

BIBLICAL TRUTH ABOUT MAN, SIN, AND SALVATION

Lesson 17: Propitiation

This is the fourth of seventeen lessons on the biblical doctrine of salvation (soteriology, from Greek *soteria*, salvation). This lesson focuses on propitiation, the truth that Christ's sacrificial death satisfied God's wrath against the believer's sins.

Lesson 17 – Central Truth Q and A

Question: What did Christ's sacrifice do for those who believe?

Answer: Christ's sacrificial death satisfied God's wrath.

Lesson 17 – Memory Verses

1 John 4:10 *In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins.*

Hebrews 2:17 *Therefore he had to be made like his brothers in every respect, so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people.*

Lesson 17 – Introduction

All people deserve God's wrath for their sins for two basic reasons: 1) because God is holy and righteous; and 2) because we are sinners by nature and by choice. Simply stated, we deserve God's wrath because of who God is and because of who we are. Scripture teaches that sinners deserve the penalty of God's wrath for their sins. It also teaches that Christ is the sinner's substitute who satisfied God's wrath for those who would believe on Him. This act of appeasing God's wrath is propitiation.

1. The Definition and Revelation of Propitiation

The term "propitiation" is found in connection with Christ's sacrificial death for sin and it basically means "appeasement" or "satisfaction." This is a clear, yet thorough definition of the biblical truth:

Scripture represents Christ's death not merely as a sacrifice but as a *propitiatory* sacrifice. That is to say, by receiving the full exercise of the Father's wrath against the sins of his people, Christ satisfied God's righteous anger against sin and thus turned away his wrath from us who, had it not been for our substitute, were bound to suffer it for ourselves.¹

The New Testament reveals Christ's sacrifice on the cross as propitiation in four texts:

Romans 3:24-25 *[We] are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith.*

¹ John MacArthur and Richard Mayhue, eds., *Biblical Doctrine* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2017), 528.

Hebrews 2:17 *Therefore he had to be made like his brothers in every respect, so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people.*

1 John 2:2 *He is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world.*

1 John 4:10 *In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins.*

2. The Reasons for Christ's Propitiation

Understanding and applying Scripture accurately requires the careful study of biblical places, people, and words. Such is the case as we dig into the meaning of propitiation, a word that greatly enhances our understanding of Christ's work in salvation. Two main motivations led Christ to offer himself as a sacrifice to make propitiation for believers—God's love and God's justice. According to 1 John 4:9, God's love was revealed in his election of sinners and in his gracious provision of Christ for their salvation. A common misunderstanding of Scripture presents God the Father as a vindictive, angry deity whose wrath his loving Son takes on himself in order to appease the Father. But Scripture teaches that God is unified without any opposing will or affections between the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. He is never at odds or divided against himself. In grace and love the Father chose to save His people from their sins and this salvation was accomplished through the satisfactory sacrifice of the Son. Then the saving sacrificial work of the Son was applied to the elect by the Holy Spirit.

While God's love motivated him to save sinners, his justice motivated him to provide a righteous means of salvation that would not violate his holy nature. God's holiness demands that he punish sinners. When God revealed his name (character) to Moses on Mt. Sinai, he included his faithful love and his just punishment of the guilty (Ex. 34:6-7). His justice is part of his faithfulness, and it was that justice which God upheld in requiring Christ's sacrifice on the cross. Just as there is no division among the persons of the Trinity, his justice and holiness is not contrary to his love and mercy. All of God's attributes are perfectly displayed in Christ's sacrificial death on the cross.

3. The Nature of Christ's Propitiation

When Christ offered himself on the cross, God considered his perfect life and substitutionary death as a sufficient payment for the sins of all his elect people. Christ's sacrifice accomplished salvation for believers because he was punished in our place (Rom. 5:8-9) and propitiated (satisfied) God's wrath. Christ took upon himself all the sins of the elect, and we received the credit of his perfect obedience as if it were our own (2 Cor. 5:21). This is the biblical truth of imputation. By his grace alone Christ absorbed God's full wrath toward the sin of his elect in three hours on the cross. The blood of sheep, goats, and oxen were never sufficient to atone for sin (Heb. 10:4), but they pointed ahead to the perfect sacrifice of Christ. He shed his own precious blood as the Lamb of God (Jn. 1:29, 35) and saved his people from the wrath that their sin deserved (Eph. 2:13; 1 Jn. 1:7; Rev. 1:5). God will have wrath and eternal punishment for unrepentant sinners, but everyone who repents and believes in Christ now will not face God's wrath because it has been satisfied (propitiated) at the cross (Isa. 53:4; 1 Pet. 2:24). Christ's sacrifice and propitiation has satisfied God's wrath fully and forever. "There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" (Rom. 8:1). The result of Christ's death is that believers can live in his love and never face his justice.

4. Lesson Summary

The biblical truth of propitiation highlights the death of Christ in its accomplishment of satisfying God's wrath against the believer's sins. This paragraph describes the blessed reality of propitiation:

The significance of propitiation, then, is that it identifies Christ's work as a wrath-bearing sacrifice. Sin may not merely be overlooked; sin must ever and always be punished, whether in the sinner in hell or in Christ the substitute on the cross. God has not relaxed his justice, for he himself declares that he will by no means leave the guilty unpunished (Ex. 34:7). Every ounce of wrath that the elect sinner deserved—all the wrath that God would have exercised on the sinner in the eternal torments of hell—was poured out fully on our substitute in those three terrible hours on Calvary. Because of this, there is no longer any wrath left for Christ's people. God is propitious toward them, for their sin has been paid for.²

"His Robes for Mine"

His robes for mine: O wonderful exchange! Clothed in my sin, Christ suffered 'neath God's rage.
Draped in His righteousness, I'm justified. In Christ I live, for in my place He died.

Refrain

*I cling to Christ, and marvel at the cost: Jesus forsaken, God estranged from God.
Bought by such love, my life is not my own; My praise, my all, shall be for Christ alone.*

His robes for mine: What cause have I for dread? God's daunting law Christ mastered in my stead.
Faultless I stand, with righteous works not mine, Saved by my Lord's vicarious death and life.

Refrain

His robes for mine: God's justice is appeased. Jesus is crushed, and thus the Father's pleased.
Christ drank God's wrath on sin, then cried, "'Tis done!" Sin's wage is paid; propitiation won.

Refrain

His robes for mine: Such anguish none can know. Christ, God's beloved, condemned as though His foe.
He, as though I, accursed and left alone; I, as though He, embraced and welcomed home!

Refrain

CHRIS ANDERSON
Hymns of Grace, 181

² MacArthur and Mayhue, *Biblical Doctrine*, 531.