Jesus, the Propitiation for Our Sins: (2:2)

In this verse, John explains the nature of Christ’s advocacy on behalf of believers. Jesus stands before the Father as the propitiation for our sins. The word “propitiation” carries the idea of satisfying the requirements of justice, as well as appeasing the wrath of God. All sin requires punishment, and it arouses the hostility of God against those who practice it. In our modern culture the idea of God’s wrath is seen as unworthy of a good and perfect being. That is because the anger is equated with a loss of control, or is seen as arbitrary. However, God’s anger is always under His control, and it is the righteous response to evil. God’s see the true nature and consequences of sin and the only righteous response is anger.

However, Christ Himself endured God’s wrath and the penalty of death on behalf of the believer so that they have no sins to answer for (such as the occasional sins to which John just referred). When considered in light of the imagery of the sacrificial system of the OT, one sees that Jesus is both the priest who makes the offering, and the offering itself. The verb indicates that the propitiation is ongoing and thus it covers pre & post conversion sins.

John adds that Jesus was not simply the propitiation for our sins, but “also for the whole world”. Some suggest that this expression can only mean that Jesus paid the debt of sin for every individual, and anything else would be a distortion of the plain meaning of this expression. However, there are two problems with this conclusion.

First, if that is what John meant, then he was teaching universal salvation for all including those who do not believe. The reason is that John does not speak of a potential propitiation, but one that is accomplished: for only an actual satisfaction of God’s justice and wrath would remove the threat of damnation. Since John later writes clearly that only those who believe are saved (5:10-13), then the conclusion must be that unbelievers answer for their own sins, and thus Christ did not die for them (since God would be unjust to punish the same sins twice).

Second, this claim about the expression “whole world” contradicts actual NT usage. There are four other occasions (not counting parallels in the Synoptic Gospels) where this same phrase is used with the same Greek terms that John employs here. The first is when Jesus said “for what profit is it to a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul?” (Matt.16:26). Does the “whole world” refer to every single individual thing that exists in the world? That would mean no one else would have anything at all (an absurd hypothetical situation). No, Jesus meant that a person’s soul is more valuable than the entire range of possessions and experiences one might have in this world. Therefore, the idea is universal in the sense of all types of things (not every individual thing). The next two uses both refer to the Gospel being preached to the whole world (Matt.26:13; Rom.1:8). In neither passage does the speaker have in mind that every individual who was alive at that point had heard the Gospel (for that would be contrary to reality), only that the Gospel would be spread throughout the known world to all people groups.

Finally, John himself used the expression later in this same letter. There John
states that “the whole world lies under the sway of the wicked one” (5:19). Believers are by definition excluded from being classified as living under the influence of the devil. Therefore, the expression again cannot mean every individual.

The real idea that John was stressing here was that Jesus was the only propitiation that there was in all the world. No other way of salvation existed for anyone other than that which was provided by the propitiation of Christ. This was important because human beings tend to have prejudices against people from different places, who speak different languages, have different customs, or who are of different races. Christians were meant to understand from the outset that God does not share those prejudices, but has provided the means of salvation to any person who is willing to believe, regardless of their racial or ethnic background.

1. In what ways might one’s personal prejudices stand in the way of being a proper witness regarding the Gospel?

2. It is good to meditate regularly on the fact that God Himself died to free us from the condemnation our sins would have brought down on us. Take this time as an opportunity to do that.