

The Significance of Christ's Propitiation (part one)

By Jay Wegter

In an effort to better understand the sufficiency of Christ's work, it is in our interest to investigate the depths of our ruin in Adam. The human condition by reason of original sin is described in Scripture as blindness, rebellion, enmity, helplessness, futile thinking, bondage, and alienation, etc. From the vantage point of the damage to relationship alone we may describe the human condition as one of *derelection*.

This is a rich word to capture the tragedy of man's state after the fall, for *derelection* means dilapidation due to abandonment. Abandonment can have a double meaning here: Adam was willfully negligent, having abandoned his duty to obey his Creator. As a consequence, he was abandoned to the sinful state into which he fell, and with him, the entire human race. There is no greater consideration in theology than the question: *how far did Adam fall?* For the answer to that question will shed great light on what Christ did to restore sinners from ruin.

At the fall, the entire human race was plunged into a state of derelection (alienation, corruption, brokenness) through original sin. We could expand upon this consequence of sin by describing it as *dis-relatedness*. The essence of loss of relationship is captured in a series of *separations* which resulted from original sin. Man became separated from God. Man became separated from other human beings (Adam blamed Eve for his sin); man became separated from himself (his soul's peace was supplanted with guilt, conflict, and defilement); and man was separated from nature (the creation became hostile to man via the curse: flood, frost, heat, natural disasters, quakes, hostile predators, infection, mosquito born disease, famines, plagues, etc.). Apart from redemption, the separations described above culminate in the ultimate separation of the soul from the body at death and separation from God in hell which is finalized at the Last Judgment.

As we consider just how far Adam fell, it becomes our necessary vantage point from which to view the work of Christ. For, only in understanding the gravity of the disaster will we be able to understand how drastic the cure must be. Only from this perspective will we truly know what the Son of God did to reverse that destruction (Eph 2:1-10).

So serious was our ruin in Adam that man is unable to contribute to his own recovery. God has taken salvation out of man's hands. This is intensely humbling. When the sinner first learns that he cannot generate a single meritorious deed by which he may 'trade' with heaven for favor, it is devastating to his pride. This devastation is an important stage in the sinner's conviction. For, if he believes that his efforts at self-reformation may soften up God and kindly dispose Him, then that man is still under the influence of self-righteousness. Only the in-breaking of God's grace can terminate this cycle of self-deception. Eventually, the sinner prepared by the Holy Spirit during conviction moves from devastation to desperation when he begins to understand that he cannot offset one iota of his legal guilt and condemnation before God.

The great Scriptural drama of unfolding redemption reveals that God addresses man's ruin decisively by means of substitution. Salvation must come from outside of man (the very opposite of today's new 'spirituality'). The solution to man's problem is not within himself—there is nothing in man that can be developed into something pleasing to God (Rom 8:5-8). The only possible answer to man's

‘dead end’ hopeless dilemma is if a perfectly holy person acts on behalf of the guilty and disobedient.

This is precisely what Christ did. By God’s decree and foreordained plan, Christ stepped into the room and stead of helpless sinners to act on their behalf (Acts 2:22-24; 4:11-26). Let us consider again the seriousness of the problem addressed by our Savior: man the sinner forfeited his ‘right’ to the life, light, blessedness, glory, and favor of God (Rom 3:23). God is the source of these essentials for living—and man was created to ‘run on God’ if you will. Without God, we do not have these essentials for life; and we cannot function according to our created purpose as the image of God.

But, man in his depraved and arrogant state pretends that he may find these blessings in the world instead of in his Creator. So he worships and serves the creature and the creation instead of his Creator (Rom 1:25). The testimony of God in Scripture reveals the human condition: by reason of sin we are cut off from the life of God. And, without the love, light, life, blessedness, and favor of God we are destined to descend deeper into darkness and misery and ultimately will perish. If left to ourselves, perish we will; for God is just and righteous to shut us out of His presence forever when we worship the creation and ourselves instead of Him.

So, the great question behind the saving grace of God is: “How may God be consistent with His own perfections, AND, at the same time fully export these essentials of life into our experience and into our eternity?” “How can God do this and still be immutably holy?” The book of Romans was written to answer this question. For the longest treatise on salvation in the Bible (Romans) explains in great detail how the unrighteous may be righteous by faith in order to be right with the Righteous One (Rom 1:16-17).

God’s patience is beyond our comprehension; His plan to send Christ to earth to take on our nature was the great mystery kept secret in the bosom of God for long ages past (Rom 16:25-27). For centuries the animal sacrifices commanded by God had been pointing out that apart from the shedding of blood there can be no remission of sin (Lev 17:11; Heb 9:22). The lesson in thousands of years of animal sacrifice was that the bestowal of pardoning mercy is predicated upon the satisfaction of justice.

For several millennia God had been making this point. The Ark of the Covenant was a visual aid to communicate this lesson. The tablets of the law rested beneath the Mercy Seat. Law and mercy were at odds, and could only operate together if the blood of the sacrifice was sprinkled on the Mercy Seat. Someday the blood on the Mercy Seat would be the blood of God’s own Son when Christ would give His life and enter into the Holy Place made without hands—into heaven itself to represent us.

But when Christ appeared as a high priest of the good things to come, *He entered* through the greater and more perfect tabernacle, not made with hands, that is to say, not of this creation; and not through the blood of goats and calves, but through His own blood, He entered the holy place once for all, having obtained eternal redemption (Heb 9:11-15).

Thus, in the great hidden mystery of God, Immanuel (God with us) would come to make the ultimate and final, all-sufficient atonement with His own blood (Heb 10: 10-18). God in Christ would invade man’s realm of darkness and ruin in order to bring about a marvelous deliverance. In order to do so, the Son of God had to take our nature upon Himself in order to accomplish the deliverance (Heb 2:9-18). Our rescue could not be accomplished unless two things took place: the nature that sinned (our human nature) must be fully punished, and the nature that failed to supply obedience must obey perfectly.

Christ did both in order to bring us to God (2 Cor 5:21). Christ is such a perfect Substitute that what He has done in His living and dying and rising counts as if the believing sinner himself has done it.

The propitiation accomplished by Christ is the ‘Mount Everest’ of Holy Scripture, for from this aery summit we may survey the totality of God’s revelation (J. I. Packer). Propitiation is the ‘mountain peak’ that gives us a lofty enough vantage point to view God’s purposes. From this summit we see that through a massive guilt transfer God is making a new humanity in Christ. The scarlet cord of redemption which we trace from Genesis to Revelation leads all the way into the Holy of Holies. Christ is God’s great mystery; for in becoming a man, God in Christ redeems man and brings the elect into the very presence of God eternally (Rev 21:1-7; Heb 6:18-20; 1 Thess 4:14-18).

In so doing, God is glorifying His grace forever—and He is doing so by imputing the sins of the elect to Christ in the work of propitiation and He is imputing the righteousness of Christ to the elect in justification. This is how we are ‘right with the Righteous One’. Propitiation controlled Christ’s life and mission—He came to lay His life down for His sheep (Jn 10:15). God gives Christ to be the propitiation for our sins (1 Jn 4:10), in order that He might deal decisively with the most formidable obstacle imaginable: our sin in the sight of our Holy God.

The propitiation accomplished by Christ quenched and pacified the wrath of God toward us (Rom 5:9). And, thus the propitiation opened up the floodgates of blessing to believing sinners. Those in covenant with God through the blood of Christ now possess ‘precious and magnificent promises’ (2 Pet 1:4). This means that God is for us—He takes endless delight in exporting His love, light, life, blessedness, and favor to us in Christ.

This is difficult for us to believe at times. For we are frequently disillusioned with ourselves: “How can God remain in a posture of Fatherly favor toward me when I fail Him so often?” The gospel answer is that Christ has won this status of sonship for us—He performed for us—He is our ‘eligibility’ and ‘qualification’ for endless blessing from the Father (Rom 8:14-25). The propitiation wrought by Christ has removed every obstacle to the unimpeded flow and enjoyment of God’s love to the believer:

We have come to know and have believed the love which God has for us. God is love, and the one who abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him. By this, love is perfected with us, so that we may have confidence in the Day of Judgment; because as He is, so also are we in this world. There is no fear in love; but perfect love casts out fear, because fear involves punishment, and the one who fears is not perfected in love. We love, because He first loved us (1 Jn 4:16-19).

This unending flow of love to us through Christ has a ‘perfecting’ effect upon us; for as we commune and fellowship with God, walking with Him as sons, we are conformed to the image of Christ; the perfect Son (1 Jn 4:17-18). So fully does propitiation remove the obstacles that stand in the way of the enjoyment of God and His love, that believers are called to spend the remainder of their endless existence ‘bathing’ in the unobstructed love of the Father.

That He would grant you, according to the riches of His glory, to be strengthened with power through His Spirit in the inner man, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; *and* that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the

breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled up to all the fullness of God (Eph 3:16-19).

Our response (loving God and the brethren) to this exotic, ‘other world’ love (1 Jn 3:1) is reflexive—we do not manufacture agape love; it is the ‘reflex’ of God’s children as they receive their Heavenly Father’s love. That is the message of 1 John chapter four. But the ability to receive God’s love and pass it back to God and the saints is stipulated upon the finality of a perfect propitiation. Christ’s atoning work removes the barrier between sinner and holy God. Christ given to be our propitiation is the apex of God’s love to us (1 Jn 4:10).

Christ’s work of substitution involves not only His assumption of the direct penalty for sin of death, wrath, and separation from God, but also the emotional and relational consequences of sin. In His vicarious death our Lord assumes our dis-relatedness and alienation in order that we might be reconciled to God. This means that in His death and suffering, He took upon Himself the legal, emotional, relational, and spiritual consequences of our sin. By becoming a curse for us; He has born the very division which sin produces (Gal 3:13). Therefore, He is our peace (Eph 2:14).

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).

“There is ‘*propitiation*’ with You that Thou may be feared” (Ps 103:4). Calvin notes that God is only loved, honored, and revered when one knows himself to be an object of divine mercy and pity. There is no honoring of God unless your relationship with Him is based solely upon His mercy and compassion sovereignly granted in Christ (Institutes, vol. 1, book 3, chapter 16, p. 801).