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No Ordinary Death: Jesus Christ, The Propitiation For Our Sins

by Kim Riddlebarger

There is no way this side of eternity we will ever be able to fully understand the words of our Lord recorded in Matthew 27:46: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” As the mob mocked him, and while the thief who was crucified next to him hurled insults at him, our Lord’s thoughts turned not to his own physical anguish or the ridicule he faced from onlookers. His mind was on something far different from that of most dying men—his dying lament was the anguish he felt at being estranged from his heavenly Father, whose wrath he bore as he faced an excruciating death by crucifixion. The Father he had known from all eternity had now turned his back on his only begotten son. Just moments after uttering these awesome words, he took his final breath. The significance of his death was only then slowly being grasped by those who watched him give up his spirit. For at the very moment when his heart ceased beating the afternoon sky was suddenly darkened and terra firma itself shuddered beneath his cross. This was no ordinary death.

There are other signs which marked the time of his death as well. The great curtain in the Jerusalem temple—separating the Holy Place from the Most Holy Place—was dramatically torn in two all the way from top to bottom. It was as though God Himself was removing his blessing from what had been his earthly temple. The sacrifices offered in that temple were no longer accepted by God, and any further shedding of the blood of bulls and goats was now an offense to God and only served to further increase the guilt of those who offered them. And when it was finally and mercifully over, one soldier responsible for seeing to it that the sentence of death was carried out, and now terribly frightened because of the cosmic upheaval that accompanied this man’s dying, is reported to have exclaimed, “Surely, this man was the Son of God” (Mt 27:54). For it was now clear to all that this was not just another common criminal who had died before their eyes. Indeed, this bloody, disfigured, and humiliated man, the one identified by the crude sign that adorned his cross as the “King of the Jews,” was none other than the Son of God. Without guilt before God or man, and a willing victim despite his complete and total innocence, this man died under the wrath of his Father in order to save those who were even then taking perverse delight in his death. This was no ordinary death.

Surely we will never fully understand everything that happened when Jesus Christ died on a Roman gibbet for the sins of the world. But Scripture does tell us quite a bit about what Christ’s death accomplished, and how his death benefits us today, nearly 2,000 years later. While there are several striking explanations offered throughout the New Testament as to the meaning of Christ’s death by crucifixion, one term strikes me as capturing the meaning behind our Lord’s lament perhaps better than any other: Christ’s death is said to be a “propitiation for our sins.” Used only four times in the New Testament (twice by John: 1 Jn 2:2, 4:10; once by Paul: Romans 3:25; and once by the author of Hebrews: 9:5), the term has a rich Old Testament background, and we will be unable to understand why this term is so significant when used of Christ’s death apart from such a context.

There is one theme, however, no doubt more than any other, which underlies the concept of propitiation in both the Old and New Testaments and that is the notion of God's wrath. "In the Old Testament, more than twenty words are used of the wrath of God (in addition to a number of others which are used in reference only of human anger). The total number of references to God's wrath exceeds 580, so that it cannot be said to be an occasional topic."¹ While the pagans described their "gods" as possessing a capricious and almost irrational anger, which they believed was often turned loose against them without perceptible rhyme or reason, "the Hebrews were not in doubt," about why their God was angry with them. "They knew that one thing and one thing only aroused God's anger, and that was sin."² Thus we can never understand why the biblical writers speak of Christ's death as a propitiation if we do not see the fundamental fact that God is Holy, and that he must punish all sin. Take for example God's reaction to idolatry recorded in Exodus 32:8–10: "They have been quick to turn away from what I commanded them and have made themselves an idol cast in the shape of a calf. They have bowed down to it and sacrificed to it and have said, 'These are your gods, O Israel.'" God's reaction is swift and quite clear: "I have seen these people," the Lord said to Moses, "and they are a stiff-necked people. Now leave me alone so that my anger may burn against them and that I may destroy them."

One of the most sobering declarations of God's holy anger is found in Isaiah 30:27:

See, the Name of the Lord comes from afar, with burning anger and dense clouds of smoke; his lips are full of wrath, and his tongue is a consuming fire. His breath is like a rushing torrent, rising up to the neck. He shakes the nations in the sieve of destruction; he places in the jaws of the peoples a bit that leads them astray. And you will sing as on the night you celebrate a festival; your hearts will rejoice as when people go up with flutes to the mountain of the Lord, to the Rock of Israel. The Lord will cause men to hear his majestic voice and will make them see his arm coming down with raging anger and consuming fire, with cloudburst, thunderstorm and hail.

God's righteous anger against sin is also seen by his response to those who commit murder and adultery: "I will bring upon you the blood vengeance of my wrath and jealous anger" (Ez 16:38). Even what we might impudently consider small and insignificant sins nevertheless provoke the same reaction from the Holy God. "Do not take advantage of a widow or an orphan. If you do and they cry out to me I will certainly hear their cry. My anger will be aroused, and I will kill you with the sword; your wives will become widows and your children fatherless" (Ex 22:22–24). Indeed, lies and greed meet with a similar response, as Jeremiah laments, "I am full of the wrath of the Lord, and I cannot hold it in" (Jer 6:11). God is Holy and he will punish all sin with an eternal and righteous vengeance.

There is an unfortunate tendency on the part of some to argue that it is the "mean" god of the Old Testament who acts in such wrath, while the God of the New Testament is loving and would never express such righteous anger toward his creatures. While not spoken of as frequently as in the Old Testament, God's anger toward sin and evildoers is clearly spoken of in a number of ways in the New Testament. In John's Gospel, for example, we read that God's wrath abides on everyone who does not believe in Jesus Christ (Jn 3:36). Jesus himself spoke of Hell and eternal punishment quite frequently (see Mt 5:22, 18:8, Mk 9:48; Lk 12:5). The Apostle Paul argues that "God's wrath is being revealed from

¹ Leon Morris, The Atonement: Its Meaning and Significance (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1983), 153.

² *Ibid.*, 154.

heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men” (Rom 1:18) and that “God’s wrath comes on those who are disobedient” (Eph 5:6). In Revelation, John speaks of “God’s fury, which has been poured into the cup of his wrath” (Rv 14:10, cf. 16:19), and John even goes so far to speak of Christ’s coming in judgment as “the wrath of the lamb” (Rv 6:16). We cannot drive a wedge between God’s anger in the Old and New Testaments.

Thus the question necessarily arises as to how any will enter heaven since God’s righteous anger burns against all those who commit sin, and if the biblical record is clear about anything, it is that everyone living has sinned and is therefore under the just condemnation of God. How will anyone be admitted into heaven and on what grounds? If God cannot overlook sin, then he must punish it. But how can he punish sinners without annihilating them? We will never understand the cross of Christ if we first do not contemplate God’s anger toward all sin and those who commit it. And so it is against this background that we must endeavor to understand the term “propitiation.”

When those who were translating the Old Testament from Hebrew into Greek looked for a word to describe God’s forgiveness, in reference to his anger, they choose the term *hilsokomai* in a number of instances. The idea in view by using that specific term is certainly a turning aside of anger through the offering of a sacrifice (cf. Ex 32:14, Ps 78:38, and Lam 3:42).³ But the term’s full meaning is seen most clearly in the New Testament when it is applied to the cross of Christ. When John speaks of the death of Christ as a “propitiation [*hilasmos*] for our sins” (1 Jn 2:2; 4:10), the meaning is clear. Christ’s death on the cross turns aside God’s wrath that otherwise would be directed toward us in the judgment because of our sins. Christ accomplishes this for us through his offering up of himself as the sacrifice on whom God has poured out his anger. Christ shed his blood then, in part, to appease the Holy God’s anger toward our sins.⁴ The same idea is in view in Romans 3:25. Paul says that “God presented his Son as a propitiation [*hilasterion*],” to demonstrate his justice—he will indeed forgive sin only because he punishes it in Christ—and so that he can justify those who have faith in his Son. Since God cannot simply overlook sin but must punish it, Christ must stand in the sinner’s stead. The guilt of the sinner’s sin has been dealt with in that Christ’s shed blood turns aside the wrath of God toward the sinner, thereby removing that guilt from him or her. In this sense, the concept of propitiation is foundational to understanding not only the substitutionary aspect of the atonement, but also forensic justification as well. The reason that sinners can be justified at all is that the guilt for their own sins has been imputed to Christ, so that Christ in turn can turn aside God’s wrath toward sinners by being punished for the sinner in the sinner’s place (Phil 3:9). Perhaps James Denny put it best when he said, “the simplest word of faith is the deepest word of theology: Christ died for our sins.”

The prissiness of Protestant Liberalism is clearly evident in the notion that Christianity is a religion of

³ Ibid., 158 ff.

⁴ Historically, the Reformed have based the notion of particular redemption on the idea of propitiation, namely that Christ’s death actually appeases the wrath of God toward the sinners for whom Christ is said to die. If God’s anger is actually appeased by the death of his Son, how then could God punish sinners a second time after Christ had propitiated God’s anger toward them? If you don’t limit the atonement’s extent, you must limit its efficacy and, in effect, this leaves you with a propitiation that ultimately doesn’t propitiate! The Reformed argue that Christ’s death was designed to turn aside God’s righteous anger toward the sin of the elect specifically, and not to make salvation possible for mankind generically.

morality and ethics, rather than a religion of rescue from real personal guilt and the penalty due us from the Holy God, whose “eyes are too pure to look on evil; [who] cannot tolerate wrong” (Hab 1:13). Protestant liberals have always had a problem with the vivid biblical language of personal guilt before a Holy God and the necessity of shedding the blood of the Son of God if there was to be any real remission of sin. One thinks of the rather pitiful efforts of C. H. Dodd to redefine and reduce God’s wrath to mere reciprocity—our bad actions inevitably produce bad consequences for us.⁵ According to Dodd, anger is a human trait, so “how can God, who is love, be angry in the way in which men understand anger?” So Dodd redefines wrath according to his own theologically liberal sensitivities. The God of the Bible is too barbaric for those who don’t believe that God is holy and will, therefore, necessarily punish eternally all who violate his law as a matter of justice. I have always shuddered at the story recounted by one of my colleagues about a liberally inclined fellow seminarian who once asked him, “You’re not one of those guys who’s into the ‘blood’ and all that stuff, are you?” Protestant liberalism has always struggled to fashion a god who serves as a mascot for whatever political or moral cause that happens to be in vogue that week. Redemption by the blood of Christ, and the turning aside of God’s righteous anger, is always a problem for those who don’t take sin and guilt seriously.

The liberals are not the only branch of the broader Protestant tradition, however, who have had serious problems with the wrath of God and the language of propitiation. John Miley (1813-1895), noted American Methodist theologian, was quite certain that a consistent Arminian theology—one based squarely on the first principle of the absolute freedom of the human will—demanded that “an atonement of satisfaction” be rejected in favor of the so-called governmental theory of the atonement. Declares Miley, “The Wesleyan soteriology, taken as a whole, excludes the satisfaction theory, and requires the governmental as the only theory consistent with itself.” According to Miley, this means that “the atonement is only provisory in character; that it renders men savable, but does not necessarily save them . . . and the consequence is the conditionality of salvation.” A conditionality, Miley notes, which must be “in accord with the synergism of the truest Arminianism.”⁶ Thus the death of Christ doesn’t actually accomplish anything, according to Miley, other than showing God to be a just governor of his universe and that by offering up his Son on the cross he shows his love for a lost world. But in Miley’s scheme, the death of Christ merely makes it possible for God to remit sin on the condition of faith, and does not actually turn aside God’s wrath toward sinners. The cross then, supposedly enables God to find some other less brutal way to save sinners, such as enabling God to now forgive sin through faith. But the nagging question remains: “If Christ did not need to die to satisfy God’s wrath toward sinners, then why did God cause his Son to suffer such unspeakable torment, if he really didn’t need to?” The governmental atonement of consistent Wesleyan Arminianism turns the cross of Christ into the torture of the Son by God the Father for no good reason. Such a notion is an offense to the holiness of God and the suffering of Christ.

The unfortunate fact that many of our evangelical contemporaries find the whole idea of God pouring out his wrath on his Son as repulsive, demonstrating both the influence of Protestant liberalism and

⁵ See C. H. Dodd, The Epistle of Paul to the Romans (New York: Harper and Bros., 1932), 22-23.

⁶ John Miley, Systematic Theology (New York: Eaton & Mains, 1894), II.169. See B. B. Warfield’s decimating critique of Miley’s efforts in B. B. Warfield, “Review of Systematic Theology by John Miley” in Selected Shorter Writings, Vol. 2 (ed., John E. Meeter) (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1980), 308-320.

Wesleyan Arminianism, is seen in the fact that several of our major English translations of the Bible have abandoned the term propitiation for the weaker term expiation (RSV, NEB) or the more nebulous “sacrifice of atonement” (NIV, NRSV).⁷ As Leon Morris has noted, there is indeed a very important theological point in view here. “Propitiation means the turning away of anger; expiation is rather making amends for a wrong. Propitiation is a personal word; one propitiates a person. Expiation is an impersonal word; one expiates a sin or crime.”⁸ The term “sacrifice of atonement” tries perhaps to allow for both meanings, but is sufficiently vague to lose both meanings altogether. Fuzzy theological language, it seems, helps avoid the rather sticky problem of deciding the correct rendering in the face of differing opinions.

Evangelicalism has no doubt become more preoccupied with morality and ethics, and increasingly embarrassed by its biblical and historic Protestant roots. There is also no doubt that in more and more circles, synergism in regard to sin and grace is now the rule and not the exception. We should not be surprised then that certain evangelicals would argue that God is not vengeful upon sin (cf. Clark Pinnock’s book *A Wideness in God’s Mercy*), or that we can no longer speak of our sins as the reason Christ suffered upon the cross since that would be psychological battering (cf. Fuller Seminary Professor Ray Anderson’s *The Gospel According to Judas*). It is hard to imagine being an evangelical without an evangel, but that is where Dodd, Miley, Pinnock, and Anderson would lead us if they could. As for me and my house, we will not follow. If we as Christians are to be faithful to the biblical account, we must see that the death of Jesus Christ was no ordinary death. For the biblical writers are crystal clear about both God’s wrath on sin and his grace in offering up his own Son to satisfy his own righteous anger for sins that we have committed. Christianity is not a religion of ethics, morality, or politics. Its central message is the proclamation of the death of God’s Son, under God’s curse, dying in unspeakable anguish to turn aside God’s holy hatred of sin, so that all who trust in him and in him alone can be saved from God’s wrath and be assured of God’s favor toward them. If we lose that message we have lost Christianity itself.

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⁷ The NIV margin notes do, however, give the preferred translation of *hilasmos-hilasteerion*, “turning aside wrath, taking away sin.”

⁸ Morris, *The Atonement*, 151.