



#2 “How does God deal with his anger issue?”

To consider that it is God himself who provides the solution to enable relationship with the humanity with whom he is angry (Romans 3:21-26).

“Romans” is a letter in the latter half of the Bible. It is believed to have been written around 60’s AD, by the Apostle Paul, to the young church in Rome (hence the name). Paul wanted to encourage the church by explaining the “gospel” to them. The key sentence of the letter is this: **“I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes...” [Romans 1:16]**¹

The word “gospel” just means good news. The good news is to do with salvation – with being saved from God’s anger at humanity.

John Dickson is a Historian and Writer. In an article for the Sydney Morning Herald for Easter one year he wrote²:

Critics of the Christian faith would have us believe there is nothing true or good about Good Friday, the traditional commemoration of Jesus's death by crucifixion. But you can be sure that the symbol of the cross will continue to provide solace and joy for millions the world over.

On the face of it, there is little to commend the traditional Easter story. There's blood, brutality, a body entombed, and the bizarre claim of a resurrected corpse. Then there is the, for some, **repulsive idea that Jesus died "for our sins"**. Surely, such a macabre third-party pay-off to a vengeful deity should be denounced as barbaric. It's no wonder someone invented the Easter Bunny as a diversion.

Enter the New Atheists, so called, I think, to distinguish them from the grumpy, Bertrand Russell-style atheism of yesteryear. They have ridiculed beyond belief (literally) the Easter slogan that "Jesus died as a sacrifice for sins". Richard Dawkins, former Oxford professor and author of *The God Delusion*, scoffs, **"It is vicious, sado-masochistic and repellent."** ...We should therefore **"dismiss the idea as barking mad. If God wanted to forgive our sins, why not just forgive them?"**

Session #1 on Romans 1:18-32 concluded with these words:

Romans 1:28-32

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² John Dickson, 'From instrument of brutality to symbol of love', *Sydney Morning Herald*, April 10 2009.

28 Furthermore, since they did not think it worthwhile to retain the knowledge of God, he gave them over to a depraved mind, to do what ought not to be done. 29 They have become filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, greed and depravity. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit and malice. They are gossips, 30 slanderers, God-haters, insolent, arrogant and boastful; they invent ways of doing evil; they disobey their parents; 31 they are senseless, faithless, heartless, ruthless. 32 Although they know God's righteous decree that those who do such things deserve death, they not only continue to do these very things but also approve of those who practice them.

Q1. 'If God wanted to forgive our sins, why not just forgive them?' (Dawkins). Why isn't God in a position to do this?

- *The punishment for wrong-doing is death (Romans 1:28). So if God bypassed the punishment and just forgave sin, then it wouldn't satisfy his justice.*

Romans 3:21-26

21But now a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. 22This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference, 23for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, 24 and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. 25God 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 committed beforehand unpunished— 26he did it to demonstrate his justice at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus.

Q2. How does God demonstrate or satisfy his justice?

- *By presenting his son Jesus as a sacrifice for atonement.*

The word 'atonement' means to provide satisfaction or reparation for a wrong or injury; to make amends³. The concept of 'atonement' comes from the Old Testament. On the Day of Atonement in Leviticus 16, the high priest would slaughter one goat for the wrongdoing of the people, making atonement for them. The violent spilling of blood was seen by God as the sacrifice of a life to pay for another. The high priest would then place his hands on the head of another goat and confess the wrongdoing of the people. This goat would then 'carry on itself all the sins' of the people and be sent away into the desert [Leviticus 16:20-22].

Note that the same root word gives rise to the words translated as 'righteousness', 'justified', 'just' and 'justice'. Today we are most familiar with the term 'self-righteous' which conjures up images of someone who is smug, convinced they are right about something, and intolerant of the beliefs or behaviour of another. The word 'righteous' however has a very different meaning.

Q3. What does Jesus' sacrifice of atonement provide for those who trust in him?

- *Belief in Jesus Christ (and in particular his sacrifice) provides a 'righteousness' (Romans 3:21-22). This righteousness comes from God, not from humanity. Humanity is under God's anger as a result of their actions in Romans 1:18-32. Nothing humanity can do can satisfy God's anger – not even by keeping the Law/10 commandments. God himself needs to step in.*

³ www.dictionary.com

• *What is this 'righteousness' exactly though? Paul will go on to flesh this out a bit more later in his letter. At this stage, what we can conclude is that those who are righteous before God no longer face his anger at their wrongdoing, because Christ satisfied God's sense of justice with his own sacrifice.*

John Dickson in his article continues:

Was Jesus "barking mad" to think this way? **Why indeed doesn't God simply forgive sins without atonement?** The answer of Judaism before 70 AD, and of Christians ever since, is clear.

It is for the same reason that we would be outraged if a judge let a convicted criminal off the hook simply because it turned out he was his friend. Love and justice both matter in the Christian vision of God. And lest we think of this as some kind of **cosmic child abuse** - a father punishing a son for someone else's wrongs - we should remember that from the beginning Christians insisted that Jesus was not a third party forced into an atoning death; he was God.

We may not like this idea either, but if we're going to dismiss the Christian idea of atonement, we have to do so on its own terms, as an entire package. The first Christians said that God, the wronged party, entered the world and bore the punishment wrong-doers deserve. It was as if the judge paid the fine that was another's due. There is nothing "**sadomasochistic**" about this. The idea belongs to the noble tradition of self-sacrifice for the good of others.

At the ANU a couple of years ago, as I was preparing a lecture on Jesus's death, I read a story in The Canberra Times . A Melbourne woman, Kimberley Dear, was set to fulfil a life ambition by taking skydiving lessons while on holidays in Missouri. The plane she was in lost power, and started careering towards the ground. Her instructor, 22-year-old Robert Cook, responded instantly. He took hold of her and calmly talked her through what would happen next. "As the plane is about to hit the ground, make sure you're on top of me so that I'll take the force of the impact," he said. They crashed. Several died, including Cook. Kimberley survived. From hospital, she reported that in the final seconds she felt Cook swivel his body into position as he pushed her head against his shoulder to cushion the blow. Kimberley's sister, Tracey, voiced her gratitude and astonishment at his sacrificial act. "He met Kimberley ... that day. I would do that for her but I can't believe that a stranger who just met her would knowingly give up his life for her."

I have never been a fan of attempts - my own included - to illustrate the meaning of Jesus's death by way of modern stories. There is a danger of trivialising one or the other. But when I read of Robert Cook's actions, I could not help but think of the noble tradition of self-sacrifice and of Jesus's words at his Last Supper: "My body given for you."

Understood this way, it is no wonder that the cross, once an instrument of Roman brutality, became a symbol of love for millions throughout the world.

Q4. Is the cross just 'cosmic child abuse'?

- *The cross could look like cosmic child abuse because Jesus is an innocent third party dying for the wrongdoing of others. However if Jesus is God, then God himself is taking on the penalty for our wrongdoing. And if Jesus was willing, then it is not a case of the Father forcing his Son to suffer.*

The word 'sodomasochistic' means an interaction in which one person enjoys inflicting physical or mental suffering on another person, who derives pleasure from experiencing pain⁴.

Q5. Is the cross just 'sodomasochism'?

- *From one perspective it could look like sodomasochism – especially if you think that Jesus had no good reason to suffer like that. However if Jesus suffered to provide the necessary atonement (satisfaction for sins) then it could be seen as a tremendous act of self-sacrifice for the good of others. As Dickson observes, what Robert Cook did in dying for another wasn't construed as sodomasochism.*

Written by Caroline Spencer of City Bible Forum. 2012 .

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⁴ www.dictionary.com