

## SOTERIOLOGY (53)

The barrier between Jew and Gentile is broken down through Christ.

5) We have a whole new purpose for tribulation. Rom. 5:1-5

Trials for the believer are character development agents. For the unbeliever, tribulation is designed to break him down; for the believer, tribulation is designed to build him up. One reconciled to God has a whole new dimension in his perspective of trouble and trials.

6) We have the privilege and responsibility to proclaim reconciliation. II Cor. 5:18-20

God gives us the privilege of sharing the message of reconciliation.

**Accomplishment #5** - Christ's sufferings and death provide propitiation between God and man.

The word "propitiation" is the word *hilaskomai* (ἱλασκομαι), from which we get all of its derivatives, *hilasmos* (ἱλασμος) and *hilastarios* (ἱλαστηριος). The word means to appease and to conciliate—to make compatible by means of an appeasement—a satisfying or pacifying of all demands for compatibility.

There is no doubt whatsoever that propitiation is an appeasement that is needed because of our sin. That point is very clear biblically—Rom. 3:25; I John 2:2; 4:10. The difficulty of the doctrine does not lie in seeing the need for propitiation, the difficulty lies in what is it that needs propitiating. In other words, what is appeased by Christ's propitiatory work in behalf of our sin? Is it God's wrath that is satisfied or is it God's righteousness that is satisfied?

Dr. Charles Ryrie believes it is the wrath of God that needs 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 writes: "As the Father's propitiation for our sins, He (Christ) appeased God's wrath by satisfying the demands of divine holiness and justice that were made against us and our sins" (*Practical Christian Theology*, p. 121).

Dr. Lewis Sperry Chafer says, "The value to God by Christ's death as a vindication of His righteousness and law is indicated by the word propitiation" (Vol. 3, p. 93).

Dr. C. I. Scofield writes: "Propitiation, then, relates to the law and what is due God's holiness" (*Ibid.*, p. 95).

The reason for the seeming difference of opinion is because some theologians believe it is possible to appease the wrath of God and others do not believe it is possible to appease God's wrath, but it is possible to appease God's righteousness. The thinking would be Christ did not appease God's wrath but took the full brunt of God's wrath.

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What He appeased was the holiness of God. He satisfied all demands in the violation of God's holiness, and in this He took the full wrath of God upon Himself. Therefore, God's holiness was completely pacified.

Dr. C. I. Scofield is powerful on this matter: "For 'propitiate' means to appease, and suggests the wholly false notion that God's wrath was appeased. But the very fact that God Himself provides the mercy seat, the propitiation, should have banished the notion from human thinking" (*Ibid.*, p. 95).

Dr. Scofield's position is that it is not the wrath of God that needs to be appeased, it is the holiness of God that needs to be appeased. Dr. C. H. Dodd, a Cambridge theologian who attempted to resolve this matter in 1931, argues that when the word is used in the N.T., it always has to do with appeasing because of sin, not because of wrath. Therefore, it is not wrath that needs appeasing; it is holiness that needs appeasing. Sin violates holiness, not wrath (*E.D.O.T.*, 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 holiness. It is holiness that needs appeasing. Dr. Augustus Strong simply said propitiation is that "which satisfies the demands of violated holiness" (*Systematic Theology*, p. 718). He also cites Lyman Abbott in saying, "What humanity needs is not the removal of the penalty, but the removal of sin" (*Ibid.*, p. 720).

Dr. Leon Morris, on the other hand, does believe that propitiation has to do with appeasing God's wrath. He offers the whole development of the first chapters of the book 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 rewards, not because of some impersonal retribution, but because God's wrath is directed against it (Rom. 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 (Rom. 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" (*E.D.O.T.*, p. 888).

In order for us to better understand the doctrine of propitiation and to even be in any position to form some conclusion or conviction on this matter, we must examine the concept from the Bible—both O.T. and N.T. Certainly we will be quick to admit that the wrath of God is a theme that shows up in both the O.T. and N.T. Dr. 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 truly helps us understand God's concept of propitiation in the O.T. is the N.T. passage of Hebrews 9:5. The word translated "mercy seat" (KJV, NASV) "atonement cover" (NIV) is the word used for propitiation. This critical text enables us to go back to the O.T. and glean as much as possible about the concept of the "mercy seat."

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### Passage #1 - Exodus 25:17-22

From this passage we may observe the following:

- 1) The mercy seat was to be a place of purity—made of “pure gold” (v. 17).
- 2) The mercy seat was a place of angelic protection—“cherubim” (v. 18). Cherubim specifically guard God’s holiness (Gen. 3:22-24).
- 3) The mercy seat was the place where Holy God would meet and communicate with a sinful man like Moses (v. 22).

In an examination of this first text, we would have to conclude that the emphasis is certainly not on God’s wrath, but on His holiness.

### Passage #2 - Lev. 16:1-17

From this passage we may observe the following:

- 1) The mercy seat was to be the place of the sin offering (16:5, 15).
- 2) The mercy seat was to be a place where a man could die (16:13).
- 3) The mercy seat was to be a place where Israel’s sin was atoned for and stressed (16:15-16).

From this passage we may conclude that although God could and would execute someone who did not properly follow His directions, it does not seem that the emphasis here is so much on the appeasing of God’s wrath, but on the appeasing of God’s holiness. It is the shed blood 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 truly understand the doctrine, we begin by asking the question “Why does God’s wrath exist?” God’s wrath is a part of God and exists because God’s 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 wrath is a by-product of 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 we resolve the wrath problem, but how we resolve the violated holiness problem. Wrath entered into the picture because God’s holiness was violated. Resolve the holiness matter and 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 Corinthians 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).

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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 most certainly is found in the Bible. It is like the term “vicarious” which is not found in the Bible, but the theology is found in the Bible.

As we have already discussed, “propitiation” has to do with appeasing, satisfying and pacifying the violated or offended holiness of God, which has been violated by 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” (Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Theology*, p. 468).

Dr. Charles Ryrie adds: “Expiation has to do with reparation for a 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” (Charles Ryrie, *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. He took the full brunt of God’s wrath, which we deserved 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” (ἰλασκομαι). The prayer of the tax gatherer makes proper theological sense when this important point is observed. The tax gatherer is really crying out to God for God to be propitious toward him. Under the 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 sin. A full, complete appeasement for sin committed against a Holy God was not possible until Christ went to Calvary. Therefore, when this tax gatherer stood in the temple humbly asking God to be propitious to him a sinner, it is asking God to be His eternal ally rather than His eternal enemy.

Truth is God cannot be merciful to any sinner. His righteousness, holiness and justice won’t permit it. God can, in His mercy, provide some method of helping the hopeless. He can provide a means so the sinner can be justified, but He cannot ever be merciful to one who is a sinner.

The reality of the Bible is if one faces God as a sinner, he will only experience God’s wrath. God, in His mercy, provided a Savior—Jesus Christ.

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It is not by pleading for God's mercy will one be saved; it is only by believing in Jesus Christ and inviting Him into a life that one will be saved. The propitiatory and expiatory work of Jesus Christ appeased God completely.

In the sufferings and death of Jesus Christ, God's wrath was experienced, His holiness was appeased, His mercy was demonstrated and our sins can be forgiven. As Dr. Chafer observed: "For an individual to ask now that God be merciful, is to reject the death of Christ and to 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" (Vol. 3, p. 95).

There are two phases to propitiation:

**(Phase #1)** - The general or universal propitiation. I John 2:2b

This phase of propitiation means 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 can have their sins forgiven and be saved forever.

**(Phase #2)** - The specific or personal 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 can live in perfect harmony with the Holy God, even when the child sometimes sins, is because of the propitiatory work of Jesus Christ. It is not the 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.

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 personal 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.

For any person to reject a proper response to Jesus Christ is very foolish. Christ has appeased God's violated holiness and made it possible for sinful people, both lost and saved, to live in perfect harmony and fellowship with God.

It is quite evident from these doctrinal studies that redemption, reconciliation and propitiation are critical soteriological doctrines. Christ's sacrificial work in redemption is toward sin. His work in reconciliation is toward sinful humanity. His work in propitiation is toward Holy Deity.

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Christ's work on Calvary is finished, it is complete. It resolves all theological problems. What a tragedy for anyone to reject Jesus Christ and miss out on the appropriation of these wonderful eternal blessings.

**Accomplishment #6** - Christ's sufferings and death provide judgment of our sin nature.

Not only did Christ's sufferings and death resolve the problem of personal sin, it also resolved the problem of the sin nature. This is a very important point for us to grasp, as Dr. Chafer says, "As unregenerate men may continue unsaved because of their failure to enter by faith into the truth that Christ died for their sins, in like manner regenerate men may remain undelivered from evil in their lives because of their failure to enter by faith into the truth that Christ died unto their sin nature" (Vol. 3, p. 98).

Sin can be understood in the context of any failure to live up or measure up to the righteous and holy standards of God. Sin nature may be understood as that part of every human being that attempts to lure one into failing to live up to the righteous and holy standards of God. The matter of sin answers the question of what is the violation. The matter of the sin nature answers the question of why the violation.

Every honest believer will admit when he sins that the reason for it is because there was a part of him that wanted to sin. That part was the sin nature. As Dr. Chafer said, "...the truth is not in the one who asserts that he has no sin nature" (Vol. 3, p. 96). (See I John 1:8, 10.)

There are certain passages of Scripture that make it clear that both the personal sin and the personal sin nature were judged by the work of Christ on the cross:

- 1) I Cor. 15:3 - The word "sins," which is plural, refers to personal sins,
- 2) Rom. 6:10 - The word "sin," which is singular, refers more than just to personal sins, but also to the entire sin nature. This point is not so much determined by the word, for the same word is used for sin, but it is determined by the context of Rom. 6, 7, 8, which does reveal that God did pronounce a judgment against the sin nature. (We will discuss this matter further.)
- 3) I John 1:8 - This verse has its primary focus on the sin nature. The word "sin" is anarthrous (without article) which means John has the character and quality of the nature of sin in view. What John is saying is one who says he does not have the character or quality of sin or a sin nature in him is not one living in accordance to truth. Although believers, through a theological ignorance, may in fact misunderstand this important concept, if one were to continually insist that he has no character, no capacity or no nature of sinfulness in him, the truth is not in him and he is not saved. The Spirit of God quickly reveals and exposes the reality of the sin nature and the reality of personal sin. For one to continually deny this truth is to clearly show no such Spirit of truth indwells the individual.