

# The Setting Forth of Christ

Rev. C. Harinck - Romans 3: 25-26

Sing: Psalter 243: 1 - 5

Read: Leviticus 17

Sing: Psalter 389: 1 - 4

Sing: Psalter 187: 3, 4

Sing: Psalter 422: 4, 5

Congregation, in the portion of Scripture which we read together the Lord wants to impress upon Israel's heart that the soul, or the life, of an animal is in its blood. Therefore, shedding blood is shedding life. God nurtured the Israelites with this principle. When the blood of a sacrificial animal was shed, the Jews saw that the life of the animal was poured out.

So when Christ's blood was shed, His life was poured out too. It teaches us that Christ obtained His Church by shedding His own blood, namely, by pouring out and laying down His life.

Romans 3 verses 25 and 26 speak of this, and this is also our text for today.

*Whom God hath set forth to be a propitiation through faith in His blood, to declare His righteousness for the remission of sins that are past, through the forbearance of God; To declare, I say, at this time His righteousness: that He might be just, and the Justifier of him which believeth in Jesus.*

These verses speak about “*The setting forth of Christ.*” We will consider two thoughts:

1. Christ is set forth for a propitiation
2. Christ is set forth for justification

## **1. Christ is set forth for a propitiation**

The Apostle Paul continues his argument about the doctrine of the justification of sinners by the death of Christ. He says of Jesus, “*Whom God hath set forth to be a propitiation through faith in His blood.*”

“*Whom,*” that is Christ. The apostle refers here to what he has said of Christ up

to this point. He has argued that Christ brought about redemption. The slave of sin was redeemed by Christ.

Now the apostle says that Christ was *“set forth to be a propitiation through faith in His blood.”* *“Set forth,”* that means exhibited. Not pushed aside into some dark corner or hidden from the people. No, Jesus is *“set forth”* for redemption, placed in the foreground, exhibited to everyone!

This occurred on the cross of Golgotha. But also this takes place particularly when the Gospel is preached. Ever since the Day of Pentecost, Christ is being shown as the Saviour of the world. Preaching is a public setting forth of Christ as the Saviour and the Redeemer.

Preaching which puts Christ into a dark corner and not before the eyes of the hearers is not Scriptural preaching. In true preaching, Christ is set before our eyes. In the letter to the Galatians, Paul says, *“Before whose eyes Jesus Christ hath been evidently set forth, crucified among you”* (Galatians 3:1).

God set forth to the world the way of atonement through the blood of Jesus. He did not hide the deliverance brought about by Christ, but set it forth before the eyes of the world.

How did God set forth Christ openly to the world? We read, *“To be a propitiation through faith in His blood.”* Christ was proclaimed as the way of propitiation, or atonement, with God. But not only that. He is set forth to be *“a propitiation through faith in His blood.”* This propitiation is based on the shed blood of Jesus.

In Scripture, propitiation has everything to do with blood. The entire Old Testament service is, as it were, summarized in the statement, *“Without shedding of blood is no remission”* (Hebrews 9:22). The blood of the sacrificial animal stilled God's wrath and acquired His favor.

When we research the definition of propitiation, or atonement, in the Book of Leviticus, we find that it comprises four important aspects. First, a sin has been committed and God's law has been transgressed. Second, this transgression has offended God and provoked Him to anger. Third, a man has become guilty through this transgression: he or she is in a state of guilt before his Maker. And finally, the fourth element is the vicarious offer which brings reconciliation between God and the guilty sinner.

This offer reconciles in all aspects. This offer covers the transgression, it atones for the debt, it stills God's wrath, and it brings peace between God and the transgressor. This sacrifice brings full reconciliation with God. It pleases God. This sacrifice also renders the transgressor innocent. It covers his transgressions, it takes away his sin.

This way of atonement, which is taught us in Leviticus, includes elements which the Holy Ghost teaches in true conversion. The concern of a soul under conviction is firstly the fact that he has committed sin. *"I have sinned against heaven, and before Thee"* as the prodigal son confessed in Luke 15:18. It is the confession of all those who are convicted by the Holy Ghost of their sins and iniquities. I have committed sin. I have transgressed God's law.

The sinner will then experience what God caused the Old Testament worshipper to feel, namely that God's wrath is on him. The great question then becomes, "how can I ever become reconciled with God?" Both the Old and the New Testament answers are, "through the vicarious sacrifice. An innocent lamb was set forth to the guilty Israelite as the way of atonement.

Also in the New Testament, Christ is *"set forth to be a propitiation through faith in His blood."* This Gospel is good news, for in it Christ is set forth as a propitiation for our sins. Just as Moses raised the brazen serpent in the wilderness for everyone to see, so Christ is raised in the preaching for a *Propitiation* for everyone to see. What it really says is 'for a mercy seat'. The mercy seat, on which the blood of the sacrifice was sprinkled, covered the law which had been transgressed. And so Christ is set forth in the preaching as the mercy seat which covers the damning law and the transgression.

*"To be a propitiation through faith in His blood,"* says the apostle. Propitiation has been brought about through the blood of Jesus. The apostle summarizes His suffering and death as *'the shedding of His blood.'* By shedding His blood, that is, by offering His life, Christ reconciled an angry God with the guilty sinner.

This propitiation becomes ours *"through faith in His blood."* We do not become partaker of this propitiation by works, or merits, or by making ourselves meet for deliverance, but through faith in the power of the blood of Jesus as the blood that covers the transgression and satisfies an angry God.

Faith in His blood is nothing other than to rest in the blood of Jesus against all the accusations of the law. It is not a matter of works or merit. Above all, it is forsaking all self-righteousness, and taking nothing to Christ but your wretchedness, guilt, and damnation.

Faith is trusting in the blood of Christ. Notwithstanding that we are black with sin, guilty before God, and condemned by the law, faith rests in Christ's blood as the answer to all the accusations of the law and conscience.

That is why true faith lives by the word "notwithstanding." True faith says, "I am indeed guilty, and according to God's justice I deserve a double portion of God's punishment. My conscience accuses me, the Devil torments me, saying that there is no hope for me, but..., I see a mercy seat, and I see the blood of Christ sprinkled on it." Seeing this, faith says, "Nevertheless, I will yet hope and entrust myself to Christ." In this way a soul takes refuge in the precious blood of Christ that speaks better things than that of Abel and which pleads with God for forgiveness for a guilty one. It makes the words of the Apostle Paul become reality, *"Whom God hath set forth to be a propitiation through faith in His blood."*

This then is God's way of redemption. God gave His Son for a propitiation, for a mercy seat, to cover our sins! What a wonder! This evokes admiration when we thus get to know Christ! It evokes worship when we are given to look upon the mercy seat on which the atoning blood has been sprinkled and under which the law and sin are buried. It is the core of the entire Gospel message.

Setting forth Jesus Christ for a propitiation through His blood gives hope and consolation to a sin-burdened sinner, who must acknowledge: *"My transgressions I confess, Grief and guilt my soul oppress"* (Psalter 140:2). The knowledge of the Lord Jesus as the propitiation for sin is a *soul-saving knowledge*. This knowledge fills the heart with wonder, joy, and peace!

The well-known preacher Reverend J C Philpot tried to illustrate how great and important this is. He compared it with reaching the Cape of Good Hope. When, in former times, the seamen sailed the oceans, they called the southernmost point of Africa the "Cape of Good Hope." Once you had made it past that point there was no longer any danger of perishing in the storms of the Bay of Biscay. The seamen drew a deep sigh of relief when they rounded the Cape of Good Hope. They passed from the stormy Atlantic Ocean into the tranquil South Pacific Ocean. Philpot used this as an example to illustrate the knowledge of the Saviour.

The revelation of Christ to the heart is the great turning point in the life of a soul under conviction. Behind it was the Atlantic Ocean with its great storms and wild breakers: the convictions of sin, damnation, and judgment! Behind it was the soul's distress and struggle, the sense of God's wrath and the trembling for the damning law! But now the sinner has come to know Jesus. He has reached the Cape of Good Hope! The storms are behind him and he has navigated into a tranquil sea. And so the knowledge of Jesus by faith is essential. It forms a turning point in the life of a believer. The apostle then teaches us: *"To declare His righteousness for the remission of sins that are past, through the forbearance of God"* (Romans 3:25b).

We would like to consider this in our second thought, when we see that Christ is set forth for justification.

## **2. Christ is set forth for justification**

God not only set forth Christ as an offer of the propitiation for sin, but also as a declaration of His righteousness. The apostle uses the word *"to declare."* It means, to exhibit. The Greek word contains the meaning of, to demonstrate. Something like: calling out, making it clear to everyone. What then does the Lord want to make clear to everyone? We read, *"To declare His righteousness for the remission of sins."*

At first it reads a bit strange. We would expect the text to read that God has set forth Christ and made Him known as the declaration of His love, grace, and mercy, and that the whole world might know, through the cross of Golgotha, the greatness of His mercy and love. But the apostle does not say that. He says, *"To declare His righteousness."* God has demonstrated in Christ that He is just, that He punishes sin, and that He always deals according to the rules of His justice. Jesus sweating blood in the Garden of Gethsemane, His hanging on the cursed cross, His exclamation, *"My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?"* teaches us that God is just. Yea, so just, says the form for the administration of the Lord's Supper, that rather that sin should go unpunished He has punished the same in His beloved Son Jesus Christ, with the bitter and shameful death of the cross. Nowhere do we see so God's justice so clearly than at Golgotha. Noah's flood was a terrible manifestation of God's justice. The destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah also demonstrated that God hates and punishes sin. But in the death of Christ, it is made abundantly clear that our God is a just God, a God who is righteous. He hates sin, and punishes it.

Thus was God's righteousness set forth in Christ. He makes known His righteousness in Christ's suffering and death. It is, however, not a setting forth of God's righteousness unto the destruction of the transgressor, but it is set forth in Christ for the forgiveness of sin. The apostle says: "*To declare His righteousness for the remission of sins.*" Basically, the apostle says that God is just in forgiving sin. Now that Christ has borne the punishment of sin and God has been reconciled, God can forgive sin. After all, His justice has been satisfied through Christ's sacrifice.

Now, somebody could object to this doctrine of atonement and say, "How then could the Old Testament believers enter heaven, as sin had not yet been atoned? How could God accept them into heaven without compromising His justice?" The apostle addresses this problem in the last part of the text when he writes, "*For the remission of sins that are past, through the forbearance of God.*"

It sounds a bit difficult. But still, let us examine Paul's argument a little closer. He has explained that the forgiveness of sin cannot take place without God's justice being satisfied. That happened at Golgotha. But how then could the righteous God allow the Old Testament believers into heaven? There would seem to be a problem here, but the apostle gives the answer. He says that the forgiveness of sin also applies to sins which fall under "*the forbearance of God.*" God forbore the sins of His Old Testament believers.

From our perspective of time Christ had not yet died on the cross. From our perspective sin had not yet atoned for by Christ. But God still forgave the sins of the Old Testament believers, and took them up into heaven. They went to heaven on the grounds of the satisfaction that the Son of God had promised He would establish.

Simply put, Paul argues that the power of Christ's atonement not only reaches *forward* in time to the true believers of the New Testament who live after Golgotha, but Christ's atonement also reaches *back* in time to all the true believers of the Old Testament who lived before Golgotha.

The middle sentence "*sins that are past, through the forbearance of God*" is really meant to emphasize the all-forgiving power of the sacrifice of the Lord Jesus

Christ. It reaches back to all the Old Testament believers, and reaches forward to the day of the Second Coming.

Paul continues his argument in verse 26, *"To declare, I say, at this time His righteousness: that He might be just, and the justifier of him which believeth in Jesus."* This text takes us to the core of the doctrine of atonement. The atonement that enables God's righteousness to justify those who believe in Christ.

According to His righteousness, God hates and punishes sin. How then can He justify the sinner, that is, acquit him and declare him to be innocent? The question really is, "how can a righteous God declare a sinner to be just?" If God is and continues to be just -- and we cannot expect Him to compromise His justice, as He cannot deny Himself -- then God can only do one thing and that is condemn the offender. We would say, God's justice excludes forgiveness.

And that is just how the convicted sinner experiences it. The thought that God, is just, that He hates and punishes sin, often robs him of all hope. After all, in true conversion we begin to believe what most people do not believe, namely, that God is righteous. The problem is that God's attribute of justice has become sadly neglected. The general opinion about God is that He is only love and full of understanding, that somehow He will turn a blind eye to our wickedness and accept us all into heaven.

If that were so, why then did Christ have to suffer and die? What was the point of His death on the cross? Surely in that case it would not have been necessary for Jesus to sweat blood in the Garden of Gethsemane and to lay down His life on the accursed tree? Jesus' suffering and death then loses all sense and meaning. At best then, the death of Christ would only be an example of how people should be willing to die for their ideals. His death becomes a terrible tragedy and coincidence. Without a proper understanding of God's justice, namely, that He hates sin and must punish it, we cannot understand the Gospel.

Our world urgently needs to know once more that God is not only merciful, but also just and that His justice must be satisfied! But this knowledge of God's justice is badly needed in the church too. Only when we have learned that will we value the Gospel, of which the Belgic Confession states, 'God therefore manifested His justice against His Son when He laid our iniquities upon Him, and poured forth His mercy and goodness on us, who were guilty and worthy of damnation' (article 20).

We do not really believe in God's justice. We reassure ourselves with the thought that everything will not be so bad in the end. Ultimately, everything will

work out all right for everyone. After all, God is merciful and I have always done my best to live properly. I have always attended church and said my prayers. It will be all right in the end.

But did you know that this is precisely the obstacle to believing the Gospel? If only you didn't believe that it would be all right in the end! If only you wouldn't soothe yourself to sleep with the thought that God will be merciful to you after all! If only you would believe that which God's children believe, that it will not be all right in the end and that it will be a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God! If only you would believe that there is no life outside of Jesus but only eternal damnation! It would then lead to faith in the crucified Christ!

When the Lord works conversion we become aware that we have to face God's justice. The all-important question of our heart becomes, "Oh my soul, how wilt thou appear right with God?" God's justice becomes a great problem. An insurmountable problem. A problem that makes us cry out, "If God is just and remains just, then He can do nothing other than punish me eternally for my many sins!"

That is why the Epistle to the Romans is so important. What does the Epistle to the Romans show us? There Paul shows us that God does not need to compromise at all in order to forgive. God can, and will remain what He is: eternally just. And yet He can forgive sin too! And He can do that on grounds of justice. Why? Because the Son of God has satisfied God's justice in the human nature. That is why in the Gospel Christ is *"set forth to declare his righteousness for the remission of sins."*

The apostle adds, *"At this time."* Now, after Good Friday, Easter, and Pentecost, God has revealed this clearer than ever. It has now become clear that God can remain just *and* can justify the guilty sinner in Christ.

This then is Paul's message in a nutshell. God remains just *and* forgives. He hates sin *and* is gracious to the sinner. He punishes sin *and* forgives the sinner. All this because His justice has been satisfied in Christ; because blood has been shed; because a holy, sinless life has been laid down; because a Lamb has been slaughtered; because there is a mercy seat on which atoning blood has been sprinkled.



Before we continue let us sing of this from Psalter 187: 3, 4.

**Verse 3**

*With joy the meek shall see my soul restored,  
Your heart shall live, ye saints that seek the Lord;  
He helps the needy and regards their cries, Those  
in distress the Lord will not despise.*

**Verse 4**

*Let heav'n above His grace and glory tell,  
Let earth and sea and all that in them dwell;  
Salvation to His people God will give,  
And they that love His Name with Him shall live.*

*“Salvation to His people God will give,  
And they that love His Name with Him shall live.”*

This salvation is the great mystery of the Gospel. It is a mystery that even the angels desired to look into. The two cherubs on the golden Ark of the Covenant bowed and looked down. They looked down at the mercy seat on which the blood of the sin offering was sprinkled, and wondered how it was possible for the just God Who hates and punishes sin, to dwell with such a guilty people. It was only possible because of the blood that was sprinkled on that mercy seat. Hence God had already revealed this mystery in the Old Testament, but in the New Testament it is preached with much greater clarity.

Here Paul teaches us that God, while He forgives, is and remains just. When God forgives, He does not compromise His justice. No, God is just in forgiving and acts according to the rule of law. His forgiveness is based on satisfaction, on the substitutionary suffering and death of Christ. That is the point which the apostle wishes to make clear.

Congregation, how wonderful and full of merciful wisdom is this plan of salvation! God found a way in Christ to maintain His justice *and* to forgive the guilty sinner. The apostle says of this in Romans 5 verse 21: *“That as sin hath reigned unto death, even so might grace reign through righteousness unto*

*eternal life by Jesus Christ our Lord.*" God's grace does not reign at the expense of His righteousness, but to the vindication of His righteousness.

We read further in our text, *"That He might be just, and the justifier of him which believeth in Jesus."* Literally the Greek text reads, *"of him which is from the faith of Jesus."* God maintains His righteousness and is able to justify the sinner who is *"from the faith of Jesus."*

With these words the apostle describes the person who shares in this salvation. It is the person *"that is from the faith of Jesus."* The apostle chooses his words carefully. He chooses the words *"from the faith"* and *"of Jesus"* in order to make clear who these people who God has justified, who God has set free, actually are. This justification is *"from the faith"* or *"by faith."* The apostle says this to show that God does not justify man by works. He speaks about *"the faith of Jesus"* to show which kind of faith justifies us before God, namely a faith that cleaves unto Christ.

Usually, the apostle speaks in his letters about faith *in* Jesus. Here, however, he writes about the faith *of* Jesus. In the letter to the Philippians he also talks about the faith *of* Jesus. There he writes, *"And be found in Him, not having mine own righteousness, which is of the law, but that which is through the faith of Christ"* (Philippians 3:9). There he uses the expression *"the faith of Christ"* in connection with the righteousness that can be obtained through faith in Jesus, as opposed to the righteousness that can be obtained by the works of the law.

He has the same intention here when he uses the expression *"the faith of Jesus."* He emphasizes that it is about a faith that finds its righteousness in Jesus. That is the type of faith we need. A faith that looks for complete salvation in Jesus. People who have this faith no longer live by the law of works, but by the faith that is *"of Jesus."*

For this reason the apostle ends in verse 27 with: *"Where is boasting then?"* And the answer is, *"It is excluded."* When God reconciles people with Himself in this manner, there is no boasting. *"It is excluded."* And yet, faith boasts, but not in something of itself. It boasts in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ.

*"Whom God hath set forth to be a propitiation through faith in His blood."* This takes place when the Gospel is preached. Christ is then publicly set forth. *"Set forth,"* that is, exhibited, *"to be a propitiation through faith in His blood."*

Just as Moses lifted up the brazen serpent on a high pole, so Christ is lifted up in the preaching of the Gospel as the only remedy against sin, damnation and death. Just as the bitten Israelites could only be healed by looking at the brazen serpent, so there is only life for death-worthy sinners by looking on the crucified Jesus.

And if you say, "yes, but what about my sins?" Or, "but what about God's justice? Surely God cannot just ignore my sins? Surely He cannot leave them unpunished?" Then the Gospel says that God's justice has been satisfied through Christ. God's justice is no longer the enemy of your salvation, as you think it is. God's justice now demands that whosoever believes in the crucified Jesus should not perish but have everlasting life. The way is made straight. God's righteousness is vindicated. God can now forgive the guilty sinner while preserving His justice.

What then stands in the way? Only this--you don't want to surrender! You don't want to give up the struggle! You don't want to break with the wickedness of sin! You don't want to kneel down as lowly as the Gospel demands! Because it is your pride that says, "I don't want to kneel lowly. I don't want to be saved like that. I don't want to stand next to the publican or sit next to the sinner." But oh, I pray you! Please leave your money at home! Give up the struggle and kneel like a guilty one at the foot of Golgotha's cross. It will turn out so exceedingly well!

Then the Holy Ghost will show you that God can actually glorify His justice as He forgives a sinner for Christ's sake. Is that not an amazing wonder? That is the unsearchable richness and mystery of the Gospel. God remains what He is, namely a God Who hates and punishes sin. But He also can, and will forgive the sinner because His justice has been satisfied in Christ.

The apostle said that God set forth Christ to be a propitiation, that is, as a mercy seat for sin. The blood of Christ is a mercy seat. But when considering this, the apostle does not say, 'Stay as far away as possible from God.' No, on the contrary! He says, *"Let us therefore come boldly unto the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need"* (Hebrews 4:16).

Sermons from the Epistle to the Romans can be difficult. And yet Paul wrote this letter to people who had only recently come to faith in Christ. Paul wanted them to have a good understanding of God's plan of salvation to save sinners through the death of Christ. Therefore this letter to the Romans is about what you I, and all people need, namely, a righteousness with which we can fearlessly meet God.

Many preachers, and hearers too, think that coming to church involves occupying each other in a pleasant way, and making sure that people leave the church service with a good feeling. But church is the place of the ministry of atonement. In church, if it is well, it is about the deepest issues of life. It asks "How can I, a sinner, meet a righteous God?" That is why Christ is set forth in the preaching as a perfect, willing, and suitable Saviour for you. You are beseeched, *"Be ye reconciled to God!"* (2 Corinthians 5:20).

In church we do not just hear about happiness. We hear the truth, namely that meeting God outside of Christ will be terrible. And, the sooner you believe this, the better it will be for you. It will cause you to value the Gospel as set forth in the Epistle to the Romans. It will bring you to the faith of Jesus, the faith that cleaves to Jesus.

Amen.

Concluding Psalter 422: 4 - 5