

The Significance of Christ's Propitiation (part three) By Jay Wegter

The deep love of God and the unfathomable wisdom of God are expressed in propitiation; for the way in which God saves sinners is the greatest revelation of who He is. The means of salvation must not merely protect God's attributes from compromise; God's work of redemption must exalt His attributes. Thus, the great question is: "How can a wicked person be released from his sins and God still remain just in freely granting that man's pardon?" The propitiation which Christ accomplished on Calvary's cross answers this question. In the death of Christ God's trampled law; His wounded honor; and His offended justice are all answered decisively. The cross is the vindication of God's justice. That is why it is the heart of the gospel. In making Christ the 'sin-bearer', God has displayed His son publicly as an atoning sacrifice—as a propitiation of divine wrath.

Being justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus; whom God displayed publicly as a propitiation in His blood through faith. *This was* to demonstrate His righteousness, because in the forbearance of God He passed over the sins previously committed (Rom 3:24-25).

God 'placarded' publicly, as if on billboard, His Son in death as a demonstration of divine righteousness (Rom 3:25). This is mystery so deep it is beyond the power of the natural mind to understand. It is spiritually discerned, for the natural man cannot receive these things (1 Cor 2:14). But, God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself by not imputing the sins of believers to their own persons. God did this by charging those sins to Christ's account (2 Cor 5:18-21). The death of Christ was a demonstration of God's righteousness (Rom 3:26). God wanted the world to know that He is righteous when He forgives the ungodly. God's authoritative record of what happened at Calvary is this: under the moral government of God, Christ became 'officially guilty' of the sins of His people. Christ bore those sins up to the cross so that they could be taken away (1 Pet 3:18; 2:24). God's righteousness is exalted in the forgiveness of sinners because real, blood-bought justice has been done in the propitiation for sin wrought by Christ.

Whom God displayed publicly as a propitiation in His blood through faith. *This was* to demonstrate His righteousness, because in the forbearance of God He passed over the sins previously committed; for the demonstration, *I say*, of His righteousness at the present time, so that He would be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus (Rom 3:25-26).

The cross is God's message to the world that He has a 'legal basis' for pardoning sinners. Christ's work of penal substitution on our behalf met all the demands of God's justice. Therefore, God is both JUST, and the JUSTIFIER of the one who has faith in Jesus (3:26). In the Old Testament, the Passover lamb gave its life blood so the family who brought it to the high priest could be forgiven and live. Christ, our Passover Lamb has also been sacrificed that we might have endless life in Him (1 Cor 5:7). And, like the scapegoat in the Old Testament Levitical system, Christ carries away the guilt of His people by His dying in the 'wilderness' of our dereliction and deserved wrath. God wills to be known by us His creatures, but as Luther pointed out, He is the 'hidden God' (*deus absconditis*). He hides Himself behind the work of propitiation. We must find God in 'Christ crucified for sinners' or we will never know Him savingly. Those who are saved know God through Christ and His work. They know Him as He is revealed in the cross-work of Christ—as 'just and the justifier' of the one who has faith in Jesus (3:26). Our challenge to the reader is this. Return frequently to this glorious doctrine. For, it is not merely a formal orthodox truth; it is the very heart of the gospel. It is the touchstone of all redemptive truth. We have yet to find (and never will) a religious unbeliever who understands and loves this doctrine of propitiation. The reason why is evident, the religious unbeliever (whether in a cult or Eastern belief, or in Romanism) always, always reasons from what he is in himself up to God. By infinite contrast the person who believes the gospel reasons down from what God has done in Christ to himself and his ruin by sin. Thus, propitiation is the watershed, the continental divide which separates gospel faith from formal religious 'faith' (a faith which cannot save). Therefore, since the doctrine of propitiation is so pivotal in knowing God; it ought to be our constant source of meditation. So many professing Christians seem content to coexist with a partially defiled conscience—as if no perfect propitiation has been accomplished. God has promised that the work of Christ will cleanse our conscience from all of the 'dead works' we utilize in an attempt to quiet its accusations (Heb 9:14). But, the truth is this: your conscience is God's moral mark

upon you. Therefore it is an extension of His justice—His courtroom. This means that nothing can ultimately satisfy your conscience but that which satisfies the absolute justice of God Himself. When we sin, it is sin against God Himself (Ps 51:4). His justice energizes the conscience. Every failure to obey His holy laws is like a subpoena issued from the courtroom of God: “this is a sin against God that you have committed; you will be summoned to God’s courtroom to answer for this sin.” Oh Christian, do not settle for half measures in dealing with your moral failures. The new covenant has a boundless provision for ongoing cleansing through the propitiation (Heb 8:12).