possible.

If we agree with God about the awfulness of sin and accept that He is right then we too can declare the righteousness of God. He can then justify, or reckon us right in His sight, and that is precisely the point that Paul now proceeds to make. In these last few chapters we have looked at the way in which Almighty God and His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, have been working together to make it possible to overcome the problem of sin and death that confronts all of us. We have found that this can mean an enormous amount to us, if we want it to. Now we have to turn our attention to what we are supposed to do about it, for that is what the apostle begins to explain.

Things to Read

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-  As we have been thinking about the high priest going into the presence of God, you might want to read Leviticus chapter 16 and the New Testament explanation given in Hebrews chapter 9:1-15 of how this was fulfilled by Jesus.
 -  The death of the Lord Jesus is vividly portrayed in all four gospels. Try Luke's account (Luke 23:27-56).

Questions to Think About

- 9.1 Jesus willingly offered himself as a sacrifice for sins; nobody forced him or compelled him to lay down his life. What should that mean for us? (John 10:17-18; Luke 22:42; Romans 12:1-2)
- 9.2 If Jesus gave his life for us, what should we be willing to do for him? (Galatians 2:20)