

“Propitiation”

1 John 4:7-12

April 2, 2010 – Good Friday

INTRODUCTION:

It is customary at Good Friday services to consider the 7 last words of Jesus while he hung on the cross. One of his last words, spoken just before his death around 3:00 p.m., was his cry to God. Matthew records it as follows: **“Now from the sixth hour there was darkness over all the land until the ninth hour. And about the ninth hour Jesus cried out with a loud voice, saying, ‘Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?’ that is, ‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’”** (27:45-46).

I would like for us at today’s Good Friday service to consider the answer the Bible gives to that question of why God the Father forsook God the Son during these hours of darkness. It lies in a word that was in our reading from the 1 John 4, the word “propitiation.” **“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”** (v. 10). Jesus was forsaken by his heavenly Father because Jesus was the propitiation of our sins. This word, when properly understood, takes us to the heart of the gospel. It also takes us to the heights, where we can see other Bible teachings more clearly. Let’s consider it more carefully now.

I. Propitiation Takes Us Down to the Heart of the Gospel

Let’s talk first about what this word means. Until recently, which in theological studies means the last two-hundred years, there has been almost universal agreement among those who study the Bible that the consistent meaning of this word from the Old Testament to the New is the satisfaction of God’s wrath through blood sacrifice. For God to be propitiated means that his wrath has been turned away through a blood sacrifice.

For example, in the Old Testament we read of God’s wrath arising upon Israel when they rebelled against Moses’ leadership. God visited a plague upon them for their sin. Moses instructed Aaron, **“Take your censer, and put fire on it from off the altar and lay incense on it and carry it quickly to the congregation and make atonement for them, for wrath has gone out from the Lord; the plague has begun”** (Num. 16:46). Aaron did so and the plague stopped. The fire in his censer came from the altar, where blood sacrifices are made.

We see the same idea in the New Testament. In his letter to the Romans, Paul spends the first two and a half chapters talking about the wrath of God

coming upon all people because of the universal presence of sin. But then he announces this good news: 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”** (Romans 3:24-25).

An effort began in 19th century German liberal theology, and has gained momentum in the last one hundred years or so in America, to remove the idea of propitiation as the appeasing of God’s wrath, and to see it simply as the removal of sin. Part of their case for this is that they see the appeasing of the wrath of a god as more of a pagan idea than a Christian idea. For example, in the Trojan War legend, Prince Paris had carried off Princess Helen to Troy. The Greeks sent their army, led by their general, Agamemnon, to retrieve the princess. They set off by ship to travel to Troy, but were held up by contrary winds for many days. Agamemnon responded by sending for his daughter, who was then slaughtered as a sacrifice to appease the gods who were sending the contrary winds. It worked, and the fleet reached Troy without further delay. J. I. Packer summarizes this pagan notion of propitiation as follows:

There are various gods, none enjoying absolute dominion, but each with some power to make life easier or harder for you. Their temper is uniformly uncertain; they take offense at the smallest things—or they get jealous because they feel you are paying too much attention to other gods and other people and not enough to themselves, and then they take it out on you by manipulating circumstances to your heart.

The only course at that point is to humor and mollify them by an offering. The rule with offerings is the bigger the better, for the gods are inclined to hold out for something sizeable. In this they are cruel and heartless, but they have the advantage, so what can you do? The wise person bows to the inevitable and makes sure to offer something impressive enough to produce the desired result. Human sacrifice, in particular, is expensive but effective. Thus pagan religion appears as a callous commercialism, a matter of managing and manipulating your gods by cunning bribery. And within paganism propitiation, the appeasing of celestial bad tempers, takes its place as a regular part of life, one of the many irksome necessities that one cannot get on without. (*In My Place Condemned He Stood*, pp. 29-30)

I would like to suggest that the Bible embraces this idea of propitiation as a satisfying of God’s wrath by blood sacrifice, but distances itself from this pagan idea in at least two very important ways. First, God’s wrath is not the fickle, capricious and even selfish response of the gods. Rather, it is the exercise of God’s holy and moral nature against all unholiness. Or as Paul says in Romans 1:18, **“The wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men.”** God’s is a righteous anger, so that if he didn’t respond in wrath as he does, he would not be a righteous God.

The second difference between propitiation in paganism and in the Bible is that God provides his own propitiating. In paganism, man is to offer something

precious to himself in order to appease his god's anger, while in Christianity it is God who makes the offering, sacrificing something that is precious to him. He provides the sacrifice of his own Son. **"In this is love, not that we have love God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins"** (1 John 4:10). John Murray summarizes it well.

The doctrine of the 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 His wrath. It was Christ's so to deal with the wrath that the loved would no longer be the objects of wrath, and love would achieve its aim of making the children of wrath the children of God's good pleasure (*The Atonement*, p. 15, quoted in Packer, p. 36).

II. Propitiation Lifts Us to the Heights of Clear Vision

Near Covenant College on Lookout Mountain, just above Chattanooga, is a tourist attraction known as Rock City, where the claim is made that on a clear day seven states can be viewed from that one spot. In his excellent treatment of this topic, J. I. Packer says that propitiation not only takes us down to the heart of the gospel, but also lifts us to the heights where other Bible teachings can be more clearly seen. Let me mention three of them that come into sharper focus through an understanding of propitiation.

First, the doctrine of propitiation provides us with the clearest grasp of hell that is offered in the Bible. If hell is the place where the holy wrath of God falls on those who have rebelled against him, and if Jesus satisfies that wrath by taking it upon himself at the cross, then the cross provides us with a clear glimpse into the nature of hell itself. As terrible as death by crucifixion was, probably the most gruesome form of capital punishment devised in the history of the world, its physical terrors were nothing compared to its spiritual terrors. That is seen most clearly in Jesus' cry, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" God is the source of all good in life. There is nothing good we have that does not come as a gift from his hand. So when Jesus was forsaken by God, all good was removed from him. Left in its place was intense loneliness, inner pain and an overwhelming sense of darkness. It was in anticipation of these horrors that Jesus agonized in the Garden of Gethsemane, so much so that his sweat became like great drops of blood. And when Jesus cried out, "I thirst," his thirst was more than physical. It was a great sense of unfulfilled longing, a spiritual longing that remained unmet and exceedingly painful.

Second, John points out in our passage that the doctrine of propitiation speaks clearly of the sovereign love of God. **"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."** We see in the cross the sovereign love of God, a love that will achieve

its purpose of redemption. This is how far God is willing to go in order to save his people. He is willing to pay the ultimate price and make the ultimate sacrifice.

Third, propitiation shows us what it means to have peace with God. Propitiation means that God's anger is satisfied, so that we now have peace with God. And God's anger has been removed not just out of love, but also in truth. There is a verse in the book of Proverbs that says, **"Acquitting the guilty and condemning the innocent—the Lord detests them both."** (17:15). When Jesus was pronounced guilty of our sin, God detested the thought of acquitting him. Now that we are declared innocent because of his taking our sins upon himself, the God of truth detests condemning us. Our peace with God is grounded not just in the love of God, but also in the truth of God. The wrath of God was fully poured out on the one who was made sin for us. Now God would be guilty of wrongdoing to punish us, and our holy God can never be guilty of wrongdoing. Our claim upon peace with God is not based on hoping that God will be in a good mood regarding us, but founded upon the objective reality of Jesus having satisfied his wrath.

CONCLUSION:

How can we know that the wrath of God has been satisfied in our case? John wrote this little epistle **"that you may know that you have eternal life"** (5:13). Not everyone does, you see. He also says in that verse that he is writing to those who believe. They are the ones who know they have eternal life. How can we know that we believe? Several years ago, I read a story that was told by a man who loved fox hunts. "Rising early one morning," he said, "I heard the baying of a score of deer hounds in pursuit of their quarry. Looking away to a broad, open field in front of me, I saw a young fawn making its way across, and giving signs, moreover, that its race was well-nigh run. Reaching the rails of the enclosure, it leaped over and crouched within ten feet from where I stood. A moment later two of the hounds came over, when the fawn ran in my direction and pushed its head between my legs. I lifted the little thing to my breast, and, swinging round and round, fought off the dogs. I felt, just then, that all the dogs in the West could not, and should not capture that fawn after its weakness had appealed to my strength." Faith is when human helplessness appeals to Almighty God. We acknowledge that there is nothing we can do to change God's wrath to his favor, and we depend fully on what God has done for us in Christ to remove his wrath and bring his eternal blessing upon us.