

Propitiation: is accomplished through the work of Christ in the shedding of His blood on Calvary's cross

By Jay Wegter

Propitiation is the technical word in theology for Christ's atoning work that quenched and satisfied the wrath of God against His people. We could say that the propitiation Christ accomplished was a **vindication of God's righteousness**. In other words, how can God remain righteous when he releases the wicked of their sins and pardons them and reckons them righteous by justification by faith? It's only because of the work Christ accomplished in the propitiation.

But this work of propitiation is not meant to, in some way, cancel the justice of God, for **God's justice was preserved in the sacrifice of Christ**. The word, *vindication* is very important. To vindicate is to defend the honor, the rectitude, the perfection, the innocence, and the purity of the individual who is being vindicated. Let us not forget that through judgment—that is, the coming Day of the Lord and eternal damnation—God is actually '**clearing His Name**' of the thousands of years of humans profaning His Name by their wicked thoughts, rebellious words, and sinful deeds. This whole idea of God clearing His name is repeated in the book of Ezekiel where nearly 50 times God says (in a context of judgment), "**And then they will know that I am the Lord.**" There are only one or two references in the book of Ezekiel in which God utters this phrase, "then they will know that I am the Lord," in conjunction with His restoration of Israel/Zion. But, for the most part, the phrase, "then they will know that I am the Lord," is uttered in a context of severe destruction, judgment, and damnation of sinners.

Central to doctrine is our creational identity is the image of God. We were made to reflect God's character—His moral majesty. And, because bearing His image is our key identity, that is the foundational reason **why all sin is against God Himself**, for all iniquity is against the righteous character of God; it is against who He is as the infinitely Holy One. God is vindicating His Name in both the work of redemption on Calvary's cross and in the condemnation of the impenitent. God's honor is recovered in the death of Christ. Christ's suffering makes up for the dishonor heaped upon God and His Law by sinners.

Puritan Jeremiah Burroughs observes: in effect God says, "I will have as much honor as I had dishonor in the sinning of the creature. These are the

conditions upon which I will be reconciled to man.” Your sin dishonored Me, how will you be recovered and delivered? But the sinner argues, “You are merciful.” God’s answer: “I will have as much honor by suffering as I had dishonor by your sinning. I will vindicate my holiness.” This is why the damned in hell will lie there forever. And so, in the new covenant Christ lays down the price to God so that He shall have as much honor by his Son’s suffering for sin as He had dishonor in sin being committed. **Thus, through Christ’s propitiation, divine mercy streams out to the children of men.** In Christ, God shows forth his righteousness (Rom 3:24-26). Christ conveys God’s goodness by performing the obligations of the covenant and in so doing, satisfying divine justice. Christ’s mediation as our Substitute involves presenting His merits on our behalf in a continual work of intercession—the great thing we need from God is acceptance of us as righteous. This is the justification won for us by redemption (Romans 3:24).ⁱ

Sin is only punished comprehensively in two places: either at the cross of Christ in His substitution for us, or in eternal hell (punished either in Christ’s Person, or in the sinner’s own person). All other existence (including present suffering) prior to final judgment is merely a function of what we call **common grace**. In other words, the unbeliever’s temporal relief from final judgement is a function of common grace. For, by Christ’s sacrifice on the bloody cross, He was not only purchasing salvation for the elect, but also purchasing common grace—even for those who would ultimately die lost (Rom 2:1-5). So that even the lost right now in their earthly lives, who will die as reprobates, are experiencing the patience and long-suffering of God which according to Romans 2:1-5ff. is designed to lead them to repentance.

What about a true believer, what are some of the evidences that he has tasted true salvation? One of the tests of someone who really fears God is that God’s cause, His own glory, is now his or her cause. A true believer has a passion for the glory of God, and that passion enables the believer to be willing to suffer for Christ’s sake (Phil 1:29). In fact, when Peter (after his denial of Christ) was being recommissioned by our Savior in John chapter 21, the Lord predicted that Peter when he is old, will be bound and taken where he does not wish to go (21:18). By the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, John says of that passage that these words of Christ about Peter’s earthly end indicate by what kind of death he would glorify his God. And, tradition says that Peter was crucified upside down, rejecting upright crucifixion. In Peter’s estimation, he was not worthy to suffer in the same

way as his Savior. **What a picture this is that the true believer who is willing to suffer for the sake of God's glory** (Rom 8:18-25), willing to suffer death, and willing to suffer in order to bring a crop of 'spiritual fruit' to harvest as Paul describes in 2 Timothy 2:3-10.

Now back to this issue of God's glory set forth in the work of Christ: the Puritans used to describe it this way, **'God is jealous for every beam of His glory'**—that refers to every single aspect of His perfections and excellence revealed in the Word of God, revealed in His mighty works, revealed in Christ, revealed in redemptive history. God is jealous for every beam of that glory. He does not want any of His glory to be hidden, misrepresented, or obscured by the sinner's rebellion, idolatry, and love of darkness. He is going to vindicate the glory of His righteousness in three great vindications: **1) the great act of penal substitution in the cross, 2) the Day of the Lord (which includes the glorious Second Advent and the coming Kingdom), and, 3) in the final judgment—the Great White Throne Judgment.** God will vindicate His transcendent holiness in these great events/activities. **God's moral majesty, in fact will not be fully recovered and revealed, in terms of its witness and manifestation before men and angels until every reprobate is cast into the flames of hell, and every elect person is glorified and makes up the company of saints who surround the throne of Christ.**

So when we think about this grand theme of propitiation—God vindicating the honor of His Name—it is incumbent upon sober, reflecting believers to consider just how much evangelicalism has drifted towards a man-centered gospel. What are some of the symptoms of a man-centered gospel today?

1) It's seen in the idea that **salvation can be appropriated by man** as a function of the exercise of his own prerogative. In other words, a work of God is not needed. It is the assumption that the sinner, by his own will can regenerate himself and appropriate salvation. That is a man-centered gospel.

2) A second symptom of a man-centered gospel is **that salvation exists primarily for the benefit of the sinner** as opposed to glorifying God. The redeeming work of Christ is viewed primarily as being helpful to people and not viewed as the revelation of God's glory in the face of Christ in tandem with the vindication of God's righteousness.

Our world is currently in a state of darkness. This present evil age is still

held by the lie that the serpent spoke in the Garden of Eden. **That lie is filled with insolence and pride, for it asserts that you shall not die if you rebel against God.** In fact, that was Satan's original wager, namely that he could rebel against God and yet would escape the justice of God. Every unbelieving sinner has also entered into **the evil one's original suicidal wager**. It comes down to this: whose word will stand? God's Word or the sinner's word? God's Word or the devil's word? **Whose word will remain, and be fulfilled?** In many ways, redemptive history and its consummation will be the grand demonstration that only God's Word will stand; the defiant word of all rational creatures will fall to the ground, and ultimately be publicly hung on the gallows as wickedness and folly.

At the time of the prophet Jeremiah, the most insolent statement imaginable is made by the apostate citizens of Judah when they say, "But rather **we will certainly carry out every word that has proceeded from our mouths**, by burning sacrifices to the queen of heaven and pouring out drink offerings to her, just as we ourselves, our forefathers, our kings and our princes did in the cities of Judah and in the streets of Jerusalem; for *then* we had plenty of food and were well off and saw no misfortune" (Jer 44:17). That's a perversion of what God says in Deuteronomy 8:3, namely that the Israelites are being taught in the wilderness to live by every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God. We live in an apostate society in which people pursue self-determined lives, thinking they can do so without being eternally cut off from God. Therefore, in a sense they are making a wager that their word will stand, and God's Word will fail. They are betting that God makes idle threats—that He is not as good as His Word. Just as Satan suggested to our first parents, "You will not die."

In view of this overt apostasy, we ought to consider afresh that the Lord is prosecuting two great programs: the Lamb program and Lion program. In the Lamb program, our Lord manifests Himself as so incredibly meek that He does not return the mistreatment and persecution He receives with any type of threat (1 Pet 2:21-24). In fact, He is meek as a lamb. He's quiet (silent and dumb) before his shearers (Is 53:7). He goes to the slaughter without complaint. But in the Lion program Christ comes back to reclaim every speck of created territory for the glory of the Triune God. He is referred to as the **Lion of the tribe of Judah** (Rev 5:5). When He returns, what a terrifying thing it is going to be. It will be just the opposite of His meekness wherein He allowed Himself to be so abused and to bear so much reproach. The *Battle Hymn of the Republic* captures some of the

zeal and ferocity of the Lion program. “Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord; He is trampling out the vintage where the grapes of wrath are stored; He has loosed the fateful lightning of His terrible swift sword; His truth is marching on.”

Where do we stand in relation to these three vindications (the cross, the Day of the Lord, and the Great White Throne Judgment)? Every single person on the planet who has ever lived bears a relationship to these three vindications: *the cross of Christ, the day of the Lord (when his Kingdom is installed), and the Great White Throne*, at which time every single reprobate will be cast into the lake of fire and all the saved find that their names are in the lamb’s book of life. **And so every person stands in some relationship to these three vindications of God’s character.** I would remind us that in the Day of the lord, (that’s the installation of God’s kingdom on earth), it is going to be a *rod of iron rule* with Kingdom authority, instant justice, no tolerance of dissent, and, with the saints who have overcome sitting down on the throne with Christ, and ruling with him as with a rod of iron over the nations (Rev 2:26-27; 3:21).

You might say, why does Christ have to wait 2000 years for his vindication? After all, wasn’t He vindicated by his resurrection, ascension, and glorification? Wasn’t He given all authority in heaven and in earth, and hasn’t He sat down at the right hand of God? Yes, all that’s true. **But the last view the unbelieving world had of Christ was of a man more marred than any man;** a dead man who died in incredible shame and ignominy; mutilated; with spittle and dust and dried blood clinging to Him; His beard partially plucked out; wearing a crown of thorns to mock His claims and label Him an imposter; bowed down, stabbed with spears and nails. That’s the last view the unbelieving world had of Christ. **When Christ appeared after his resurrection, it was only to believers.** Let’s keep in mind that part of Christ’s vindication is going take place the next time He appears, for His appearance at His glorious return will be public—in real time-space history. All the world will see Him. **Even those who pierced Him will see him, and all the tribes of the earth will mourn when they see the sign of the Son of Man in the heavens** (Mt 24:30; Rev 1:7).

Now, it is true, He did experience a form of vindication at His resurrection, but that was a vindication before believers and also before angels and demons. It says in Scripture that after His death, He preached to the spirits in prison (1 Pet 3:18-20). In other words, He preached His triumph over their leader, the devil. He

also showed by His resurrection and exaltation that He has conquered sin, death, and the devil. **Thus, in the world of spirits He was making it known that He has ‘defanged’ the demons.** He has triumphed over them. In fact, God says that His victory over evil spirits was a public display, or spectacle—‘public’ in that every angel, holy or fallen witnessed Christ’s victory (Col 2:15).

But Christ has not made a public display of His victory before the world of unbelieving men. His victory is a fact, recorded in Scripture, and the reality of His conquest is taken on faith by genuine believers, but, only believers saw the resurrected Christ. **The public vindication of Christ is waiting for the Day of the Lord. That’s when the unbelieving world of humanity will see Him in His majestic glory in time-space history, and what an awesome, terrible, terrifying vindication that will be.** The unbelievers of every class and level in society will flee into the hills, the rocks, and caves and beg for annihilation rather than face the lamb of God (Rev 6:12-17). Christ will take his rightful throne. Every eye will see him. The Lamb who once came to be sacrificed will return in wrath to judge the world as the Lion of God. **But, in His present longsuffering, Christ is patient in His waiting for His public vindication as rightful King of kings. His patience is tied to the bringing in of all of His elect (2 Pet 3:9ff.).** When Christ returns, He will be dealing out fire, wrath, and retribution, destroying those who do not obey the gospel and do not obey God (2 Thess 1:7-10).

Now, as to this coming judgment, we think about the **vocabulary in the book of Jeremiah**; there are many different words that are used to describe God’s justice being poured out: ***fury, wrath, anger, retribution, vengeance, God avenging what he had not avenged, God satisfying His anger, and so on.*** . . . In our age of scoffers, we have to ask the question, how is God’s wrath at sin to be perceived as a testimony of His holiness? For, in our man-centered therapeutic age, there is no category for divine wrath against sin. **In fact, from the carnal perspective of secular humanist psychology, the threat of God’s coming wrath looks like a petulant tantrum, like the toothless grumblings of a flustered deity—an upset grandfatherly figure in a rocker.** It does not look like the perfect expression of holiness that it is—and that shows us just how far we have moved from a theocentric gospel into a man-centered gospel—as if God exists for our well-being and not for His own honor and glory and purposes.

Now let’s look back at the cross again as the vindication of God and remember that Christ died under the moral government of God. The cross of

Christ was a kind of courtroom in which the legal guilt of God's people was put upon the Son. This was a guilt exchange. It was very legal in the sight of God. It was carried out in agreement with the immutable law of God. It was legal and just because the Son of God agreed, in total voluntarism, to exalt the Trinity by taking the guilt and punishment of His people upon himself and expiating it by His incredible suffering. **Christ's volunteerism as our suffering substitute, as our surety and cosigner and Passover Lamb, was how the guilt was transferred to Him.** This plan, formed in eternity past in the counsels of the Godhead, is known as the covenant of redemption. In that covenant, Christ was promised a people if He would lay His life down on their behalf (see Isaiah 53).

Now this is really important because if we are not feeding upon the propitiation, we might imagine that somehow, we are doing something to placate God, something to satisfy God's anger, something to ameliorate His anger, mitigate it, something to avert His disfavor and win His favor. That's not the case. In fact, **all false religion is based upon this idea that the sinner can do something to reduce the anger of God and somehow protect himself from God.** In fact, the conscience of the unbeliever tells him that because he loves his sin and because he is morally what he ought not to be, why in heaven's name would an infinitely holy God desire a relationship with him? If the sinner only consults his own conscience and sinful appetites, he would never imagine that God's love is available to him. And this is why the sinner must hear the gospel that God has sent his Son for guilty sinners.

Unbelieving sinners have a fear of God, but it is not a reverential fear of God. **Sinners have a craven fear of God. That is a fear that according to Hebrews 2:15, is used by the devil to keep sinners in a state of bondage and slavery.** This craven fear seeks to maintain distance from God, seeks to buffer itself from God, insulate itself from God, protect itself from God. How do sinners do that? They do so either by atheism, or agnosticism, or by creating a false idolatrous god who is nothing but a benign figure, a mascot, a god that can be placated with religious ceremony and tradition. Sinners have many ways of trying to protect themselves from God. There are as many ways to bribe one's conscience as there are sins.

Again, Puritan Jeremiah Burroughs is helpful at this juncture: Justification is by faith alone, the sinner comes empty-handed. When Christ is in the bridal chamber with us, it is Christ and faith alone, only those two, but when we go abroad with Christ we manifest other graces so that our bond with Him becomes

evident. **There is a great danger in the church today; it's amazing how easily the truth of justification is lost, faithful churchgoers hope that God will accept their deeds, their duties, their performance, their faithfulness—and in so doing, God's mercy shall bring about their justification.** But God only accepts a perfect righteousness, woe to all the professed biblical saints if their combined righteousness is what they depended upon for salvation. Many church individuals have bought into the error that God adds His mercy to their efforts so that they may eke their justification. No! We must have a righteousness beyond our own. God in Christ did not come to add his mercy to your efforts. “Do your best and God will do the rest” is the devil’s gospel, and it will take you to hell.

ⁱⁱIt is a soul-damning error to get the relationship between mercy and justification wrong. **The true work of God's mercy in justification is to take a soul off of himself, to remove his carnal foundation, to bankrupt him, or as Burroughs says “to un-bottom him”—to make him sensible of his unrighteousness and uncleanness, that is the mighty work of God's mercy.** The only righteousness that is acceptable that we offer up to God is the righteousness of our Mediator.

No one goes to heaven except those who are righteous by faith, and the only reason you will be in heaven is because your Substitute is righteous. Luther said it well, Countless church goers have a false confidence, for nothing is harder than to take Christ alone for righteousness. People have a false peace and are complacent when conscience is napping. **But let the conscience come into violent conflict and trouble; that is when it is most difficult to take Christ as all in all in our justification—that is a true test of whose righteousness we are trusting. True believers are regarded righteous because of their union with Christ (John 1:12). Luther said “it is harder to comfort an afflicted conscience than to raise the dead.”**ⁱⁱⁱ

The cross of Christ breaks through all of this. The gospel, the message of Christ crucified for sinners punctures through the sinner’s self-protective defenses. It melts the sinner with love, crushing him over his sin. It reaches into a defiled conscience. The gospel proclamation that Christ was given by the Father for sinners is what the Lord uses to attack the sinner’s self-righteousness, and his enmity or hostility towards God. This work of redemption by the Son of God preserves God’s almighty holy character and authority. This message of Christ crucified also softens the hearts of sinners who are being called by the Holy Spirit.

So, propitiation in Christ, that is the message of Him bearing the wrath of

God against sin on behalf of his people, is a vital message. There is no salvation without that message of substitution. Keep in mind that there are millions upon millions of people in this world who have heard of the historical Jesus and who know something of his awful crucifixion. I think of the Russian Orthodox church, Greek Orthodox, Ukrainian Orthodox, Eastern Orthodox, and the Roman Catholic Church. All of these expressions of Christendom have a crucified Jesus, but they do not have a confidence in the finished work of Christ, nor do they have a confidence in the testimony of God the Father concerning the Son. Only the biblical gospel has the Father's testimony of what Christ accomplished, secured, purchased, and obtained by his death. **If the Father's testimony of what Christ accomplished is not part of the gospel, then people have never heard of the penal substitution accomplished by propitiation, and how God is satisfied by it.**

The Father in heaven is the Judge who had his Son pay, and He is completely satisfied with that. Any attempt to add to it destroys its efficacy. So, my friends, in order to be saved from your sin, you must hear the Father's testimony and proclamation concerning the sufficiency and finished work of His Son's cross. For the gospel, without the message of substitutionary atonement is not the gospel, even if it has a Jesus and a cross. Christ's atoning sacrifice was a true substitution, a true penal substitution, in which he was bearing the penalty and the wrath due his people. This wrath-bearing which our Savior accomplished is technically known as the propitiation.

The message of the cross is really a great insight into the character of God and into the character of our sin. Does the cross really mean that my sin against a holy God was so serious as to deserve what Christ received in His death on my behalf? Yes! It does mean that, so let us remember that the propitiation is the very heart of the gospel. It's the unifying theme of Scripture. It is the purpose of Christ coming. Your conscience and your affections need the message of propitiation by the cross every day. If we do not feed upon the propitiation on a regular basis, we will be tempted to do the bookkeeping of our conscience by factors other than the blood of Christ. We must keep looking to the cross of Christ.

The vindication produced by Christ's death is a source of great boldness. For, nothing can truly satisfy the justice our conscience demands but the justice which satisfies God Himself—and that is the satisfaction of God's justice accomplished in the propitiation. A clear conscience makes for a bold man. Our

Lord could face unbelievable amounts of hate, objection, insults and persecutions, shame and reproach knowing that his honor was safe in the hands of the Father and knowing that his humiliation was the cost of our redemption. We think about Jesus stooping down and girding himself with a towel when He was about to wash the disciples' feet. It says in John 13:1, "Now before the Feast of the Passover, **Jesus knowing that His hour had come that He would depart out of this world to the Father, having loved His own who were in the world, He loved them to the end.**" He knew that He was going back to heaven, He knew that His Father was going to vindicate him, He knew that the cross would be a true purchase of the elect. In Hebrews 12:2 we see that our Savior went to the cross with the joy before Him in mind. He went to the cross despising its shame. And this is actually a paradigm for the people of God because it says in Philippians 1:29 that by God's sovereign grace not only does He enable you to believe, but He also enables you to suffer for the sake of Christ and for sake of bearing fruit for Him.

We are told in 1 John 4:18, "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." Here's the human condition that we always seem to stumble back into, the fact that: fear involves punishment. Our conscience is accusing us. We fear that our failures are calling for the direct punishment of us. When we fall into that situation, we are not being perfected in love. We need to return to the reality that the highest emblem, the highest token of divine love, according to **1 John 4:10, is that the Father gave the Son to be our propitiation.** "In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son *to be* the propitiation for our sins." So our fellowship with God is based upon the propitiation. Your fellowship is maintained and sustained by that propitiation, knowing what God has done with your sin, knowing your relationship with God is settled in Christ. That is the basis, the support point of being able to continue to receive love from God. **In fact, the enjoyment and reception of that love from God is interrupted when we turn to fear so as to be controlled by it instead of by His love. Our fear involves punishment, the sense that we deserve to be punished, and if we look only at that—looking away from the propitiation—we will lose our courage to speak for Christ and to run to him for continued communion and even confession of sin.**

Salvation is not an exercise in spiritual democracy in which you go to the

polls and cast your vote for Christ, and then He's glad you cast you chose Him. No, faith is not the making particular by your choice, the general benevolence of God. No, the gospel is the revelation of God's righteousness and power (Rom 1:16-17). **The gospel comes bringing divine power to helpless sinners. A man or woman who is truly saved can say, "My pardon, my justification and my saving faith are all blood bought."** My friends, the cross was a real purchase obtaining those whom the Father had given to Christ (Jn 17:6, 12).

How often we forget that the Bible is the living Word of God. This supernatural book began to be written over 3500 years ago and then was completed approximately 2000 years ago. Now, here is the marvel, when the elect of God read it, they, by means of God-given faith are assured that God has written them into His redemptive plot. They are assured that their names are indelibly written in the Lamb's book of life. This is all grounded in the fact that the propitiation Christ accomplished was a real satisfaction, a real effectual purchase. **The propitiation answered the question, how can an absolutely holy omniscient God be so perfectly satisfied that a believing sinner is assured of God's unchanging favor?**

The word propitiation comes from the same root word as propitious, which means favorably disposed. If this world only knew that apart from that favor propitiation in Christ bestows, eternal perdition is certain. For no sinner will be spared if his name is not entered into the Lamb's Book of Life. **And the Lamb's Book of Life is the book of names of those for whom Christ has made propitiation.** How are these individuals on whose behalf Christ died described? This present author has found at least eleven marks of true salvation in Romans chapter eight alone. One of the most certain marks of salvation is described in Romans 8:12-13. "So then, brethren, we are under obligation, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh—for if you are living according to the flesh, you must die; but if by the Spirit you are putting to death the deeds of the body, you will live." Every genuinely saved person can say, from eternity past, God wrote me into His redemptive plot.

When contemplating his salvation, a true believer will not rely upon a single speck of self-righteousness. **The true saint is amazed that his Savior paid and paid on that cruel cross until the Father said, "You've paid beyond what is required. I am fully satisfied."** Therefore, the true saint is appalled at the idea of attempting to add anything to this perfect sacrifice. According to John chapter 6

verses 54 to 57, reckoning the propitiation is central in fellowshiping with Christ. Remembering of course that in this passage, 'eating' is a metaphor for believing, we quote the verses: "He who eats My flesh and drinks My blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day. "For My flesh is true food, and My blood is true drink. "He who eats My flesh and drinks My blood abides in Me, and I in him. "As the living Father sent Me, and I live because of the Father, so he who eats Me, he also will live because of Me." **Your daily reckoning of Christ's perfect propitiation is the basis for your intimate fellowship with Him.** Is it any wonder then, that apart from regularly reckoning this propitiation, your spiritual life will be a wilderness wasteland characterized by weariness and waywardness. (For additional marks of true salvation, see also 2 Corinthians 5:4-15, Titus 2:14, Gal 5:24, Phil 3:8-21).

End Notes:

ⁱ Jeremiah Burroughs, *The Saints' Treasury*, pp. 55-57

ⁱⁱ Ibid, pp. 60-62

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid, pp. 58-62