

Exegetical Brief: Romans 3:25 "Through Faith in His Blood"

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A portion of this year's Reformation Sunday second lesson is Paul's masterful treatise on the righteousness of God, Romans 3:21-28. The δικαιοσύνη θεοῦ Paul describes so thoroughly in these verses is not God's inherent holiness from which a sinner must cower in fear. It is the not guilty verdict that God announces for Jesus' sake, the blessed news of forgiveness received by a sinner through faith. What a privilege for Reformation preachers to proclaim this righteousness that courses through the Scriptures (cf. μαρτυρομένη ὑπὸ νόμου καὶ τῶν προφητῶν, v. 21) and served as the foundation for the Lutheran Reformation.

Paul was inspired to examine the justification jewel's multiple facets in these verses. By telling us this not-guilty verdict "has been revealed" (πεφανερώται, v. 21), Paul communicates that it was always there, that is, it is *objectively* true independent of human response. By attaching phrases like διὰ πίστεως and ἐκ πίστεως to justification, as well as the dative πίστει and the verb πιστεύω, Paul clearly teaches us that this not-guilty verdict is *subjectively* received by the sinner through the gift of faith in Jesus Christ (cf. vv. 22,25,26,28). By connecting the subject πάντες with the participle δικαιούμενοι, Paul leaves no doubt that God's not-guilty verdict is pronounced *universally* upon all people by virtue of Christ's perfect payment for sin (cf. vv. 23,24). Justification, the central message of Scripture upon which the very existence of the church depends, is studied from every possible angle in this Pauline paragraph.

In order for sinners to be forgiven of their sins, the holy God must have his justice satisfied. This concept, too, Paul explores from three different angles in this paragraph. With δικαιοσύνη Paul takes us to the law court so we can picture God as the judge who, for Jesus' sake, acquits us. With ἀπολύτρωσις Paul takes us to the marketplace to prove that our sins demanded payment, and Jesus made that payment. God's forgiveness of sins is not sentimental nor arbitrary, it is bought and paid for by Christ. With ἱλαστήριον Paul takes us to the temple and its Most Holy Place. The blood that God commanded to be sprinkled there on the Day of Atonement prefigured the blood Jesus would shed at Calvary to pay for our sins and set aside God's righteous anger. In three different ways Paul paints the picture: God has been satisfied with Christ's sacrifice. In three different ways Paul assures us that our standing with God is not based on fickle fate, but on the bedrock of the divine justice and love that allows God to be both "just and justifier" (cf. δίκαιον καὶ δικαιοῦντα, v. 26).

Christ alone! By teaching justification so fully, Paul encourages his readers to cling to Christ alone for their salvation. Why build your hope for eternal life on the shifting sand of works when God justifies sinners completely apart from works (cf. χωρὶς [ἔργων] νόμου, vv. 21,28)? God's plan for our salvation is Christ alone. With the rest of this exegetical brief we would like to focus on the language Paul uses in the first half of Romans 3:25 to describe *how* God presented Jesus as the only plan of salvation. We will especially focus on the back-to-back prepositional phrases to see how they fit into Paul's description of Christ's atoning sacrifice.

ὃν προέθετο ὁ θεὸς ἱλαστήριον διὰ τῆς πίστεως ἐν τῷ αὐτοῦ αἵματι

The relative pronoun ὃν beginning verse 25 finds its antecedent in the final words of verse 24: Christ Jesus. Thus, Paul is making an important additional point about the Christ in whom we have redemption. The main verb is προέθετο, the aorist middle form of προτίθημι. This verb tells us what God did to Christ Jesus in his plan to save us. The verb can mean "plan" or "display publicly." While Paul's usage of the verb elsewhere (Rom 1:13; Eph 1:9) makes a good case for "plan," perhaps the double accusative (ὃν as direct object and ἱλαστήριον as predicate accusative) argues more for understanding προτίθημι here as "display publicly." Paul takes us to Golgotha with this phrase and invites us to see in the man who hangs on the middle cross a sacrifice that propitiates, that is, turns away the wrath of God that would justly fall upon us due to our sins. By using the term ἱλαστήριον Paul uses the *place* of propitiation (-τήριον is like our -torium and denotes place) to communicate the *sacrifice* of propitiation. While Luther's *Gnadenstuhl* is a more literal rendering of ἱλαστήριον, the NIV's transferred

meaning "sacrifice of atonement" is certainly acceptable given the context.

How do we best understand the two prepositional phrases that complete Paul's thought about God presenting Christ as our atoning sacrifice? The translation of διὰ τῆς πίστεως ἐν τῷ αὐτοῦ αἵματι is simple enough: "through faith in his blood." Thus the rendering of KJV and NIV. Other versions, however, insist on translating the phrases in reverse order. The NASB has "in his blood through faith," and the NKJV has "by his blood, through faith." It seems these inverted order translations are attempts to keep Christ's blood from being the object of our faith. Is such a translation legitimate? Or is Paul declaring by πίστις ἐν that the Christian appropriates Jesus' atoning sacrifice by having faith in his holy blood?

While Paul does, occasionally use πίστις ἐν to denote the object of faith (cf. Gal 3:26; Eph 1:15 Col 1:4; 1 Tim 3:13; 2 Tim 1:13; 3:15), we should also note that nowhere else does he make Christ's blood the object of Christian faith. Although trusting in Christ's blood for the forgiveness of sins is not a heretical thought, one wonders if that's the point Paul is making in this "Christ alone" paragraph.

It is better to allow the two prepositional phrases to serve as prepositional phrases normally serve, as adverbs. In that case Paul would be drawing our attention to the way God presented his Son as a propitiatory sacrifice. With διὰ τῆς πίστεως Paul tells us that faith is the instrumental means by which the blessings of Christ's sacrifice become ours. With ἐν τῷ αὐτοῦ αἵματι Paul designates Christ's death on the cross as the bloody, sacrifice that removes our sin. Thus, God presented Jesus as the atoning sacrifice by the shedding of his blood, and this atoning sacrifice is appropriated to the individual sinner through faith. Taking "blood" as the sphere in which or means by which atonement happens, rather than the object of our faith, is in line with Paul's similar statement later in Romans at 5:9.

God bless your Reformation preaching of Christ alone. What a rich text we have in this lesson, and what a wonderful opportunity to proclaim the unconditional grace of God displayed in the sacrificial Lamb of God.