



Propitiation

John writes: *'Herein is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us, and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins'* (1 Jn. 4:10). Propitiation is an expression of God's love and central to the mission of Christ. But what exactly is propitiation? It is not a word commonly used in everyday speech. A dictionary defines it as follows: *'Propitiation is a means of turning away wrath by an offering'*. An offended wife may be pacified by presenting her with a large bouquet of flowers. In theology, propitiation may be defined as placating or satisfying the wrath of God by the atoning sacrifice of Christ. It is vital to the gospel.

Our Need of Propitiation

When God first created man propitiation was unnecessary because man was perfect and at peace with God who periodically visited the garden and had fellowship with him. God had made a covenant of works with man which promised life upon the condition of perfect obedience. However, the moment Adam sinned and the covenant was broken God was offended and angry and the curse of a broken covenant rested upon our first parents and not just upon them but on us also, because the covenant made with Adam was not just for himself but for his posterity. That original sin was imputed to every descendant, so that in God's eyes we are regarded as having sinned in Adam and fallen with him. For this reason we are sinners under the wrath of God even before we are born and take any actual decision for ourselves. Also, the effect of Adam's first sin, and the divine wrath which followed, was that our first parents, and we with them, fell into a state of sin and misery. Sin became easy and natural. Very quickly this became obvious in human history so that Scripture says, *'God saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually'* (Gen. 6:5). The earth was quickly so defiled by the sin of man that God determined to destroy it with a flood. Following that devastation, Noah offered an atoning sacrifice to God who made a covenant of grace with man: *'And the Lord smelled a sweet savour; and the Lord said in his heart, I will not again curse the ground any more for man's sake; for the imagination of man's heart is evil from his youth'* (Gen. 8:21). The heart of everyone of us by nature is evil: *'The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked: who can know it?'* (Jer. 17:9).

God is a holy God and hates sin. Justice is an essential part of His nature. He must punish sin. Some countries like Somalia are lawless. There the government, such as it is, turns a blind eye to crimes, violence and corruption. God's kingdom cannot be like that. Crime (sin) will not be tolerated. Nothing unclean or impure will enter heaven. Because of sin, original and actual, all men are under the wrath and curse of God and even the elect are described in their unconverted state as *'children of wrath, even as others'* (Eph. 2:3). Satan and his demonic followers were the first to rebel against God and He has prepared a hell for them. Interestingly no saviour was provided for them and no second chance given. Mankind having sided with Satan is condemned to punishment in that place *'prepared for the devil and his angels'* (Mt. 25:41). Our one original sin deserves that damnation and our constant transgressions since we were born multiply our guilt and demand our punishment. Thankfully God provides a propitiation for us.

One who Designed Propitiation

The best known verse in the Bible tells us who designed propitiation: *'God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life'* (Jn. 3:16). It is God's plan and His covenant of grace. Writing in his first epistle,

John makes the amazing statement: *'God is love'* (1 Jn. 4:8). Of no mere human, even the most loving, could that be said. God's love is so great that He gave His Son to be a propitiation for us, to suffer and to die on our behalf. God loved the world which, as B B Warfield put it, is the very opposite of Himself, His hell-deserving enemies. He tells us: *'Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world. If any man love the world, the love of the Father is not in him'* (1 Jn. 2:15). Here we have God's immeasurable love — the length, the breadth, the height and the depth of it cannot be told. *'Herein is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us, and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins'* (1 Jn 4:10). For us to love God should not be difficult. His character is beautiful and His providence generous. He is good and does good constantly. But for God to love rebels like us, filthy and ugly because of our sin, is amazing. It is not the Son forcing the Father's hand to show mercy to us but rather the Father sending the Son to work out salvation for us at great personal cost. *'God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto himself'* (2 Cor. 5:19).

The Propitiation

As we noted, propitiation is turning away the wrath of God by the atoning sacrifice of Christ. At its heart is the substitutionary suffering of our Saviour. Adam's sins had been imputed to us and we have added our own actual iniquity. We are *'a transgressor from the womb'* (Is. 48:8). Our sins are imputed to Christ and He suffers the punishment that was due to us. *'Who his own self bare our sins in his own body on the tree, that we, being dead to sins, should live unto righteousness: by whose stripes ye were healed'* (1 Pet. 2:24). This verse could more accurately be translated *'to the tree'*. He took our sins to the tree and dealt with them there. On that cross he suffered all that divine justice required so that our sins would be blotted out and cast into the bottom of the sea, never to be found again (Mic. 7:19).

Propitiation was first taught in Genesis 3. In that chapter not only is the Saviour's coming announced as the seed of the woman who will bruise the serpent's head but also we are told about God making clothes of animal skins to cover the nakedness of Adam and Eve. They were not shamefully naked before one another. The marriage bed is not a place of shame but honourable (Heb. 13:4). However they were naked before God as guilty sinners. Animals had to be sacrificed and killed to provide the clothing. These animals were types of Christ. The covering of the blood of Christ turns away God's wrath. Abel by faith offered a more excellent sacrifice than Cain, a firstling of the flock to die (Heb. 11:4). God commanded Abraham to offer up his son Isaac as a sacrifice and, when Abraham showed himself obedient, He provided a propitiation, a ram which was a foreshadowing of His own Son whom God spared not at Calvary. Isaiah is given a wonderful vision of the Son of God as a propitiation: *'But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed'* (Is. 53:5).

On the cross, our sin being imputed to Christ, He suffered our hell, the punishment due to us for our sins, and now His righteousness is imputed to us. We who were the children of the devil have become the children of God and instead of hell we have heaven before us. Look at that cross; there you see the Son of God in human nature burdened with our sins. You see divine justice pouring upon Him the wrath and curse of God. The Lamb is pressed to the limits of His endurance till He cries *'Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani? which is, being interpreted, My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?'* (Mk. 15:34). Innocent and spotless, he is made sin and endured hell on the cross. The full sentence is carried out *'dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return'* (Gen. 3:19). *'Behold my servant, whom I uphold; mine elect, in whom my soul delighteth; I have put my Spirit upon him'* (Is. 42:1). He needed to be strengthened and it was *'through the eternal Spirit'* that He *'offered himself without spot to God'* (Heb. 9:14).

One more picture may help. The NT Greek word for 'mercy seat' is closely related to the word translated 'propitiation'. It was the golden cover of the ark of the testimony in which were kept the two tables of stone on which were written the ten commandments. This was at the very heart of Old Testament worship. The law demands to be obeyed. God's presence symbolically sat upon the ark and God is a God of justice. However on the day of atonement in Israel, once every year, two goats were taken. Aaron laid his hands on the head of the first goat and confessed the sins of the

people, symbolically transferring them onto the goat. He then killed the goat as a sin offering and took its blood and went into the Holy of Holies in the Temple and sprinkled it upon the covering of the ark. What had been the judgment seat becomes the mercy seat. The transgressions of the law are covered by the blood of the sacrifice which symbolises the blood of Christ. The other goat is then taken and the sins of the people confessed as the high priest lays his hands on its head too. It is then led out into the wilderness to a land of God-forsakenness, far away and let loose. *'As far as the east is from the west, so far hath he removed our transgressions from us'* (Ps. 103:12). *'Blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered'* (Ps. 32:1). God's wrath is turned away and our iniquities are covered forever from view: *'I, even I, am he that blotteth out thy transgressions for mine own sake, and will not remember thy sins'* (Is. 43:25).

Conclusion

Steve Chalke, a prominent Baptist minister and charity worker, claims to be an evangelical yet rejects propitiation as 'cosmic cruelty'. He demonstrates his total lack of understanding of the holiness and justice of God, of the seriousness of sin and the sinfulness of man, of the glory of Christ and His finished work and of the riches and freeness of the gospel. Evangelicalism in the past meant accepting the verbal inspiration of the Scriptures and the substitutionary suffering and propitiatory work of Christ. It was the liberals of the late nineteenth century who opposed these things and despite Chalke belonging to the Evangelical Alliance he is nothing more than an old-fashioned liberal.

This wonderful provision is ours through faith in Christ. *'Therefore being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ: by whom also we have access by faith into this grace wherein we stand, and rejoice in hope of the glory of God'* (Rom. 5:1-2). The amazing gospel, the glad tidings of great joy, freely offers this salvation to all who will believe. The God who is angry with sinners every day, promises to be at peace with all who trust in Christ. But who will believe?

William Macleod

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