

Propitiation

A Study on Romans 3:24-26

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Most folks feel that the main purpose of the death of Christ was to bring sinful men to God. However, I would like to suggest that an even greater problem was solved in the atoning work of Jesus Christ. The Cross solved the problem of how to bring a holy and righteous God to sinful men. Through redemption (sinward), reconciliation (manward), and justification, man is brought to God, but through propitiation (godward), God is brought to man. This lesson is about propitiation.

PROPITIATION — Romans 3:24-25

“Being justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus: Whom God hath set forth to be a propitiation.” The basic meaning of propitiation is “appease” or “satisfy.” What did the death of Christ appease or satisfy in the nature of God? In his very nature, God is holy and righteous. He can have no fellowship with anything that is sinful, including sinful men. Thus, God’s wrath burns hot against sin and sinners because he must judge all sin. If he does not do this, he is not acting according to his perfect character. But, in love, God sent his Son Jesus Christ to be the perfect sacrifice for sin. No mere human being could have atoned for the sins of men because all are sinners. But Christ, who was a perfect human as well as truly divine, became the perfect sacrifice for sin. God poured out his wrath against sin on the person of Jesus Christ. Thus, the death of Christ appeased God’s wrath and satisfied his holy, righteous demands against sin.

God took out his wrath on Christ instead of on sinners. Now anyone who will place his faith and trust in Jesus Christ as personal Saviour from sin will receive the forgiveness of sins, and the wrath of God will never again come down upon that one because Christ bore God’s wrath on that believer’s behalf. Why? Christ satisfied the holy, righteous demands of God against sin. Now, through the death of Christ, a holy God and sinful men can meet and God can have fellowship with men.

Some have translated the word “propitiation” as “mercy seat,” looking back to the Old Testament and the sprinkling of blood on the mercy seat on the Day of Atonement. The Day of Atonement was a most significant feast day for Israel because it was then that the high priest entered into the holy of holies in the tabernacle to make an atonement for the nation of Israel (Lev. 16:1-10 ff.). In the tabernacle, the dwelling place of God, was the holy of holies, and no man was allowed in this place except the high priest who could go in only once a year on the Day of Atonement.

In the holy of holies stood the Ark of the Covenant. The Ark contained several articles such as Aaron's rod that budded and a pot of manna, but the main article was the Ten Commandments. On top of the Ark was the mercy seat, the dwelling place of God. Two cherubim (angels) were on either side of the mercy seat, and above it was the pillar of cloud and smoke (the Shekinah glory). The Ten Commandments pointed to the fact that all men had broken the law and were sinners; the Shekinah glory represented the holiness of God — men were sinners and would be judged by a holy God. The mercy seat stood between sinful men and God.

On the Day of Atonement, the high priest put on special garments of white and underwent special purification to offer sacrifice for the sins of Israel. He offered a bullock for himself and a goat for the people. Since no one else was allowed inside and since a slight mishap in his ritual could cause his death, a cord was tied around his ankle in case he died before God in the holy of holies. Then he took the blood in one hand and a censer of fire in the other, and went through the veil. He put down the censer and threw special incense on it so the room was filled with smoke — no man could see God and live. Then he entered the holy of holies to sprinkle the blood — one time towards heaven and seven times on the mercy seat.

Two goats were sacrificed, one was killed and the other kept alive. This was for the sins of Israel as a people. The congregation of Israel would watch with breathless anticipation as they saw the high priest take the blood of the slain goat into the holy of holies to sprinkle it on the mercy seat to appease God's wrath against their sins and to cover those sins for another year. Every Israelite wondered, "Will God accept this sacrifice? Will our sins be covered for another year? Or will God bring immediate judgment on us because of our sins?" When the High Priest came out of the holy of holies the people breathed a sigh of relief because they knew that God's wrath had been appeased for another year and they needed not fear judgment.

How could they know their sins had been forgiven? The high priest came out and placed his hands on the head of the live goat, confessing the sins of Israel. Then he let the live goat go free into the wilderness. This speaks of the fact that these sins were forgiven and put away by God.

Jesus Christ is our mercy seat. All the sacrifices of the Old Testament looked forward to the Lamb of God who would take away sin forever:

"Nor yet that he [Christ] should offer himself often, as the high priest entereth into the holy place every year with blood of others; for then must he often have suffered since the foundation of the world: but now once in the end of the world hath he appeared to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself. And as it

is appointed unto men once to die, but after this the judgment: so Christ was once offered to bear the sins of many; and unto them that look for him shall he appear the second time without sin unto salvation” (Heb. 9:25-28).

Christ’s death propitiated, appeased or satisfied, the holy, righteous demands of God against sin. God was perfectly satisfied with the death of Christ. As a propitiatory sacrifice, Christ’s death made a provision for sins to be forgiven and put away, not just for a year but forever:

“For thou hast cast all my sins behind thy back” (Isa. 38:17b).

“And thou wilt cast all their sins into the depths of the sea” (Mic. 7:19b).

“As far as the east is from the west, so far hath he removed our transgressions from us” (Ps. 103:12).

God can and will make the vilest sinner clean. He can wipe out your past sins. He doesn’t want you to clean up your life to become a Christian. He wants you to receive Jesus Christ who alone can forgive your sins, and then God himself will begin to clean you up. He wants you to come as you are. No matter what you have done, Jesus Christ will forgive. He will give you a new life.

The most important thing that could ever be said about the death of Christ is that God is satisfied with it. If he, the righteous Judge, is pleased to remit all penalties against us by virtue of what the Saviour did on the cross, then there is no case against us forevermore. We can never again stand under God’s wrath if we have trusted in Jesus Christ.

“Through faith in his blood.” There is no salvation apart from the shedding of blood. “And almost all things are by the law purged with blood; and without shedding of blood is no remission” (Heb. 9:22). Christ’s blood witnesses that a life has been laid down — a substitutionary sacrifice.

Believe it or not, some denominations today are removing references to blood from their hymnals and prayer books because they consider this a first century concept not necessary for the scientific twentieth century.

“There is a fountain filled with blood,
Drawn from Immanuel’s veins;
And sinners plunged beneath that flood,
Lose all their guilty stains.

The dying thief rejoiced to see
 That fountain in his day;
 And there may I, though vile as he,
 Wash all my sins away.

Dear dying Lamb, Thy precious blood,
 Shall never lose its power
 Till all the ransomed church of God
 Be saved to sin no more.

E'er since by faith I saw the stream
 Thy flowing wounds supply,
 Redeeming love has been my theme,
 And shall be till I die."

"To declare his righteousness for the remission of sins that are past, through the forbearance of God." One might ask, "What provision did God have for sin before the death of Christ, for a righteous God must judge sin?" In the Old Testament sin was simply covered, not taken away. It was Christ's death that made the final atonement for sin. All Old Testament sacrifices pointed forward to the Lamb of God Jesus Christ who would be the perfect sacrifice for sin, and all Old Testament sacrifices depended on Christ's then future sacrifice for their effectiveness.

JUST AND JUSTIFIER — Romans 3:26

"To declare, I say, at this time his righteousness." God has made a declaration to all the world of his righteousness at the cross. In the death of Christ, God has solved the sin problem!

"That he might be just." A holy, righteous God must judge sin and the sinner or he cannot be God. He is absolutely just in judging sin and the sinner!

"And the justifier." In love, God devised a way in which he could justify men, declaring them righteous. His solution was that in the death of Christ for sin God poured out his wrath on Christ, who did not deserve it, instead of on sinners, who most certainly did and do deserve it. Through the death of Christ, one can receive forgiveness of sins and be declared righteous so as never again to stand under the wrath of God.

“Of him which believeth in Jesus.” Christ’s death is only effective for those who believe in him, that is, to those who trust and commit (abandon) themselves to him alone as personal Saviour and Lord.