

## DOCTRINE OF CHRIST

### Lesson 15

#### Christ's Propitiatory Work

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You may have stumbled across the word “propitiation” while reading through the New Testament. It appears in a few select places and describes one of the works Christ accomplished for us on the cross. It is closely related to the doctrines of atonement, redemption, and reconciliation. Propitiation is because God’s holy justice demands that all sin be punished. In this study we will learn about the propitiation Christ accomplished on the cross, and what propitiation means for the believer today.

#### I. DEFINITION OF PROPITIATION

- A. *New Bible Dictionary*: “Propitiation properly signifies the removal of wrath by the offering of a gift. . .

[S]in inevitably arouses the strongest reaction from God. God is not to be accused of moral flabbiness. He is vigorously opposed to evil in every shape and form while he may be ‘slow to anger’ (Ne. 9:17, etc.), his anger is yet certain in the face of sin. We may even read ‘The Lord is slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, forgiving iniquity and transgression, but he will by no means clear the guilty’ (Nu. 14:18). Even in a passage dealing with the longsuffering of God his refusal to condone guilt finds mention. . .

We see the force of the New Testament idea of propitiation from the occurrence of the term in Rom. 3:24f. We are ‘justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus: whom God hath set forth to be a propitiation through faith in his blood.’ The force of Paul’s argument up to this point is that all, Jew and Gentile alike, are under the condemnation of God. ‘The wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and wickedness of men’ (Rom. 1:18). Paul shows first that the Gentile world stands under God’s condemnation and then that the Jewish world is in the same plight. It is against this background that he sees the work of Christ. Christ did not save men from nothing at all. He delivered them from a very real peril. The sentence of judgment had been passed against them. The wrath of God hung over them. Paul has strongly emphasized the wrath of God throughout these opening chapters, and therefore Christ’s saving work must include deliverance from this wrath. This deliverance is described by the word ‘propitiation’.”<sup>1</sup>

- B. *Pocket Dictionary of Theological Terms*: An offering that turns away the wrath of God directed against sin. According to the NT, God has provided the offering that removes the divine wrath, for in love the Father sent the Son to be the propitiation (or atoning sacrifice) for human sin (1 Jn 4:10).<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>*New Bible Dictionary*, Logos Bible software, under propitiation.

<sup>2</sup>Stanley Grenz, David Guretzki and Cherith Fee Nordling, *Pocket Dictionary of Theological Terms* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 96.

- C. John Walvoord: "In its theological usage propitiation has in view the satisfaction of all God's righteous demands for judgement on the sinner by the redemptive act of the death of Christ."<sup>3</sup>
- D. *Vine's Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words*: "It is God who is propitiated by the vindication of His holy and righteous character, whereby, through the provision He has made in the vicarious and expiatory sacrifice of Christ, He has so dealt with sin that He can shew mercy to the believing sinner in the removal of his guilt and the remission of his sins. . . The expiatory work of the Cross is therefore the means whereby the barrier which sin interposes between God and man is broken down. By the giving up of His sinless life sacrificially, Christ annuls the power of sin to separate between God and the believer."<sup>4</sup>
- E. There is disagreement about the meaning of the New Testament Greek word translated "*propitiation*." Some see the word referring to **an offering which satisfies the wrath of God** against fallen men, even those He intends to save. Others don't see how God could be angry and wrathful towards those He loves and desires to save. They believe propitiation is a synonym for what is called "*expiation*" which is **to extinguish the guilt incurred by payment of a price** (e.g., **Col. 2:13-14**). Propitiation is therefore necessary so God can forgive us. Thus God is not angry with sinners, He merely needs to pay the penalty for their sin in order to remove their guilt so that He can forgive them. What is the answer? Maybe we should ask, "What is the question?" Can God both love the sinner and hate the sinner and their sin? All agree that the death of Christ takes care of the guilt of those who sin but is propitiation satisfying the wrath of God against sinners by payment or is it payment for sin in order that forgiveness might be extended? Look up the Scriptures below and see what they teach you.
1. **Deut. 7:7-10** "The Lord did not set His love on you nor choose you because you were more in number than any of the peoples, for you were the fewest of all peoples, 8 but because the Lord loved you and kept the oath which He swore to your forefathers, the Lord brought you out by a mighty hand and redeemed you from the house of slavery, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt. 9 "Know therefore that the Lord your God, He is God, the faithful God, who keeps His covenant and His lovingkindness to a thousandth generation with those who love Him and keep His commandments; 10 but repays those who hate Him to their faces, to destroy them; He will not delay with him who hates Him, He will repay him to his face.

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<sup>3</sup> John Walvoord, *Jesus Christ Our Lord*, pg. 155.

<sup>4</sup>*Vine's Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words*, Logos Bible Software, under "propitiation."

2. **Deut. 9:7-8** “Remember, do not forget how you provoked the Lord your God to wrath in the wilderness; from the day that you left the land of Egypt until you arrived at this place, you have been rebellious against the Lord. 8 “Even at Horeb you provoked the Lord to wrath, and the Lord was so angry with you that He would have destroyed you.
3. **Psa. 5:4-6** For You are not a God who takes pleasure in wickedness; No evil dwells with You. 5 The boastful shall not stand before Your eyes; You hate all who do iniquity. 6 You destroy those who speak falsehood; The Lord abhors the man of bloodshed and deceit.
4. **Psa. 11:5-7** The Lord tests the righteous and the wicked, And the one who loves violence His soul hates. 6 Upon the wicked He will rain snares; Fire and brimstone and burning wind will be the portion of their cup. 7 For the Lord is righteous, He loves righteousness; The upright will behold His face.
5. **Hos. 11:1-4** When Israel was a youth I loved him, And out of Egypt I called My son. 2 The more they called them, The more they went from them; They kept sacrificing to the Baals And burning incense to idols. 3 Yet it is I who taught Ephraim to walk, I took them in My arms; But they did not know that I healed them. 4 I led them with cords of a man, with bonds of love, And I became to them as one who lifts the yoke from their jaws; And I bent down and fed them.
6. **Nah. 1:2-7** A jealous and avenging God is the Lord; The Lord is avenging and wrathful. The Lord takes vengeance on His adversaries, And He reserves wrath for His enemies. 3 The Lord is slow to anger and great in power, And the Lord will by no means leave the guilty unpunished. In whirlwind and storm is His way, And clouds are the dust beneath His feet. 4 He rebukes the sea and makes it dry; He dries up all the rivers. Bashan and Carmel wither; The blossoms of Lebanon wither. 5 Mountains quake because of Him And the hills dissolve; Indeed the earth is upheaved by His presence, The world and all the inhabitants in it. 6 Who can stand before His indignation? Who can endure the burning of His anger? His wrath is poured out like fire And the rocks are broken up by Him. 7 The Lord is good, A stronghold in the day of trouble, And He knows those who take refuge in Him.
7. **Jn. 3:16** “For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life.
8. **Rom. 1:18** For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men who suppress the truth in unrighteousness, 19 because that which is known about God is evident within them; for God made it evident to them.

## II. THOUGHTS TO PONDER ABOUT PROPITIATION

- A. *New Bible Dictionary*: “Another thought that is widespread is that the death of Christ is a death for sin. It is not simply that certain wicked men rose up against him. It is not that his enemies conspired against him and that he was not able to resist them. He ‘was put to death for our trespasses’ (Rom. 4:25). He came specifically to die for our sins. His blood was shed ‘for many for the forgiveness of sins’ (Mt. 26:28). He ‘made purification for sins’ (Heb. 1:3). He ‘bore our sins in his body on the tree’ (1 Pet. 2:24). He is ‘the propitiation for our sins’ (1 Jn. 2:2; so, rightly, (King James’), 1611). The cross of Christ will never be understood unless it is seen that thereon the Saviour was dealing with the sins of all mankind.”<sup>5</sup>
- B. *Tyndale Bible Dictionary*: “[Mercy seat is a] Gold slab placed on top of the ark of the covenant with cherubim attached to it on either end, termed the “mercy seat” in many English versions of the Bible (cf. Ex. 25:17-22). The Hebrew word for which “mercy seat” is the translation is technically best rendered as “propitiatory,” a term denoting the removal of wrath by the offering of a gift. The significance of this designation is found in the ceremony performed on the Day of Atonement, held once a year, when blood was sprinkled on the mercy seat to make atonement for the sins of the people of Israel (Lv. 16).”<sup>6</sup>

## III. SCRIPTURAL PROOF OF THE PROPITIATORY WORK OF CHRIST

- A. **Luke 18:13-14** “But the tax collector, standing some distance away, was even unwilling to lift up his eyes to heaven, but was beating his breast, saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, the sinner!’ 14 “I tell you, this man went to his house justified rather than the other; for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but he who humbles himself will be exalted.”
- B. **Rom. 3:25-26** 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; 26 for the demonstration, I say, of His righteousness at the present time, so that He would be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.
- C. **Heb. 2:17** Therefore, He had to be made like His brethren in all things, so that He might become a merciful and faithful high priest in things pertaining to God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people.

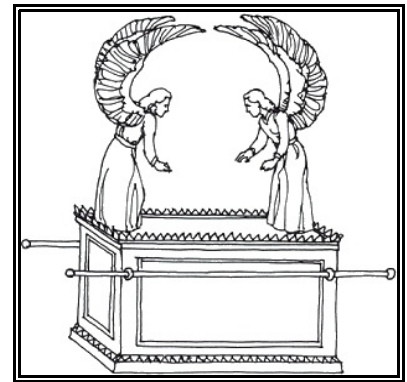
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<sup>5</sup> *New Bible Dictionary*, Logos Bible software, under atonement.

<sup>6</sup>Walter A. Elwell and Philip Wesley Comfort, *Tyndale Bible Dictionary*, (Wheaton, Ill.: Tyndale House Publishers, 2001), 883.

D. **Heb. 9:3-5** Behind the second veil there was a tabernacle which is called the Holy of Holies, 4 having a golden altar of incense and the ark of the covenant covered on all sides with gold, in which was a golden jar holding the manna, and Aaron's rod which budded, and the tables of the covenant; 5 and above it were the cherubim of glory overshadowing the mercy seat; but of these things we cannot now speak in detail.

1. **Exod. 25:17-22** "You shall make a mercy seat of pure gold, two and a half cubits long and one and a half cubits wide. 18 "You shall make two cherubim of gold, make them of hammered work at the two ends of the mercy seat. 19 "Make one cherub at one end and one cherub at the other end; you shall make the cherubim of one piece with the mercy seat at its two ends. 20 "The cherubim shall have their wings spread upward, covering the mercy seat with their wings and facing one another; the faces of the cherubim are to be turned toward the mercy seat. 21 "You shall put the mercy seat on top of the ark, and in the ark you shall put the testimony which I will give to you. 22 "There I will meet with you; and from above the mercy seat, from between the two cherubim which are upon the ark of the testimony, I will speak to you about all that I will give you in commandment for the sons of Israel.



2. **Lev. 16:14-16, 34** "Moreover, he shall take some of the blood of the bull and sprinkle it with his finger on the mercy seat on the east side; also in front of the mercy seat he shall sprinkle some of the blood with his finger seven times. 15 "Then he shall slaughter the goat of the sin offering which is for the people, and bring its blood inside the veil and do with its blood as he did with the blood of the bull, and sprinkle it on the mercy seat and in front of the mercy seat. 16 "He shall make atonement for the holy place, because of the impurities of the sons of Israel and because of their transgressions in regard to all their sins; and thus he shall do for the tent of meeting which abides with them in the midst of their impurities. . . 34 "Now you shall have this as a permanent statute, to make atonement for the sons of Israel for all their sins once every year." And just as the Lord had commanded Moses, so he did.

E. **I John 2:2** and He Himself is the propitiation for our sins; and not for ours only, but also for those of the whole world.

F. **I John 4:10** 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.

#### IV. ERRORS CONCERNING THE PROPITIATORY WORK OF CHRIST

- A. Propitiation means forgiveness.
- B. Propitiation means expiation.
- C. Propitiation does not satisfy God's wrath against sinners because God is a loving God.
- D. Propitiation can be accomplished by being a good person, doing what is right, and living our lives for God.

#### V. APPLICATION OF THE PROPITIATORY WORK OF CHRIST

- A. Propitiation teaches us that God is perfectly holy and just.
- B. Propitiation teaches us how much God loves us by the price He was willing to pay in order to satisfy His just and holy wrath against us.
- C. Propitiation reminds us that God is no longer hostile towards those who have placed their faith in Jesus Christ for salvation.
- D. Propitiation should move us to thank, praise, and serve Christ.
- E. Propitiation should motivate us to share the gospel with those still under the wrath of God who need propitiation from sins.

**“Without the shedding of blood is no remission.” — Hebrews 9:22**

*Sin will yield to nothing less potent than the blood of him whom God hath set forth as a propitiation. What a blessing that there is the one way of pardon! Why should we seek another? Persons of merely formal religion cannot understand how we can rejoice that all our sins are forgiven us for Christ's sake. Their works, and prayers, and ceremonies, give them very poor comfort; and well may they be uneasy, for they are neglecting the one great salvation, and endeavoring to get remission without blood. My soul, sit down, and behold the justice of God as bound to punish sin; see that punishment all executed upon thy Lord Jesus, and fall down in humble joy, and kiss the dear feet of him whose blood has made atonement for thee. It is in vain when conscience is aroused to fly to feelings and evidences for comfort: this is a habit which we learned in the Egypt of our legal bondage. The only restorative for a guilty conscience is a sight of Jesus suffering on the cross. “The blood is the life thereof,” says the Levitical law, and let us rest assured that it is the life of faith and joy and every other holy grace.*

*“Oh! how sweet to view the flowing Of my Saviour's precious blood;  
With divine assurance knowing He has made my peace with God.”<sup>7</sup>*

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<sup>7</sup>Charles Spurgeon, *Morning and Evening*, Morning February 2<sup>nd</sup>, Logos Bible Software.