

The Significance of Christ's Propitiation (part two)

By Jay Wegter

God 'placarded' publicly, as if on billboard, His Son's 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, or imputing 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). There is no other way to know God. 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. These two trajectories (reasoning from self to God; or from God in Christ to self) could not be any more opposed than they are: one goes up from man, the other comes down from God.

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 and revealing 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 law 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 specific 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).

Oh, how we need to feed on the propitiation! For, in Christ’s atoning death, God’s unbending justice was fully satisfied toward the believing sinner. How many times do we stop short of reckoning the propitiation on our behalf and as a result live with a sullied conscience? God gave Christ to be our propitiation so that we might be perfected by God’s love (1 Jn 4:10-19). ‘Dead works’ can never bring balance to the ‘ledger sheet’ of conscience. Let us practice going more quickly to the perfect atonement accomplished for us.

Not only is propitiation the means of a clear conscience, it is also the lens through which we see God’s fatherly disposition toward us. God could not adopt us as sons until our enmity of heart was cleaned out. When our first parents sinned, the satanic lie filled their hearts with darkness. They no longer regarded God’s glory and their highest good to be compatible. In Christ’s atoning work, He steps into that dark maelstrom of enmity, suspicion, hostility, and hatred of God and bears its wrath and curse.

This means that at the moment of salvation when the believing sinner sees by faith a crucified Savior pumping out His heart’s life blood for the likes of him—a miracle takes place. Suddenly that person sees the glory of God in the face of Christ (2 Cor 4:6). God is no longer ‘hidden’. His mighty attributes, love, and wisdom are seen in the sin-bearing work of Christ.

Wonder of wonders, in an instant the hostility engendered by the ancient lie is cleaned out of the heart of the believing sinner (Col 1:19-23). Everything changes; the confidence that God’s glory and our good are joined is now made perfectly clear in the gospel to the new believer—for now God’s glory and our eternal good are forever joined in Christ.

CONCLUSION: We have seen that propitiation is the revelation of God’s righteousness and that the Father’s disposition toward a world of sinners is *propitious* through Christ. In addition, we have marveled that Christ has entered the human condition—at the cross He became our *derelection*—our ‘forsakenness’. This must move us and stagger us; that in His passion and humiliation, Christ assumed our forsakenness and our reproach in order that what separated us from God might be removed. Thus, by

His abandonment at Calvary, we might be given perfect access, intimacy, favor and communion with God. “My God, my God, why have You forsaken me? Far from my deliverance are the words of my groaning” (Ps 22:1). “Therefore Jesus also, that He might sanctify the people through His own blood, suffered outside the gate. So, let us go out to Him outside the camp, bearing His reproach. For here we do not have a lasting city, but we are seeking *the city* which is to come” (Heb 13:12-14).

Do you see how this vital doctrine of propitiation is necessary for our spiritual wellbeing? The use of this doctrine is both for our holiness and our comfort. We have seen that the propitiation allows our life to be controlled by God’s love; but it is not a content-less, sentimental love—it is absolutely goal oriented. He called us to be conformed to His Son (Rom 8:29-30; 2 Thess 2:13-14; Heb 12:14). Thus, the cross shapes our entire life so that we are to be continually ‘calibrated’ to God’s holiness.

As obedient children, do not be conformed to the former lusts *which were yours* in your ignorance, but like the Holy One who called you, be holy yourselves also in all *your* behavior; because it is written, “YOU SHALL BE HOLY, FOR I AM HOLY.” If you address as Father the One who impartially judges according to each one’s work, conduct yourselves in fear during the time of your stay *on earth*; knowing that you were not redeemed with perishable things like silver or gold from your futile way of life inherited from your forefathers, but with precious blood, as of a lamb unblemished and spotless, *the blood* of Christ (1 Pet 1:14-19).

The propitiation accomplished at Calvary has set us free from sin, guilt and death; BUT we are to use this blood-bought freedom wisely in order to retain it. “For you were called to freedom, brethren; only *do not turn* your freedom into an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another. For the whole Law is fulfilled in one word, in the *statement*, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Gal 3:13-14).

Do you want to know Christ better? Do you want greater views of the Father’s heart of love? Do you want to know more of who God is toward you in Christ? Do you want to review how God makes His people holy? Then send your troubled, beat-up conscience on a journey to view the Son of man suffering in your place. Stand on this mountain peak of propitiation and breathe the pure air of God’s love to His redeemed sons and daughters.