

## THE MERCIES OF GOD: Propitiation

**“For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, being justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus; whom God displayed publicly as a propitiation in His blood through faith. *This was to demonstrate His righteousness.*” — Romans 3:23-25a**

### Introduction

“The wrath of God” and “propitiation” are unpopular topics, even in the church at large. Many professing Christians are simply ignorant of these concepts. Others turn hostile when they are mentioned. To them, the cross is about the depth of Jesus’ sacrificial love—nothing more.

This state of affairs is illustrated by the controversy over the hymn “In Christ Alone” by Stuart Townend and Keith Getty. In 2013, the Presbyterian Church USA—one of the largest Protestant denominations in the US—wanted to add the hymn to the new hymnbook it was compiling. However, the committee selecting the hymns had one condition. They requested permission from Townend and Getty to change the lyrics of the second stanza from “‘Til on that cross as Jesus died, the wrath of God was satisfied” to “‘Til on that cross as Jesus died, the love of God was magnified.” The problem was not with what the committee wanted to add; the song already affirms the greatness of God’s love. The problem was with what the committee rejected—that Christ’s sacrifice on the cross *satisfied the wrath of God*. Townend and Getty rejected the proposal, and the committee rejected the hymn. Mary Bringle, the chair of the committee gave this explanation for the decision: “People think that we’ve taken the wrath of God out of the hymnal. That’s not the case. It’s all over the hymnal. The issue was the word ‘satisfied.’”

Bringle’s response highlights a central question related to the atonement: **Do the concepts of “wrath,” “propitiation,” and “satisfaction” have anything to do with the cross of Christ?** Contrary to Bringle and many like her, the answer to the question is *yes*! To answer that question in the negative ultimately reveals a serious misunderstanding of the biblical teaching about sin and the character of God.

**When a biblical understanding of sin is absent, serious errors in understanding the doctrine of salvation are inevitable. The biggest cause for a misunderstanding of the gospel is an ignorance of God and His perfections.**

### A. Key Terms and Definitions

**1. Divine wrath.** The concept of atonement in general and propitiation in particular must start with a proper definition of *divine wrath*. The wrath of God refers to **His righteous response to everything which is contrary to His divine perfection. He cannot approve of or remain indifferent to that which challenges His character, but must actively respond with all His person to judge evil.**<sup>1</sup> Or as John Murray states, God’s wrath is “the holy revulsion of God’s being against that which is the contradiction of his holiness” (Murray, *Epistle to the Romans*, 65).

**Key idea:**  
God must respond with judgment to that which contradicts His perfection.

- For texts describing the wrath of God, see: Deut 4:24; Isa 66:15; Jer 30:23-24; Nahum 1:2-3; John 3:36; Rom 1:18; 3:5-6; Eph 2:3; 1 Thess 1:10; 2 Thess 1:6-9; Heb 12:39; Rev. 19:15.

Those who deny penal substitutionary atonement (see the previous session on “Atonement”) and the concept of propitiation deny that what happened to Jesus on the cross had anything to do with divine wrath. Such opponents regularly claim that “the cross is not an instrument of God’s wrath” and that “God did not need to punish the Son in order to forgive our sin.” For them, sin needs no payment—only a declaration of forgiveness. They believe that Christ’s death on the cross was just a way for God to show His love. Ultimately, they believe that while

<sup>1</sup> From “The Wrath of God” (<https://www.gracechurch.org/sermons/13129>), Men of the Word, preached 4/26/2017.

their own sin may be bad, it is never that bad so as to warrant a necessary and severe exercise of God's wrath in response. God's perfect righteousness is impugned as a result.

2. **Propitiation.** Wayne Grudem defines "propitiation" as "**a sacrifice that bears God's wrath to the end and in so doing change's God's wrath toward us into favor**" (*Systematic Theology*, 575). In other words, the sacrifice Christ offered on the cross on behalf of believers was of such value and sufficiency that God's necessary wrath against their sin was *satisfied*. Christ "drank the cup" of God's wrath for each and every one of their sins. The wheels of God's justice bore down on Christ fully. A complete payment was made and the wheels stopped turning. As a result, God's *relationship* towards those for whom Christ died has changed to one of *favor*.

**Key idea:**  
the satisfaction of God's  
wrath and the acquisition  
of His favor

In other words, **central to the idea of propitiation is the concept of satisfaction**. Sin demands payment. If God did not mete out justice for each and every sin committed against perfect righteousness, He Himself would cease to be righteous; He would not remain true to His perfection. But the majesty of the cross is that this wrath was turned upon a substitute—Jesus Christ—who could actually make the payment so that we who believe could avoid experiencing that wrath. Furthermore, since the sacrifice of Christ *satisfied* God's wrath over the sin of those who would believe, **a changed relationship results** between God—the offended One—and the believer—the one who offended. This new relationship is one of *favor*.

**"It pleased our heavenly Father, of his infinite mercy, without any our desert or deserving, to prepare for us the most precious jewels of Christ's body and blood, whereby our ransom might be fully paid, the law fulfilled, and his justice fully satisfied."** —Thomas Cranmer, *First Book of Homilies*, 130

- (a) The **concept** of propitiation finds its basis in **the OT sacrificial system**, and particularly in Isaiah 53.
- **Isaiah 53:5** – "But He was pierced through for our transgressions, He was crushed for our iniquities; the chastening for our well-being *fell* upon Him, and by His scourging we are healed."
  - **Isaiah 53:11a** – "As a result of the anguish of His [the Suffering Servant's] soul, He [the LORD] will see *it and be satisfied*."
- (b) The **language** of propitiation is derived from **a specific NT word group**, particularly the Greek verb ἱλάσκομαι (*hilaskomai* – "to make propitiation") and its related nouns ἱλασμός (*hilasmos* – "a sacrifice of propitiation") and ἱλαστήριον (*hilastērion* – "a means of propitiation"). There are four key texts:
- **Romans 3:25** – "whom God displayed publicly as a propitiation in His blood through faith"
  - **Hebrews 2:17** – "Therefore, He had to be made like His brethren in all things . . . to make propitiation for the sins of the people."
  - **1 John 2:2a** – "and He Himself is the propitiation for our sins."
  - **1 John 4:10** – "He loved us and sent His Son *to be* the propitiation for our sins."

For anyone who wants to claim the Bible as the authority for doctrine yet deny the reality of propitiation, the language of the Bible must be changed, and that is exactly what happens. Consider how the RSV has specifically avoided the term "propitiation" in the translation of Romans 3:25, using the term "expiation" instead.

Romans 3:25 and Propitiation	
NASB	whom God displayed publicly as <u>a propitiation</u> in His blood through faith
ESV	whom God put forward as <u>a propitiation</u> by his blood,
HCSB	God presented Him as <u>a propitiation</u> through faith in His blood
KJV	Whom God hath set forth <i>to be</i> <u>a propitiation</u> through faith in his blood,
NIV	God presented Christ as <u>a sacrifice of atonement</u> , through the shedding of his blood
RSV	whom God put forward as <u>an expiation</u> by his blood

- 3. Expiation.** The term refers to “**the removal of guilt or stain of sin through payment of the penalty.**” In other words, when the atonement is defined as *expiation*, it refers to the power of the cross to remove the stain of sin from the sinner.

**Key idea:**  
**the removal of the  
guilt or stain of sin**

But what is wrong with the “expiation” when used to describe the atonement? Technically, nothing—as long as it is not used to the *exclusion* of propitiation. Both happened at the cross—not just expiation. J. I. Packer helpfully explains the difference as follows:

“The difference is that expiation means only half of what propitiation means. Expiation is an action that has sin as its object; it denotes the covering, putting away or rubbing out of sin so that it no longer constitutes a barrier to friendly fellowship between man and God. Propitiation, however, in the Bible, denotes all that expiation means, *and the pacifying of the wrath of God thereby*” (Packer, *Knowing God*, 182).

Propitiation vs. Expiation – What is the difference?	
Propitiation	Expiation
Directed toward God	Directed toward Sin
Change of Attitude	Change of Sinner
Wrath is Satisfied	Guilt is Removed

Ultimately, both *propitiation* and *expiation* are part of the atonement. Expiation is the easier of the two concepts to accept. It must not be emphasized to the exclusion of that which is difficult for us to stomach—propitiation.

## B. Essential Characteristics

A closer examination of the term “propitiation” in the NT reveals the following five characteristics:

### 1. The Initiative of the Father’s Will

- **1 John 4:8-10** – “God . . . sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins.”
- From start to finish, the atonement was the initiative of God the Father. He is not a cruel tyrant who had to be bribed by His Son.

### 2. The Ambition of the Son’s Incarnation

- **Hebrews 2:17** – “He had to be made like His brethren in all things . . . to make propitiation for the sins of the people.”
- The Son did not suffer and die unwillingly. It was the goal of His incarnation. He came “to give His life a ransom for many” (Mark 10:45), and He laid down His life on His own initiative (John 10:17-18).

### 3. The Demonstration of Pure Righteousness

- **Romans 3:21-26** – “. . . whom God displayed publicly as a propitiation in His blood through faith. This was to demonstrate His righteousness . . .”
- God did not compromise His justice when pouring His wrath out upon Christ for the sins of His elect. Christ drank the full cup of God’s fury over their sin (cf. Matt 27:46; John 19:30).

### 4. The Manifestation of Incomparable Love

- **1 John 4:8-10** – “. . . He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins.”
- “The doctrine of propitiation is precisely this: that God loved the objects of His wrath so much that He gave His own Son to the end that He by His blood should make provision for the removal of this wrath” (Murray, *Atonement*, 15).

## 5. The Foundation for On-Going Intercession

- **1 John 2:1-2** – “And if anyone sins, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous, and He Himself is the propitiation for our sins . . .”
- The satisfaction which Christ made to God on the cross is the basis for his ongoing intercessory ministry at the right hand of the Father as He applies the fruit of His finished work (Heb 7:25; Rom 8:34; Col 1:20).

### D. Practical Implications

1. **Make much of Christ!** What Christ endured on the cross for us should inspire our most profound, humble worship. Make this the theme of your life.
2. **Be happy!** For those in Christ, the wheels of divine justice finished turning 2000 years ago. Those wheels are now forever silent and satisfied. This is the *euangelion* (“good news”). We should be the happiest people on earth. Read 1 Thess 5:9-10; Rom 8:1.
3. **Love generously!** Ephesians 5:2 says that we are to “walk in love, just as Christ also loved you and gave Himself up for us, an offering and a sacrifice to God as a fragrant aroma.” Christians who find it hard to love others either do not understand or ignore the wrath of God, the work of Christ, or the doctrine of propitiation.
4. **Preach Christ crucified!** The “gospel” of mainline Christianity is “A God without wrath brought man without sin into a kingdom without judgment through the ministrations of a Christ without a cross” (Richard Niebuhr). We must preach Christ *crucified*—which means we must talk about sin, penalty, wrath—and *propitiation*!
5. **If you are not in Christ, you will face wrath!** If you have not been reconciled to God through Christ, do not believe the deceivers who say there is no such thing as wrath. There is. Either Christ bore the wrath you deserved on the cross, or you will bear it for eternity. Judgment is coming. Therefore, “we beg you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God” (2 Cor 5:20).

### For Further Reflection

**Scripture Memory:** Romans 3:23-26

**Recommended Reading:**

- John MacArthur & Richard Mayhue, *Biblical Doctrine*, pages 528-31.
- J. I. Packer, *Knowing God* (1993), chapter 18, “The Heart of the Gospel,” pages 179-199.
- Advanced: Leon Morris, *The Apostolic Preaching of the Cross* (3<sup>rd</sup> edition), chapters 5-6, “Propitiation” pages 144-213.

**Homework:**

- Review the sermon on “the wrath of God” delivered in Men of the Word on April 26, 2017 (audio available here: <https://www.gracechurch.org/sermons/13129>).
- Why is wrath a necessary attribute for God? If God did not express wrath, what would that say about His righteousness?
- In your own words, define “expiation” and “propitiation.” What is the difference between the two? Why is it necessary to affirm both as part of the atonement?
- Spend time reviewing some of the hymns found in the section “Jesus—His Earthly Life; Christ’s Christ, Blood, and Suffering (hymns #271-305) in *Hymns of Grace*. Which hymns make reference to the wrath of God poured out upon Christ on the cross.
- Explain how your growing understanding of the doctrine of propitiation *increases* your love and adoration of God.

**Hymns:** “The Power of the Cross” (*Hymns of Grace* #189); “Jesus, Thank You” (not in *Hymns of Grace*)

**This Week’s Audio:** [gracechurch.org/motw](https://www.gracechurch.org/motw)

**Next Meeting:** October 30 – “Q&A with John MacArthur”