

THE DOCTRINE OF PROPITIATION

Dr. John Walvoord said, “Propitiation is the Biblical doctrine embodying the concept that the death of Christ fully satisfied the demands of a righteous God in respect to judgment upon the sinner” (*Bibliotheca Sacra*, Vol. 119, April, 1962, p. 99).

The word “propitiation” comes from a Latin translation of the Greek verb for propitiation which is “hilaskomai” (ἱλασκομαι). All of the Greek words translated “propitiation” stem from this verb.

The actual meaning of the word is to appease or conciliate. **It means to make something compatible by means of an appeasement.** This is a satisfying or pacifying of all demands for compatibility (G. Abbott-Smith, *Greek Lexicon*, pp. 215-216).

When it comes to God and our relationship with God, there is no question that a propitiatory appeasement is needed because of our sin. That point is clearly stated in Scripture. Propitiatory appeasement and conciliation is needed because of our sin—Romans 3:25; I John 2:2; I John 4:10. Propitiation by its very nature demands some sort of sin substitution. Something must do the appeasing with God because we are all sinful.

The difficulty of the doctrine of propitiation does not exist in seeing the need for propitiation; the difficulty lies in understanding precisely what is it that needs propitiation? We know that our sin is the problem, but what exactly is appeased by Christ’s propitiatory work? **Is Christ appeasing and satisfying God’s wrath or is He appeasing and satisfying God’s righteousness?**

Dr. Charles Ryrie believed it is the wrath of God that needed to be appeased. He writes: “Propitiation means the turning away of wrath by an offering. In relation to soteriology, propitiation means placating or satisfying the wrath of God by the atoning sacrifice of Christ” (*Basic Theology*, p. 294).

Dr. Floyd Barackman believed it was the wrath of God that needed to be appeased. He writes: “A propitiation is a sacrifice that appeases or placates God’s wrath. God was angry with mankind for all had broken His laws and offended His person. However, with unparalleled grace and love, God the Father gave His only Son to appease His wrath against sinners. As the divine propitiation for sins, the Lord Jesus received the punishment that was due sinners. By this sacrifice, God’s wrath against sinners was appeased, and His demands were satisfied, but only in a provisional sense” (*Practical Christian Theology*, p. 159). He also goes on to say, “God’s wrath, or anger, is not simply the reaction of uncontrollable emotions but the judicial reaction of His holy nature in its opposition against sin and sinners. God’s holiness, justice and righteousness demand that sin’s punishment be borne by sinners, that divine justice be satisfied and that divine law be upheld” (*Ibid.*, p. 190).

Dr. Chafer saw it slightly different. He said, “The value to God by Christ’s death as vindication of His righteousness and law is indicated by the word propitiation” (*Systematic Theology*, Vol. 3, p. 93). He saw propitiation as satisfying the demands of God’s righteousness, including the law.

Dr. C. I. Scofield saw it as Chafer did. He said, "Propitiation is not placating a vengeful God, but, rather, it is satisfying the righteousness of a holy God, thereby making it possible for Him to show mercy righteously" (*Scofield Study Bible*, NASV, p. 1560).

Now the reason for the differing opinions is because some believe it is possible to appease the wrath of God and others do not believe it is possible to appease the wrath of God, but that it is possible to appease the righteousness of God.

The thinking is that Jesus Christ did not appease God's wrath but rather took the full brunt of God's wrath. What Christ actually appeased was the righteousness and holiness of God, which is the reason for the wrath. Jesus Christ satisfied all the demands of God's violated holiness and in doing that He took the full wrath of God on Himself, thus completely pacifying God's holiness.

Dr. Chafer quoted Dr. Scofield's Bible Correspondence Course on this subject:

"For 'propitiate' means to appease, and suggests the wholly false notion that God's wrath is appeased. But the very fact that God Himself provides the mercy seat, the propitiation should have banished the notion from human thinking" (*Systematic Theology*, Vol. 3, p. 95).

Dr. C. H. Dodd, a Cambridge theologian who attempted to resolve this issue in 1931, argued that when the word "propitiation" is used in the N.T., it always has to do with appeasing because of sin, not because of wrath. Therefore, he concluded, it is not wrath that needs appeasing, it is God's holiness that needs appeasing. Sin is what violates the holiness of God, not the wrath of God (*Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, p. 888).

The fact that the subject of sin is emphasized in the propitiation passages seems to place the emphasis on missing the mark of God's holiness. It is holiness that needs appeasing. Dr. Augustus Strong said propitiation is that "which satisfies the demands of violated holiness." (*Systematic Theology*, p. 718). He also cited Lyman Abbott who said, "What humanity needs is not the removal of the penalty, but the removal of sin" (*Ibid.*, p. 720).

On the other hand, Dr. Leon Morris believes that propitiation has to do with appeasing God's wrath. He offers the whole development of the first chapter of Romans as his evidence. He says, "While God's wrath is not mentioned as frequently in the N.T. as the O.T., it is there. Man's sin receives its due reward, not because of some impersonal retribution, but because God's wrath is directed against it (Romans 1:18, 24, 26, 28). The whole argument of the opening part of Romans is that all men, Gentiles and Jews alike, are sinners, and that they come under the wrath and condemnation of God. When Paul turns to salvation, he thinks of Christ's death as hilasterion (*propitious*) (Romans 3:25), a means of removing divine wrath. ...The consistent Bible view is that the sin of man has incurred the wrath of God. That wrath is averted only by Christ's atoning offering. From this standpoint His saving work is properly called propitiation" (*Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, p. 888).

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In order for us to better grasp this important doctrine of propitiation and form proper conclusions and convictions on the doctrine, we must examine the Biblical record in both the O.T. and the N.T.. Dr. Charles Ryrie observed that “over twenty different words occurring about 580 times express the wrath of God in the Old Testament” (*Basic Theology*, p. 294).

One critical passage of Scripture that does help us understand God’s concept of propitiation in the O.T., is the N.T. passage of Hebrews 9:5. The Greek word translated “mercy seat” (NASV, KJV) “atonement cover” (NIV) is the word “propitiation” (ἱλαστήριον). This key passage in Hebrews gives us impetus for us to go back to the O.T. and glean as much as possible about the concept of the “mercy seat.” Two key passages are important for analysis:

Passage#1- Exodus 25:17-22

From this text we may make the following observations:

- 1) The mercy seat was to be made of “pure gold” stressing purity. 25:17a
- 2) The mercy seat was 45 inches long (2 ½ cubits) and 27 inches wide (1 ½ cubits). 25:17b
- 3) The mercy seat lid was to have two hammered gold cherubim at each end. 25:18-20
 - A. The cherubim were to have wings spread upward. 25:20a
 - B. The cherubim wings were to cover the mercy seat lid. 25:20b
 - C. The cherubim faces were to face each other. 25:20c
 - D. The cherubim faces were to be turned toward the mercy seat. 25:20d
- We know that cherubim specifically have a responsibility to guard the righteousness and holiness of God (Gen. 3:22-24).
- 4) The mercy seat was to sit on top of the ark that contained the Word of God. 25:21
- 5) God would meet with sinful man and communicate with sinful man at the mercy seat. 25:22

Now if we simply analyze this text we would conclude that the emphasis here is not on God’s wrath, but His purity and His holiness.

Passage#2- Leviticus 16:1-17

From this passage we may make the following observations:

- 1) The mercy seat was to be a place to offer a sin offering (16:5, 15-16).
- 2) The mercy seat was a place that was so sacred a man could die (16:2, 13).
- 3) The mercy seat was to be a place where there was atonement for Israel’s sin (16:15-16).

From this passage we would conclude that although God could and would execute someone who did not carefully follow His directions, **it does not seem that the emphasis is so much on appeasing God’s wrath, but on appeasing and recognizing God’s holiness.**

It is the shed blood of Jesus Christ that enables the Holy God to meet with and associate with sinful man and that shed blood is connected to the mercy seat or to propitiation.

In attempting to completely understand this doctrine, we ask the question “Why does God’s wrath exist?” **God’s wrath is a part of God’s character and it exists because His holiness has been violated.** In other words, the reason for the existence of God’s wrath is because of His perfect holiness.

The obvious question pertaining to “propitiation” is whether or not it is the wrath of God that is appeased by Christ’s death or the holiness of God that is appeased by Christ’s death. Since God’s wrath is a by-product of His holiness, **it seems to me that what must be appeased is God’s holiness**

The person who is compatible with God’s holiness, never has to worry about God’s wrath. The issue at stake does not seem to be how do we resolve the wrath problem, but how do we resolve the violated holiness problem. Wrath entered the picture when God’s holiness had been so disregarded that everything was always evil (Gen. 6:5-7). If one resolves the holiness matter, wrath is no longer in the picture.

Dr. Robert Lighter writes: “The doctrine of propitiation clearly teaches that Christ’s death on the cross was a substitution for sin. His death satisfied the righteous demands of God the Father incurred by man’s sin. As a result of that propitiation God was satisfied and the relation of the entire world to God was altered. The propitiatory sacrifice of Christ was the basis for the reconciliation of the world to God Himself (II Cor. 5:19). God was offended by man’s sin and it is He who must be satisfied with the payment for that sin” (*Wycliffe Bible Encyclopedia*, p. 1416).

A word that is closely connected to the term “propitiation” is the term expiation. The Revised Standard Version of the Bible translates Romans 3:25 “expiation” instead of “propitiation.” Although this particular word is not found in the Bible, the concept of it is most definitely found in the Bible. It is like the term “vicarious,” which is not in the Bible, but the theology of it most definitely is.

As we have discussed, “propitiation” has to do with appeasing, satisfying and pacifying the violated or offended holiness of God, which has been violated due to sin. “Expiation” has to do with the removal of the consequences of sin.

Donald Guthrie says, “The difference is important. Expiation relates to sins (taking away the sin, guilt and wrath), and propitiation to God (making an appeasement of His offended Holy Character). Expiation is an act which allows for the removal of the consequences of sin and propitiation is an act which enables God to receive the sinner” (*New Testament Theology*, p. 297).

Dr. Charles Ryrie adds: “Expiation has to do with reparation for the wrong; propitiation carries the added idea of appeasing an offended person and thus brings into the picture the question of why the offended person was offended” (*Basic Theology*, p. 297).

Propitiation has its focus on us offending God. Expiation has its focus on God forgiving us.

Propitiation has to do with God's wrath being deserved because He has been offended; expiation has to do with God's wrath being removed because we have been forgiven. **Christ's work on the cross accomplished both.** Jesus Christ took the full brunt of God's wrath, which we deserve because of our sin. He also removed our sin in taking that wrath so that we have been completely forgiven.

One important passage is Luke 18:13. The word translated "merciful" is "propitious" (ιλασκομαι). The prayer literally reads, "The God be propitious to me, the sinner." This prayer of a tax gatherer makes proper theological sense when we realize the truth of this doctrine.

He is really crying out to God for God to be propitious toward him. Under the O.T. law, atoning sacrifices were brought to the temple to be offered as a sin offering. These O.T. offerings could never fully take away man's sin; they could just cover the sin. A full, complete appeasement for sin committed against a Holy God was not possible until Christ went to the cross. Therefore, when this tax gatherer stood in the Temple, humbly asking God to be propitious to him a sinner, he is asking God to make him His eternal ally rather than His eternal enemy.

The truth is God cannot be merciful to any sinner. His righteousness, holiness and justice will not permit it. God can, in His mercy, provide some method of helping the hopeless. He can provide a means so the sinner may be justified, but He cannot be propitious or merciful to one who is a sinner.

The entire reality of the Bible is that if one faces God as a sinner, one will experience God's wrath. God, in His mercy and grace, provided a Savior, who is Jesus Christ. It is not by pleading for God's mercy that one will be saved, it is by believing on Jesus Christ and inviting Him into the life that will save a sinner. The propitiatory and expiatory work of Jesus Christ appeased God completely.

In the suffering and death of Christ, God's wrath was experienced and His holiness was appeased. His mercy was demonstrated and our sins may be forgiven. As Dr. Chafer observed, "For an individual to ask now that God be merciful, is to reject the death and ignore its value. It is to plead for something to be done when everything has been done. Men are not saved by coaxing mercy out of God; they are saved when they are to believe God has been merciful enough to provide a Savior and that He is propitious" (*Systematic Theology*, Vol. 3, p. 95).

Another critical N.T. text that presents the N.T. application to propitiation is I John 2:2. There are two phases to propitiation:

(Phase #1)- The General or Universal offer of propitiation. **I John 2:2b**

What this phase means is that the violated Holiness of God has been potentially appeased for the entire universe. The entire world is savable. Through the propitiatory work of Jesus Christ, all who come to Him will have their sins forgiven and will be saved forever.

(Phase#2)- The specific or personal appropriation of propitiation. **I John 2:2a**

This phase of propitiation means that one who has personally believed on Jesus Christ will find complete forgiveness of their post-conversion sins in coming to God and confessing their sins. The reason why a child of God may live in perfect harmony and fellowship with God even though that child sometimes fails and sins is because of the propitiatory work of Jesus Christ.

It is not our confession of sin that appeases God's violated holiness, it is the sacrificial work of Jesus Christ that does. Confession of sin is the method that God has designed for the erring saints to appropriate Christ's propitiatory work, thus leaving them in perfect fellowship and harmony with the Holy God, even after terrible times of sinful failure (I John 1:9).

If an unbeliever does not respond to Christ's universal propitiatory work, he will go to hell. If a believer does not respond to Christ's propitiatory work, he will go to heaven, but will experience a lack of fellowship with God in this life, the disciplinary chastisement of God and the potential loss of rewards in eternity.

It is very clear Romans 3:24-25 that Paul considered "propitiation" to be one of the key grace words connected to the grace gospel.

It is also clear that the Apostle John thought the same thing for he said, "In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins" (I John 4:10).