

PAUL'S THEOLOGY

Lesson 28

Salvation – Part 4 Metaphor – Propitiation

One of the many people who help our class “go” is Mike Hudgins. For seven years, Mike has led the effort to make sure the sound is working each Sunday morning. Mike has worked through multiple soundboards, with different incarnations of microphones (no Mike/mic bad puns here!), and in multiple venues week in and week out to make sure these lessons are heard in class and beyond. Like so many others, Mike consistently makes personal sacrifices for our benefit. Thank you, Mike!

Now when I write of Mike’s sacrifices, I need to pause for a moment. Because if you know Mike well, then you know he is a huge baseball fan. In fact, in addition to Mike’s regular job, Mike also umpires baseball games. These games are serious games, not simply the Saturday afternoon Little League fair. Mike is one of our area’s top umpires. “Sacrifice” has a special meaning to Mike. It is when a batter hits into an out to advance a runner.

Today, we are studying “sacrifice.” We are not studying the kind of sacrifice that so many make in order for this class to be as effective as it is. Nor are we studying the kind of sacrifice we might see in a baseball game. We are studying a special type of sacrifice that makes our salvation before God Almighty. We are studying the blood sacrifice of Jesus Christ.

As we study the sacrifice of Christ, we look specifically at a metaphor Paul uses to describe the working of our salvation: propitiation. Now, someone may think we have reverted back to baseball lingo here! Some might think we are speaking of the state of supporting a good pitching staff for a ball club. As in, “We are propitchy-ation when it comes to our starting rotation!” (Yes, a horrid pun. *Mea culpa*, but I did pass over the Mike/mic puns!)

Propitiation has nothing to do with baseball, but everything to do with sacrifice. It is a rare word in our vocabulary, and a rare word in the Bible. It is a very important word, however, for it brings an important aspect of Christ’s sacrifice into focus. Scholars have debated whether Paul really meant what he wrote when he used this word. It is this word that we study today.

“PROPITIATION”

Do you have a copy of Oxford’s English Dictionary handy? No matter, we can reproduce the pertinent part here:

Propitiation: The action or an act of propitiating [admittedly not too helpful, but keep reading!]; appeasement, conciliation; atonement, expiation.¹

This gives us a nice intellectual starting place for our English word. If we read carefully, then we can see that the English word comes from the Latin root *propitiare* and that we also get the word “propitious” (“favorable”) from it. We can dig a little more and consider the basic word “propitiate.”

Propitiate: Make propitious or favourably [British spelling from Oxford!] inclined; appease, conciliate, placate.²

To be thorough, we should look at one last English word, “propitious.”

Propitious: Well-disposed, favourably inclined.³

In English, when we speak of “propitiating” God, we speak of appeasing God. It might seem we are trying to change his mood.

As astute students of Paul, we know that Paul was not writing in English. “Propitiate” was not his choice of words, it was that of our Bible translators. Similarly, we know that Paul did not choose the Latin root *propitiare*. Paul was a trained Jewish rabbi writing in Greek! So, if we are going to get at the root of Paul’s wording that gives us “propitiation,” then we need to step back several levels.

Jerome (c.345-c.419)⁴ and other scholars in the early church used the Latin *propitiare* when translating Paul’s letter to the Romans from Paul’s Greek into the Latin used daily in ordinary life. This translation is today called the “Vulgate.” The Latin word is used in the Vulgate in Romans 3:23-25, which reads in English:

For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a **propitiation**

¹ Shorter Oxford English Dictionary, 6th Edition (Oxford 2007).

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ See Church History Literacy lesson 28 at www.Biblical-Literacy.com.

[*propitiationem*] by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God’s righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins.

Why did the Latin Fathers of the church choose a Latin word that meant, “to soothe, appease”?⁵ To better understand, we need to take our next step back in time and look at Paul’s actual word choice in the Greek.

Paul wrote to the saints in Rome using a Greek word that sounds nothing at all like “propitiate.” Paul’s word was “*hilasterion*” (ἱλαστήριον) from the Greek root “*hilasmos*” which means, “propitiate”!⁶ In Greek, nouns that end with “*erion*” mean “the place where something is done.” Paul’s word we ultimately have translated as “propitiation” is actually referring to a place where *hilasmos* is done!⁷ Are you totally lost? Hopefully not!

Now, we can put together the real question that we face in understanding this word picture of Paul. Paul wrote of a place where appeasement of God took place. In this single passage, Paul combined many of the metaphors of our past lessons⁸ noting that “redemption” and “justification” come from a place where the blood of Christ appeases or conciliates God.

Where was this place? Christ’s blood was shed on Calvary; was it a hill outside Jerusalem that Paul was referencing to the believers in Rome? Yes and no. Christ’s blood sacrifice did indeed happen there, but we are studying Paul’s metaphors. The metaphor translated “propitiation” is a different place than Calvary.

Just when you thought we were through going into word histories, we have a need to go back one more level. Rabbi Paul was using a Greek word that had special meaning to him as a Jew, as it would have to any of his Jewish audience, as well as the Greeks who were familiar with the New Testament church’s Scriptures, our Old Testament.

⁵ Cassell’s New Latin Dictionary (Funk & Wagnalls 1968).

⁶ Liddell and Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon* (Oxford 1968).

⁷ The way Paul uses the word in Romans 3:25 is likely an adjective rather than a noun. That would mean that Paul is writing that Jesus is able to make propitiation for sin, or is able to fill the role of “propitiator.” This does not change the picture or metaphor of this lesson, but rather the grammatical way that one might arrive at our conclusions! See the discussion on this point and the references contained there in Moulton and Milligan, *The Vocabulary of the Greek New Testament* (Hodder and Stoughton 1963). But see further footnote 9 below.

⁸ These lessons are available for download at www.Biblical-Literacy.com in written, audio, and video format.

In the Greek translation of the Old Testament⁹, the word *hilasterion* referenced a very specific place. It referenced the “mercy seat” in the Ark of the Covenant.¹⁰ Therefore, to best understand this metaphor Paul uses of our salvation, we need to go back into the Old Testament and understand the mercy seat and the Ark of the Covenant.

THE ARK OF THE COVENANT

In Exodus 25, we have the narrative of God giving instructions to Moses of how the Ark of the Covenant was to be built (“Ark” translates the Hebrew word for a “box” or “chest” used to carry things). The workers were to take acacia wood¹¹ and make a carrying chest about 45 inches long, 27 inches deep, and 27 inches high. The wood was to be covered inside and out with gold. Poles were made to go through four holes on the sides of the Ark for carrying the Ark without touching it.

The chest was to hold God’s testimony given to Moses¹². This testimony is what we call the “Law” given Moses. It would have been the Ten Commandments as well as the other laws provided by God to Moses. Over the top of the chest holding the law was a “mercy seat.” This mercy seat was a lid of pure gold, not simply covered wood. The lid was full size, 45 inches long and 27 deep. The lid was to have two cherubim (angels) on each end that faced each other with extended wings reaching toward each other.

This lid, the “mercy seat,” was especially important to the Jews, for it was here that God met his people:

⁹ By the time of Paul, there were several translations of the Old Testament into Greek. We call this translation the “Septuagint.” It is apparent that Paul not only knew the Septuagint, but used it extensively in writing his various letters.

¹⁰ The word *hilasterion* is used 27 times in the Old Testament, with 21 of those occurrences translating the “mercy seat.” Morris argues that the “mercy seat” always (save once – Ex. 25:17) has a definite article before it in the Greek (“*the* mercy seat”) where here Paul has simply “mercy seat.” Morris has good arguments, but either way the result of Jesus as the propitiation before God results. We should mention at least one early church comment on this. Theodore of Cyr (393-466) wrote a Greek commentary of Romans. His understanding of Paul here was to the mercy seat: “The apostle teaches us that Christ is the true mercy seat, of which the one in the Old Testament was but a type.” See *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: Romans* (IVP 1998) at 102.

¹¹ Likely, the hard brownish-orange wood available in the barren regions of the Holy Lands is still there today. Currently, it is used for cabinet making. See, *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible* (Zondervan 1976) Vol. 1 at 31.

¹² Ultimately, the chest would also hold a jar of manna as well as Aaron’s budding staff.

And you shall put the mercy seat on the top of the ark, and in the ark you shall put the testimony that I shall give you. There I will meet with you, and from above the mercy seat, from between the two cherubim that are on the ark of the testimony, I will speak with you about all that I will give you in commandment for the people of Israel. (Ex. 25:21-22).

The chest was carried carefully and was a most holy item. Specific instructions for covering the ark and carrying it with the poles were set before Moses and the people. People dealt with the Ark lightly to their own peril (See Numbers 4).

The chest along with the Mercy Seat (the lid) was kept in the tabernacle inside the most Holy of Holies. It was separated from the Holy Place by a hanging curtain, a veil (Ex. 23:33-34).

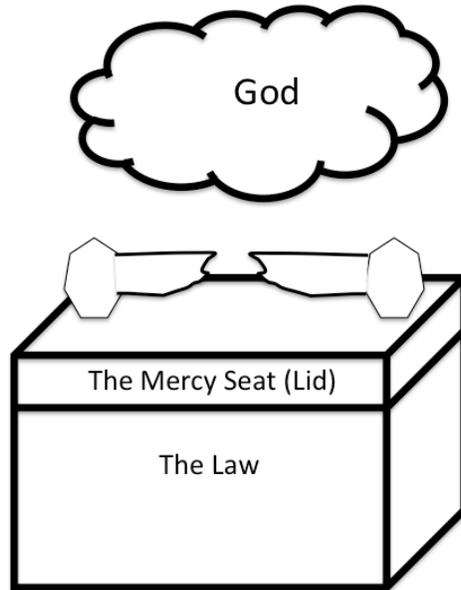
Once a year, and only once a year, the High Priest would pass through the veil and enter the Most Holy of Holies. This happened on the Day of Atonement (modern *Yom Kippur*).

Leviticus 16 sets out God's instructions to Israel regarding the Day of Atonement and the role of the chest and mercy seat. God specified the important message of the mercy seat as he set out the rules:

And the LORD said to Moses, "Tell Aaron your brother not to come at any time into the Holy Place inside the veil, **before the mercy seat that is on the ark**, so that he may not die. For **I will appear in the cloud over the mercy seat.**" (Lev. 16:2).

The Lord then set out the specific instructions for the sacrifices the High Priest was to offer on the annual Day of Atonement. Wearing holy garments, put on only after bathing, the High Priest offered multiple sacrifices. These sacrifices were to purify himself as well as the people.

The ultimate picture we should see is roughly as follows (save the fact I cannot draw an angel!):



The Mercy Seat was the place where God would meet man, the perfect One meeting the sinner. God in his glory was above the chest and the Law. The chest and Law itself was outside the reach of the nation of Israel, approached only once a year by a High Priest on behalf of the people in a day set aside for atoning of sin.

When this day came, the instructions for the High Priest were very specific. The Priest brought blood from sacrifices to sprinkle on the Mercy Seat. The first blood was sprinkled from a bull sacrificed for the High Priest's own personal sin, lest he have no right to offer sacrifice for the people. After personal cleansing, the blood of a sacrificial goat was offered for the sin of the people.

Professor J. B. Payne explained the picture this way:

In pictorial fashion, grace (the blood of the testament) thus became an intervening cover between the holiness of God (the glory cloud) and the verdict of divine justice upon the conduct of man (the Decalogue underneath).¹³

PAUL AND PROPITIATION

As we noted earlier, Paul used the special Greek word for the Mercy Seat as a metaphor for the shed blood of Christ on behalf of sinners. Paul understood that Jesus' sacrificial blood was the place where God's justice, meshed with God's glory, met the inadequacies and sins of man. As the old hymn puts it:

¹³ *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible* (Zondervan 1976) Vol. 1 at 307.

*Beneath the cross of Jesus, I fain would take my stand,
The shadow of a mighty rock within a weary land,
A home within the wilderness, a rest upon the way,
From the burning of the noon-tide heat
And the burden of the day.*

*O safe and happy shelter, O refuge tried and sweet,
O trysting-place where heaven's love and heaven's justice meet!
As to the holy patriarch that wondrous dream was given,
So seems my Savior's cross to me, a ladder up to heaven.*

*Upon that cross of Jesus, Mine eye at times can see
The very dying form of One who suffered there for me;
And from my smitten heart with tears two wonders I confess:
The wonders of His glorious love, and my own worthlessness.*

*I take, O cross, thy shadow for my abiding place;
I ask no other sunshine than the sunshine of his face
Content to let the world go by, to know no gain or loss,
My sinful self my only shame, my glory all the cross!*

This hymn does a wonderful job of explaining not only the beauty of the cross as the trysting place where heaven's justice meets heaven's love, but also explaining that the suffering of Christ was "for me." Christ shed his blood in place of ours. Christ was substituted on our behalf. His blood was shed for the redeemed!

Mankind has transgressed God's character. William Barclay termed it man's invasion of the prerogatives of God.¹⁴ Transgressing God's character and law is what originally brought separation between God and mankind. In the Garden, God set out the boundaries for Adam and Eve. Those boundaries were not difficult to understand nor hard to remember. They were simple: Eat anything you want except this one tree. At some point, Adam and Eve chose to "do their own thing" rather than live within God's instructions. This self-serving and rebellious decision set them at odds with God. They were sinners setting their own course away from God and his holiness.

Any life away from God's holiness is also a life away from his presence. We see this in the Garden of Eden narrative as man was cast out from the Garden to live under the curse that accompanies sinful rebellion. This curse is a manifestation of the wrath of God upon sin and its results. God's wrath properly exists over those matters that are destructive and harmful to his creations. God is set to destroy all things that are not proper for eternity in his presence.

¹⁴ Barclay, William *The Mind of St. Paul* (Harper & Collins 1958) at 86.

What is there to protect any of us from God's wrath? If as sinners we have become enemies of God, how shall we find peace? That is the role that Christ's blood takes. As atonement, the blood of Christ justly takes the wrath of God and discharges it without violating God's nature and character. In the blood of Christ, a sacrifice is made that is fully sufficient for mankind's need.

We should pause here for a moment and consider the purpose and nature of sacrifice before God, focusing particularly on the sacrifices involving the mercy seat.

Scholars have variously categorized the reasons behind sacrifices of different cultures. Some of the language used is a bit unusual for many of us. These scholars classify sacrifices into those of homage and those that are piacular! "Piacular" is not a typo for "peculiar" although it is a peculiar word! Piacular means "sinful, wicked" or "requiring expiation."

These two categories of sacrifices (homage and piacular) divide sacrifices that are offered for man as a creature (homage) versus those offered for man as a sinner (piacular). Man as a creature might sacrifice to show dependence on God (kill a virgin to ensure good weather for crops) or to bribe God (give God some corn in return for God giving you more). Man as a sinner offers a sacrifice out of a sense of guilt. This sacrifice is one that substitutes something else in place of the guilty one who is properly due punishment.

The atonement sacrifice of Christ is piacular. It is one for man as a sinner. Christ did not die as part of a cosmic deal to magically bring life or success to humanity. Christ was a true moral guilt substitute for the true moral guilt of each person. In Christ, we have one who has taken the place of fallen man under God's curse of death. In so doing, Christ has taken away our guilt and satisfied God's righteous judgment. This is the propitiatory work of Christ, shown in Paul's image of the mercy seat.

While Paul uses the metaphor of propitiation only once,¹⁵ he makes constant reference to the "blood of Christ." Consider these passages:

- **Romans 5:9** "Since, therefore, we have now been **justified by his blood**, much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath of God."
- **1 Corinthians 10:16** "The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a **participation in the blood of Christ**? The bread that we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ?"

¹⁵ One of the only two times "propitiation" is used in the New Testament. The second is in the Hebrews 9:5 where the Ark of the Covenant is described and the writer says, "Above it were the cherubim of glory overshadowing the mercy seat ["propitiation" / *hilasterion*]."

- **1 Corinthians 11:25** “In the same way also he took the cup, after supper, saying, ‘This cup is **the new covenant in my blood**. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.’”
- **Ephesians 1:7** “In him we have **redemption through his blood**, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace.”
- **Ephesians 2:13** “But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been **brought near by the blood of Christ**.”
- **Colossians 1:19-20** “For in him the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, **making peace by the blood** of his cross.”

These references are all to be taken within the context of the sacrificial system of Paul’s day.

We see also in Paul’s writings that he points to the words of Christ in the same sense. Jesus clearly taught that his death was one on behalf of others’ guilt and sin (a “piacular” sacrifice!). Matthew recorded Jesus saying, “This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins” (Mt. 26:28). Likewise, throughout John 6 we read of numerous times Jesus spoke of his blood and the role it played in eternal life.

Some scholars have fled using the idea of “propitiation” as appeasing the wrath of God. The Revised Standard Version was published in 1952, and it used a different word that “propitiation” in translating Romans 3:25. The RSV translated the passage as:

God put forward [Jesus] as an **expiation** by his blood, to be received by faith.

Among certain scholastic circles this translation caused quite a stir. “Expiation” means an atonement by a person, rather than an appeasement before God. In other words, with expiation, the issue is a person’s guilt being forgiven as opposed to God’s wrath being removed. The difference is one of focus: expiation points toward the effect on man, propitiation points toward the effect on God. While some scholars favored translating the word as “expiation,” they have been in the minority. To get to “expiation” requires one to step considerably outside the normative usage of the word.¹⁶

¹⁶ The most prominent scholar arguing for “expiation” as a meaning of *hilasterion* is C. H. Dodd. While he placed his arguments in several place, we reference it here in *The Bible and the Greeks*

We should note here two last things that are relevant in light of this debate. First, one should not recoil in horror over a concept of God having wrath over sin. The Bible does not portray God as some petty being who flares off in a temper tantrum without adequate safeguards (appeasement). Wrath is an anthropomorphic term for the rightful destruction of the cancer that is sin. God will destroy sin, and rightfully so. His righteous character requires it.

Second, that we understand Paul's metaphor of "propitiation" does not mean there is no expiation for sin. In other places, Paul makes it clear that sinners have true forgiveness in Christ. Real moral guilt is truly removed. Man has "expiation" from sin. But this is a two-sided coin, not simply one. Paul claims that as our sin is truly forgiven by the sacrifice of Christ, so also is God's just wrath resolved.

A FINAL NOTE ON METAPHORS

As we come to an end on this lesson, we note that we have not covered Paul's metaphor of the "New Creation" that is part and parcel of salvation. While we may make reference to that in our study of Paul and the end times, we pause now to urge you to study this metaphor on your own! Take out a Bible and start with 2 Corinthians 5:17. Read it in context and try to understand Paul's point. Then, do the same with Galatians 6:15. Add to these passages Paul's teaching in 1 Corinthians 15 and Romans 5-8. This is a wonderful way to spend an evening!

POINTS FOR HOME

1. *"Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him"* (Jn. 3:36).

Think about this passage for a moment. It is the last verse in the same chapter that has "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life." Those that do not follow Christ, on them the wrath of God *remains*. The wrath does not descend on those who reject Christ. **It is already there!** The wrath of God comes on all that is ungodly. God is set to destroy all that is not of him. Christ's sacrifice offers the way out. It is in the blood of Christ that redemption and salvation is found – nowhere else. For nothing else is truly and rightly sufficient to appease God's justice, to substitute for our sin. Are you washed in the blood of the lamb? Has Christ become your mercy seat where heaven's love and justice meet?

(Hodder & Stoughton 1935) at 82ff. Both Leon Morris, *The Apostolic Preaching of the Cross* (Eerdmans 1955) as well as Roger Nicole in the Westminster Theological Journal, xvii, 117-157, have forcefully answered Dodd's arguments..

2. *“Making peace by the blood of his cross”* (Col. 1:20).

Where is your peace before God? Is it founded on your goodness? Let us hope not! Is it founded on a deal you have cut? (As in, God, get me out of this and I will ...) Again, let us hope not. Does it come from ignoring God and his laws? Let us hope not. Our peace before God comes from the blood of the lamb. Nothing less; nothing else. Period. We join in the hymn, *“And from my smitten heart with tears two wonders I confess: The wonders of His glorious love, and my own worthlessness.”*

3. *“In him we have **redemption through his blood**, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace”*(Eph. 1:7).

We should never speak of “cheap grace.” The grace of God cost more than anything else in the history of this earth. It cost the blood of Christ. God himself incarnate, shedding his own blood to secure eternity of his creatures. This was an ultimate price to offer the ultimate blessing. How shortsighted we often get as we lose focus on this truth. Let us not live each day caught up in the daily struggles and issues without realizing the destiny awaiting those in Christ. In Christ, we live with an eye toward the future secured by the atoning sacrifice. We live as redeemed people who have faith and vision that extends beyond the crisis of the moment. Do not get discouraged! Nothing separates us from Christ’s love shown in his sacrifice. May we have the strength to comprehend the “breadth and length and height and depth” of the “love of Christ that surpasses knowledge” (Eph. 3:18-19).