

In verses 24 and 25 Paul tells us where the basis for our justification lies. He says that God gave His own Son as a propitiatory sacrifice, a sacrifice of atonement.

There are various ideas used in Scripture to describe this work: that of redemption, that of atonement, that of propitiation, that of expiation, and that of satisfaction. What do these terms convey? (see transparency copies).

Paul adds that Christ's work is a sacrifice of atonement through faith in His blood; i.e., the benefits of Christ's atoning work become ours through faith (trust) in His redemption.

In verses 25b and 26 we discover that Christ's atonement demonstrated God's righteousness in two or three important ways.

During the time period from Adam to Christ it had looked as though God permitted men's sins to go unpunished. Although there were sacrifices for sin throughout the period, it was obvious to the worshipper who thought about it that the blood of lambs and bulls and goats was not valuable enough in itself to take away sin permanently (he had to keep offering it) or even temporarily. Thus these sacrifices looked forward to and anticipated a perfect, complete sacrifice which would be valuable enough to atone for sin once for all. Christ's atonement displayed God's punishment for sins (both past and future), and thus demonstrated God's righteousness and justice.

Looking at it from a slightly different aspect, we see that God's Law reflects His righteous nature. God's Law had been broken over and over again, and the penalty promised for transgression was death. Would God keep His promise and execute His Law? Would He be just, and punish sin? Christ's atonement shows God executing the penalty for sin upon His own Son; thus Christ's death upholds God's Law and displays God's justice.

God's justice is also displayed in His justification of a believing sinner. God does not simply declare a believing sinner righteous on no basis whatever. Rather, God credits to that sinner the merit of Christ's righteousness, and then declares that person righteous. Thus God shows us the basis of His act of justification -- Christ's atonement -- and shows Himself to be just at the very time He is showing Himself to be gracious in the justification of believing sinners.

Three accompanying diagrams of differing conceptions of justification as revealed in Romans 3 may serve to elucidate this emphasis on both God's grace and God's justice. Let us analyze and evaluate them.