



“In all things it behoved him to be made like unto his brethren, the he might be a merciful and faithful high priest in things pertaining to God, to make reconciliation for the sins of the people” (Hebrews 2:17).

Propitiation

Central Truth: The sacrifice of Jesus completely atoned for sin.

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Topic: Propitiation; Salvation.

What an awesome word! We spell it “P-R-O-P-I-T-I-A-T-I-O-N.” We pronounce it pro-PISH-e-a-shun. It is to be found only three times in the New Testament (Romans 3:25; I John 2:2; 4:10). Yet, it is a key concept to understanding our Christian faith.

Mercy is involved every time this word occurs in the Bible. Propitiation does not deal with merit on our part; we have none. It deals with mercy on God's part; He has sufficient mercy for the whole human race.

How can a holy God accept in peace a guilty sinner? It is because of the fact of propitiation. How can a guilty sinner ever feel at peace with God? It is because of propitiation. How can you personally be saved from your sins and be assured that you are God's child? Propitiation is the explanation.

Here is a subject we need to understand. Here is a doctrine we should believe and teach. Here is the hope of the world. It is summarized in the central truth for this lesson: “The sacrifice of Jesus completely atoned for sin.”

I. MEANING OF PROPITIATION

The dictionary will say that to propitiate means to cause to become favorably inclined, to win or regain the good will of another, to appease or conciliate. But that does not make the heart rejoice like an understanding of the biblical teaching on the subject.

Pagans used the term to refer to their efforts to appease their gods and so secure their good will by deeds of merit. Propitiation depended on what they could do to satisfy the gods. It was strictly a works plan. The Bible uses the term to refer to our peace with God and favor before Him because of what He has done. It is totally a grace plan.

Let's illustrate what propitiation means. Here is a poor family in need of food. They ask the manager of a grocery store to give them food without their having to pay for it. He refuses. The owner of the store requires him to collect money for all the food taken from the store. Then someone gives the manager the amount of money needed to pay for all the food the poor family needs. The manager gladly supplies their need. He is free to act on their behalf.

Just so, sinners are in desperate spiritual need of forgiveness of sin and peace with God. God is willing to receive and forgive each one, but the great sin debt is there. Jesus Christ came and, through His death and resurrection, paid the sin debt by suffering the penalty in His own person. He made it possible for God to deal graciously with us. He became our propitiation!

Propitiation is the work of Christ which satisfies all the claims of divine holiness, righteousness, and justice, so that God is free to act in behalf of sinners. It is not a change in His attitude toward us; He always loved us. It is the satisfaction of the claims against us so His love may be freely manifested toward us.

God can and does receive the guilty sinner with favor because sin has been dealt with properly. God is never reconciled to us in our sins. But since the penalty for sin has been paid, He moves in evident mercy toward us. Bless His name for His work of propitiation through Jesus Christ!

II. QUALIFICATIONS FOR PROPITIATION (Hebrews 2:9, 10, 11-14, 16-18)

The one who makes propitiation may be called a propitiator. He must meet certain qualifications to perform that office.

A. The propitiator is the Son of God. His incarnation in human flesh made him "*a little lower than the angels*" who serve God (Hebrews 2:9). But He endured it for our salvation.

The Old Testament speaks often of shedding of "*the blood*" as the way to be forgiven. The New Testament mentions always "*the blood of Christ.*" The person gives value to the work; so the saving power of His death depends entirely upon the fact that He who died was and is the only begotten Son of God.

B. The propitiator is the Son of man. He who was and is eternal God in every sense of the word became as man. He who sanctifies and they who are sanctified are all of one. Since we are people of flesh and blood, the second person of Holy Trinity took the same. He did not take on the nature of angels; He took on the nature of humans. *“In all things it behoved him to be made like unto his brethren, that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest. . . , to make reconciliation for the sins of the people”* (Hebrews 2:17).

Though His mother Mary conceived by a miraculous act of divine creation, the nature and development of the physical body of Jesus was the same as that of any other person. God sent His Son in the likeness of humans that He might offer the propitiation for their sins. Amazing grace!

C. The propitiator is the priest of God. The blood of animals, or even a human being, could never take away sin. It could only serve as a reminder to a person of his need for God's help in forgiveness. Jesus came as the great High Priest of God. By His own blood, shed on the cross, He redeemed guilty sinners from the penalty and guilt of their sins. The priest on earth went into an earthly tabernacle or temple bearing the blood of animals. The great High Priest went into a heavenly tabernacle (the very presence of God himself) bearing His own precious blood. *“He is the propitiation for our sins: and not for our's only, but also for the sins of the whole world”* (I John 2:2). He did it without merit on our part but just because He loves us so much (I John 4:10).

III. WORK OF PROPITIATION (Hebrews 2:9, 14, 15)

A. Propitiation is a sacrificial work. *“We see Jesus, who was made a little lower than the angels for the suffering of death”* (Hebrews 2:9). That was the reason He came into the world. His death was no accident or tragic miscarriage of justice contrary to the will of God. All that happened in the ministry of Jesus was determined before by the Father. It was announced through the prophets. When He died for sinners, it was *“according to the scriptures”* (I Corinthians 15:3).

His death was the propitiating deed. By it we are reconciled to God. By it the price was paid for our ransom. By it God can be just and the justifier of one who believes in Jesus. Without it there is no salvation.

B. Propitiation is a substitutionary work. On the cross, Jesus tasted *“death for every man”* (Hebrews 2:9). Notice the preposition “for” in that statement. It means on behalf of and in the place of.

Jesus said that as the Good Shepherd He laid down His life “for” His sheep (John 10:11). The apostle Peter taught that *“Christ also hath once*

suffered for sins, the just for the unjust, that he might bring us to God” (I Peter 3:18). He did that when He bore our sins in His own body as if He were personally guilty of them (Isaiah 53:4-6; I Peter 2:24). We who trust Him are free from sin's penalty because He has already borne it and paid the sin debt we owed.

C. Propitiation is a sufficient work. He has completely made reconciliation for our sins (Hebrews 2:17). Since He has satisfied the demands of God, there is nothing we need to add to His work. It is our privilege to enter the benefits of His finished work.

Two great transactions result from the propitiating work of Jesus. (1) He has destroyed (brought to naught) the works of the devil (Hebrews 2:14, 15). (2) He has reconciled us to God (Hebrews 2:17). That is why we say it is sufficient. *“We are sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all. . . . By one offering he hath perfected for ever them that are sanctified”* (Hebrews 10:10, 14). You need give no thought, or depend on the help of others, to completing the saving work of Jesus. He announced the victory on the cross when He said, *“It is finished”* (John 19:30).

IV. EXAMPLE OF PROPITIATION (Luke 18:9-14)

The doctrine of propitiation is set out in Hebrews 2:9-18. An example of propitiation is set out in Luke 18:9-14. We go beyond the lesson text that we might see a man receiving the benefits of the propitiating work of the Lord Jesus. Four steps are seen in the account as Jesus reported it.

A. The sinner senses his separation from God. That publican in the temple stood far from the altar, perhaps just within the temple area. It was a witness that sin separates a person from God and closes His ears against prayers (Isaiah 59:1, 2). The saint is dead to sin, but the sinner is dead in sin. Not only is the sinner separated from God, but he also cannot come to God without divine aid (John 6:44). The Bible makes it quite clear that a person is *“accepted in the beloved”* Son of God, Jesus Christ, or he is not accepted at all (Ephesians 1:6). What a pitiful and pitiable condition! Yet, that is the case of every person who is not trusting Jesus.

B. The sinner expresses his humility before God. That publican *“would not lift up so much as his eyes unto heaven”* (Luke 18:13). In a culture where it was customary to lift up one's outstretched arms, look upward, and pray aloud, the posture of the publican showed deep humility. That is an appropriate position for the sinner. He has sinned willfully and rebelliously against God. God gives grace to the humble, but He wars against the proud (James 4:6; I Peter 5:5).

C. The sinner makes confession of sin to God. That publican showed his distress over his sin by two acts. (1) He smote himself on the chest in grief of spirit. His action was a confession of his undone and desperate state. (2) He said to God, *“Be merciful to me a sinner”* (Luke 18:13). His words admitted his guilt and asked for forgiveness. His was a godly sorrow which led him to repentance and thus to salvation as promised in II Corinthians 7:10. That is the way for sinners today.

D. The sinner receives forgiveness from God. Jesus said, *“This man went down to his house justified”* (Luke 18:14). How was that possible? He was a guilty sinner, wasn't he? Yes, he was. He deserved punishment for his sins, didn't he? Yes, he did. But he was freely forgiven without punishment or merit, wasn't he? Yes, he was. How could God do that? That is where propitiation comes in.

Remember that propitiation is the work of Christ by which He satisfies all the demands of God's holiness, righteousness, and justice, so that God is free to forgive and save guilty sinners. Jesus paid the sin debt of that publican, as well as our own; so God was right in forgiving him. He forgives us because Jesus is our propitiation.

It is not enough to understand the doctrine of propitiation. Enter the experience of it. Turn from every sin to God. Ask His forgiveness. He will receive you in peace, forgive you, and give you assurance that you are accepted. That is when propitiation passes from doctrine to experience. Enter the good of it today.

Questions

1. What is the correct pronunciation of propitiation?
2. How does the dictionary define the word in secular terms?
3. How does the Bible define it in spiritual terms?
4. In what sense is Jesus our propitiation?
5. How did His suffering on the cross effect propitiation?
6. What do we mean by “the substitutionary work” of Jesus?
7. How can we know that Jesus' work made propitiation?
8. How does Luke 18:9-14 show God's response to Christ's propitiation?
9. How would you define propitiation in your own words?
10. How can you benefit from Christ's propitiating deed this week?