

Propitiation

The value and benefit of Christ's death is so great that it cannot be expressed in one word. Hence, we read of redemption, reconciliation, and propitiation. Redemption undertakes the solution of the problem of sin, as reconciliation undertakes the solution of the problem of the sinner, and propitiation undertakes the problem of an offended God. Redemption is "to deliver by paying a price." It is the act of God by which He Himself pays as a ransom the price of human sin which the outraged holiness and government of God requires. It is the sinward aspect of the death of Christ in which He purchased out of the slave market those who were in complete bondage and servitude. Reconciliation is "to change thoroughly, to bring back into harmony." Therefore, it is manward, not Godward, since God is immutable. It is thus the manward aspect of Christ's death by which the sinner, separated from God and "far off," is "made nigh." Propitiation is "to make satisfaction." It relates to the law, and what is due God's holiness. Thus, propitiation deals with the Godward aspect of the value of Christ's death.

The pagan religionist holds the idea that his god is angry, apathetic, and distant, and must be placated before any good can be received from him. This may be seen through the outward demonstrations of the pagan, false prophets in I Kings 18:25, 26 who sought to change the attitude of their gods from animosity and indifference to kindness and mercy. In propitiation the idea is not that of seeking to change the attitude of God toward man, or of placating the anger of a vengeful God. Rather it is that of satisfying the righteous demands of His justice so that His government might be maintained, and that mercy might be shown solely on the basis of justice duly satisfied.

"Christ...hath given Himself for us an offering and a sacrifice to God for a sweet smelling savour" (Ephesians 5:2). Note "to God...for us." His death was a substitutionary act, and was offered to God in full payment of the debt of sin which we as sinners owed, and which the violated law demanded. Christ died to make it possible for God to bring hell deserving sinners into fellowship with Himself, and that in complete harmony with His holiness and justice. He died to vindicate the character of God before all the intelligences of the universe. He died that God's throne might be established. It is written, "Justice and judgment are the habitation (or, the foundation) of thy throne: Mercy and truth shall go before thy face" (Psalm 89:14). Therefore, "in the midst of the throne...stood a Lamb as it had been slain" (Revelation 5:6). Thus, "mercy and truth are met together; righteousness and peace have kissed each other" (Psalm 85:10).

To seek to change the attitude of God toward man is an unscriptural concept. The God of the Bible said, "I change not" (Malachi 3:6). Moreover, this unchanging "God is love" (I John 4:8), and He declared, "I have loved thee with an everlasting love" (Jeremiah 31:3). Therefore, God does not change, nor does His attitude toward man need to change. But, the sin of man placed an obstacle in God's way when He, in His infinite love and mercy, desired to bless man with salvation. That obstacle was the broken law, and the guilt of man. The former cried out for justice to be satisfied, and the latter needed to be cleansed away. In order that it not be necessary for Him to demand that the penalty be meted out upon sinful man so that He might satisfy the demands of His broken law, and in order that He dispense mercy upon the fallen sinner on the basis of justice satisfied, He Himself became the expiation demanded by His holiness and justice. The Judge takes upon Himself the penalty of the one whom He has adjudged guilty, and thus can show mercy. The judgment seat becomes a mercy seat. Propitiation does not infuse compassion in God. It rather secures the freedom on His part to exercise His unchanging compassion apart from those impediments which penal judgments would otherwise impose. Love is the train, but holiness is the track that it runs on. The law is the expression of God's holiness, the cross the expression of His love. In the cross of Christ there is such a doing right – meeting the inflexible demand of the broken law and the sinner's need – that the love of God can flow unhindered to the sinner without compromise of His holiness. God requires satisfaction because He is holiness, but He makes satisfaction because He is love. The Judge Himself, with all his hatred of transgression, nonetheless loves the transgressor, and comes down from the bench to take the criminal's place and bear his penalty.

The word "propitiation" in Romans 3:25 is from "hilasterion," meaning "the place of propitiation." The word in I John 2:2 and 4:10 is from "hilasmos," meaning "that which propitiates," a propitiatory sacrifice. Christ Himself is the Person, and the mercy seat sprinkled with His own blood, the place. In the Septuagint "hilasmos" is used in such passages as Leviticus 25:9 and Numbers 25:8, and translated "atonement," to cover. In the same version "hilasterion" is used in Leviticus 16:14, and translated "mercy seat." The New Testament also translates "hilasterion" by "mercy seat" in Hebrews 9:5. The verb "hilaskomai" occurs in Luke 18:13, translated "be

merciful,” and in Hebrews 2:17, translated “to make reconciliation for.” Romans 3:25 with Hebrews 9:5 proves that the mercy seat is a distinct symbol of our Lord Jesus Christ.

The mercy seat takes the reader back to the ancient tabernacle worship of Israel, first mentioned in Exodus 25:17-22. The mercy seat was actually the lid, or covering for that ark presented in verses 10-16. That ark was often called “the ark of the testimony” or “the ark of the covenant” because it contained the “two tables of testimony, tables of stone, written with the finger of God,” referring to God’s holy law – the ten commandments (25:16, 22; 31:18; Numbers 10:33; Deuteronomy 10:1-5). The mercy seat, covering the ark, was placed “above upon the ark” (Exodus 25:21).

It was made of “pure gold” (25:17), that is, it was not made of wood overlaid with gold as was the ark (25:10,11). Out from each end of it there was beaten and fashioned a figure of the cherubim. They bowed inward toward each other with their faces to the mercy seat. Their wings were lifted up above their heads, forming a canopy of wings (25:18-20). Cherubim, without any reference to their form, are first mentioned in Genesis 3:24 at the expulsion of Adam and Eve from the garden Eden, of which we read: “So he drove out man; and he placed at the east of the garden of Eden cherubims, and a flaming sword which turned every way, to keep the way of the tree of life.” God stationed them “to keep the way of the tree of life,” that is, render it impossible for man to return to Eden and eat of the tree of life. Therefore, there appeared “a flaming sword” in constant motion, cutting hither and thither, representing that “God is a consuming fire,” and showing the cherubim to be ministers of judgment – the guardians and vindicators of what is due the glory of God.

This mercy seat became God’s throne on the earth. “There I will meet with thee” (Exodus 25:22). Repeatedly, God was spoken of as “the Lord...that dwelleth between the cherubims” (II Samuel 6:2; Psalm 80:1; 99:1; II Kings 19:15). The great question is: “How could a holy God meet with a sinful people – a nation of rebellious transgressors?” The answer: “Only on the ground of accepted sacrifice.” Thus, we read, “And he shall take of the blood...and sprinkle it...upon the mercy seat” (Leviticus 16:14). The shed blood, resulting from the death of an animal in the type, spoke of judgment already visited upon the innocent substitute. The blood then sprinkled declared that God had accepted the victim offered to Him. The mercy seat truly covered from the eyes of the cherubim the broken law, and the sprinkled blood covered the sins of the worshipper.

An uncovered ark exposes man to the purity of God’s law, and becomes nothing but a throne of judgment. But, cover it, and sprinkle it with blood, and it becomes the ground and meeting place between God and the believing sinner. Who would presume to approach God by uncovering what God has covered and sprinkled with blood? Those who would need to read the incident of I Samuel 6:19 where “the men of Beth-shemesh...looked into the ark.” In order to look into it, the covering had to be removed. This severed mercy from judgment, my friend. And what was the result? 50,070 men died on the very spot! Thus came the soul searching question: “Who is able to stand before this holy Lord God?” (6:20). But, the mercy seat, sprinkled with blood, raises this question, “Who shall lay anything to the charge of God’s elect?”, and answers, “It is God that justifieth” (Romans 8:33).

Divine righteousness requires that God’s law be obeyed, and that its penalty be enforced where its precepts have been broken. Divine mercy cannot be exercised at the expense of justice. The very character of God is at stake. God does not lower His standard. He raises man up to meet that standard in Jesus Christ. Isaiah 42 is a prophetic chapter dealing with Jehovah’s righteous Servant, the Lord Jesus Christ. This can be seen by comparing Isaiah 42:1-4 to Matthew 12:17-21, and Isaiah 42:6 to Luke 2:32, and Isaiah 42:7 to Mark 10:52. It is He only who would “not fail nor be discouraged,” and who would do in His lifetime what Israel failed to do, namely “magnify the law, and make it honourable” (Isaiah 42:4, 21). He only was “holy...undefiled, separate from sinners...without spot” (Hebrews 7:26; 9:14). “All” others “have sinned, and come short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23), and that universal failure demands “death” (6:23). Justice, however, instead of being reduced to the necessity of exacting payment from the spiritually bankrupt (Luke 7:42), has received full payment from the bankrupt’s surety, Jesus Christ (Hebrews 7:22). The ancient mercy seat sets forth the fact that God’s avenging holiness would be fully satisfied by the shedding of the “precious blood” of His Son on the cross. God is forever propitious on the basis of Christ’s death.

Here is the bottom line: If God is propitious, there remains no occasion for the unsaved sinner to try to find Him, to wait until He is on the giving hand, or to implore Him to save. The problem confronting the mind of man is one of adjustment to that revealed truth – a willingness on the part of man to receive what He has already provided and is free to bestow in and through His Son, “the saviour of the world.” This is done by simply believing on the Lord Jesus Christ. Read carefully such scriptures as John 3:15, 16, 18, 36; 5:38; 6:35, 40, 47; 8:24; 11:25, 26;

12:36, 47; 20:30, 31; Acts 10:43; 13:38, 39; 16:30, 31; 26:18; Romans 1:16; 4:5; 5:1; I Corinthians 1:18, 21; and Ephesians 2:8, 9 as cases to point.

But, you may ask, “What could be more appropriate than that the unsaved implore God as did the publican, ‘God be merciful to me a sinner’ (Luke 18:13)?” The publican was a Jew of the Old Testament order, praying in the temple according to the requirements of a Jew in the temple. If he did as Jews were accustomed to do at that time when they went into the temple to pray, he left a sacrifice at the altar. It is probable that he could see the smoke of that sacrifice ascending as he prayed. What he prayed was strictly proper for a Jew of his day to pray under those circumstances. But, his prayer would be most unfitting on this side of the cross of Christ.

The words “be merciful” are from the verb “hilaskomai,” to make propitiation. The American Standard Version, for “be thou merciful” in the text, renders “be thou propitiated” in the footnote. To “be merciful” is properly associated with leniency and generosity. Such an idea is not in the text. By the use of the word in the text, “hilaskomai,” the publican clearly asked God to cover his sins in such a way as to dispose of them, yet, at the same time, to do such in a way that would protect His holiness from complicity with his sins. It was suitable for the publican, having provided his own sacrifice, to ask that his sacrifice be accepted and himself absolved. The footnote of the Scofield Reference Bible paraphrases the publican’s prayer thus: “Be toward me as thou art when thou lookest upon the atoning blood.”

One may, out of ignorance, pray such a prayer today, but strictly speaking, the wrong is immeasurable. To pray for God to “be merciful,” or “be propitious,” implies that He is not. And to that extent the petitioner is imploring God to do something more effective than the thing He has done in giving His Son as a sacrifice for sin.

Nothing could be farther from the truth. God is propitious. To pray for God to “be propitious” is to reject Christ’s death, and to ignore its value. It is to plead for something to be done when, in fact, everything has been done. The work is finished. Propitiation does not change the attitude of God toward man. It frees God to act on behalf of sinners. And propitiation is the work of Jesus Christ who, in His death, satisfied, for all times, the claims of divine holiness, righteousness, and justice so that God is free to save sinners on the basis of justice satisfied. “Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved, and thy house” (Acts 16:31). That is the message of God’s word. Believe it, and be saved today, and forever. I close by quoting the words of Christ for your consideration:

“I am the bread of life: he that cometh to me shall never hunger; and he that believeth on me shall never thirst...And this is the will of him that sent me, that everyone which seeth the Son, and believeth on him, may have everlasting life: and I will raise him up at the last day...Verily, verily, I say unto you, He that believeth on me hath everlasting life” (John 6:35, 40, 47).

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