

“The Propitiation for Our Sins” (An Exposition of 1 John 4:9-10)¹

Introduction

We looked at 1 John 4:7-12 last Sunday and dealt with that passage in some detail, but I couldn't help thinking that we really just scratched the surface of much of what John teaches us in that text. For example, there is a great deal more that we could have said about *the nature and perfections of God*.

John's statement that **“God is love”** (v.8, 16) may sound simple to some, but there is such a depth of theology found there that we could spend weeks looking at it without ever coming close to exhausting the subject. Similarly, John's statement in v.12 that **“No one has ever seen God”** has much to teach us about our God. No doubt we would find an extended study of that subject to be more than a little edifying to our souls as well.

But of all of the things that John tells us there in v.7-12, the one thing that jumped off the page at me and was stuck in my mind all week was his statement about God so loving us that He **“sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins”** (v.10, italics added).

The word “propitiation” has fallen on hard times over the past century, and that is a real shame. Many theologians believe that such a term is somehow *beneath God's dignity*. Some go so far as to claim that the idea of propitiation is “pagan in origin” and too closely resembles the false gods of antiquity who were thought to be prone to venting their anger at mankind “in vindictive outbursts of rage.”² Certainly that is *not* how we should think of God, but that is just as certainly *not* what the term conveys.

The word “propitiation” has to do with *the wrath of God against sin*. And at the end of the day, that is probably why some are so uncomfortable with the subject altogether, and prefer to use alternate terms to describe the work of Christ on the cross for our salvation.

There are a number of theological terms that have seemingly fallen out of the Christian vocabulary in our day. Think of the word “providence,” for example. Generations ago this word and the truth of Scripture that it conveys were commonplace in the thinking, writing, and conversation of Christians. And yet we rarely hear of it today. Sadly, the same can be said of the word “propitiation.”

In his book, *Knowing God*, J.I. Packer includes a chapter entitled, “The Heart of the Gospel.” That chapter is largely an expounding of the biblical doctrine of propitiation. There he writes:

“Has the word *propitiation* any place in your Christianity? In the faith of the New Testament it is central. The love of God, the taking of human form by the Son, the meaning of the cross, Christ's heavenly intercession, the way of salvation – all are to be explained in terms of it, . . . and any explanation from which the thought of propitiation is missing will be incomplete, and indeed actually misleading, by New Testament standards.”³

And as if that were not enough, Packer goes on to say that “a gospel without propitiation at its heart is another gospel than that which Paul preached, The implications of this must not be evaded.”⁴

1 All Scripture quotations are from the English Standard Version (ESV) unless otherwise noted.

2 See Robert Letham, *The Work of Christ*, p.140

3 p.181

4 Ibid, p.182

And so it is my hope that we will at the very least take some baby steps this morning toward a recovery of the use of this great biblical term that is so central to the faith of the New Testament, not just for its own sake, but so that we will have a firmer grasp and appreciation of the love of God and of the work of Christ as our Redeemer and Savior. After all, propitiation is *at the very heart of the gospel*.

The Definition of Propitiation

The *first* thing that we should do is *define our terms*, and so let us start there. *What is propitiation?* It is often said that it is related to the Old Testament idea of a sacrifice being *a covering for sin*, or an *atonement*. John Murray writes, “To propitiate means to “placate,” “pacify,” “appease,” “conciliate.” And it is this idea that is applied to the atonement accomplished by Christ.”⁵

Murray goes on to say that “Propitiation presupposes the wrath and displeasure of God, and the purpose of propitiation is the removal of this displeasure.”⁶ Joel Beeke likewise summarizes the basic truth of Christ's death on the cross as the propitiation for our sins as follows:

“According to the doctrine of propitiation, Christ offered himself as a sacrifice to appease the anger of God against sinners by bearing that wrath himself.”⁷

Propitiation is not just the removal of sin and its just penalty (i.e. *expiation*), but is rather *the full satisfaction of the wrath of God by the sacrificial death of a substitute*. This is how we are to rightly view the cross of Jesus Christ.

As we briefly saw last Sunday, that is what Paul is saying in Romans 3:23–26 when he uses this word:

“for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, *whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood*, to be received by faith. This was to show God’s righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins. It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.” (Italics added)

How can an infinitely holy and just God justify sinners like us, who are deserving of nothing but His wrath and condemnation before Him because of our infinite debt of sin? How can God save and justify sinners without being unjust and violating His own holiness and justice?

He does so by *putting forward His only-begotten Son*, Jesus Christ, **“as a propitiation by his blood”** (v.25). He does so by *sending His Son* **“to be the propitiation for our sins”** (1 John 4:10) This truth of a substitutionary atonement and propitiation of God's wrath is what was pictured and prophesied by Isaiah in Isaiah 53:4-6, where it is written:

**“Surely he has borne our griefs
and carried our sorrows;
yet we esteemed him stricken,
smitten by God, and afflicted.**

⁵ *Redemption Accomplished and Applied*, p.30

⁶ *Ibid*

⁷ *Reformed Systematic Theology, Vol.2: Man and Christ*, p.995

**But he was pierced for our transgressions;
he was crushed for our iniquities;
upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace,
and with his wounds we are healed.
All we like sheep have gone astray;
we have turned—every one—to his own way;
and the LORD has laid on him
the iniquity of us all.”**

To say that Christ was made **“the propitiation for our sins”** is to say that He took the wrath of God for our sins upon Himself in our place, that **“the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all”** (v.6) and **“crushed”** *Him* instead of us **“for our iniquities”** (v.5).

And His death in our place, His taking the wrath of God for us, was *so total and complete* that it **“brought us peace”** with God. (v.5) That is why our Lord cried out **“It is finished”** (John 19:30) as He died on the cross. His work of redemption was complete; *the debt of our sin was paid in full!*

The Love of God and Propitiation

The *next* thing that we should see from our text is not just *the nature and definition* of propitiation, but also its source. And that source is not just the love of *Christ*, but the love of *God the Father* as well. Look again at our text in 1 John 4:9–10:

“In this *the love of God* was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we have loved God but that *he loved us* and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins.” (Italics added)

Do you see here another reason why the idea of propitiation does not re-cast God in the awful image of the false gods of the heathen, who were *prone to fits of caprice and rage*, and needed to be bought off by the offerings of their subjects? Packer again writes:

“In paganism, man propitiates his gods, and religion becomes a form of commercialism and, indeed, of bribery. In Christianity, however, God propitiates his wrath by his own action. He *set forth Jesus Christ*, says Paul, to be a propitiation [Romans 3:25]; *he sent his Son*, says John, to be the propitiation for our sins [1 John 4:10].”⁸

John tells us unmistakably that the source of Christ becoming **“the propitiation for our sins”** is *the love of God!* In fact, it can only be rightly understood in terms of the undeserved love of God toward sinners like us. And in some ways the love of God toward us can only be rightly understood in terms of Christ becoming a propitiation for our sins.

John tells us that God sending His only-begotten Son into the world to be the propitiation for our sins was the very manifestation of *the love of God* toward us! That God should love us as His creatures if we had *no debt of sin* would be amazing enough as it is; but that God would so love us even *as sinners*, **“enemies”** of God (Romans 5:10), and those who are **“by nature children of wrath”** (Ephesians 2:3) is astounding. We cannot fully comprehend it!

8 Ibid, p.185

No wonder John says, **“In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins.”** (v.10) And likewise in Romans 5:7-8 Paul tells us:

“For one will scarcely die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die - but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.”

As a believer in Christ, do *you* ever struggle with doubt as to whether or not God loves you? Maybe because of the present circumstances in your life? Or because of suffering? Or because of your struggle with sin and your many shortcomings?

Then the place you must *look to is the cross of Christ*. For it is *there* that the love of God for sinners is most clearly manifested and revealed for all to see.

Assurance and Propitiation

Last but not least, the truth of God so loving us that He sent forth His only-begotten Son to be **“the propitiation for our sins”** should give *great assurance of God's love and of our salvation* to all who have believed upon Jesus Christ. In many ways that is why John brings it up in the first place!

This is also what the Apostle Paul is saying in Romans 5:9–11, where it is written:

“Since, therefore, we have now been justified by his blood, much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath of God. For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life. More than that, we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation.”

If God so loved us enough **“while we were sinners”** (v.8) and were yet His **“enemies”** (v.10), that He reconciled us to Himself **“by the death of His Son,”** how much more should we now be assured of His great love and care for us now that we have been reconciled!

As Paul says there, **“much more”** now, having been **“justified by His blood”** (and so forgiven and accepted as righteous in God's sight) **“shall we be saved by Him from the wrath of God”** (v.9), and **“much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life.”**

If God would send forth His Son to be **“the propitiation for our sins,”** then there is *nothing left for us to pay*. If you are a believer in Christ and have trusted in Him alone for salvation from sin, then the infinite debt of your sins and mine has been *paid in full* by the blood of Christ.

In Christ, your sins have been freely and fully forgiven, because the wrath of God that was due unto you on account of your many sins against God has *not* been swept under the rug or ignored, but rather has been *punished to the fullest* by the Lord Jesus Christ standing in your place.

As Isaiah says, the LORD has laid upon Him the iniquity of us all and poured at His wrath upon Him in our place! That is why we can sing as we did earlier in the service, “Bearing shame and scoffing rude, *in my place condemned he stood, sealed my pardon with his blood*: Hallelujah, what a Savior!” (“Man of Sorrows! What a Name,” by Philip Bliss)

Conclusion

Nothing shows us *the awfulness of our sin* before a holy God like the price that was paid for our salvation in the death of His Son. Christ as our propitiation teaches us this and reminds us of this.

Nothing shows us *the wonder of the love of God toward sinners* like us that He would send forth His only-begotten Son to be the propitiation for our sins.

Nothing *assures us of the certainty of our salvation* like the truth of Christ being made a propitiation for our sins! When the price of our sins has been *paid in full by the death of God's Son*, what else could be left for us to pay!

If this is the case, surely John's conclusion throughout v.7-12 is the correct one - **“Beloved** [we who are so beloved by God in Christ!], **let us love one another.**” (v.7) And as John Stott notes in his book, *The Cross of Christ*, not only is the cross of Christ “the ground of a free salvation,” but it is also then “the most powerful incentive to a holy life.”⁹ - Amen