

PROPIVIATION, THE HEART OF THE GOSPEL

God arranged that the colours of the curtains in the tabernacle and temple should be chief purple and red. The priests regularly sprinkled blood on them (cf Lv 4:6). The animals that were sacrificed regularly provided blood, which was daubed on the horns of the altar, and sprinkled, and the remainder was poured out at the base of the altar. God reserved blood to make atonement for sin.

Once each year, on the Day of Atonement, the high priest took blood into the holy of holies, and sprinkled blood on the solid golden lid of the Ark of the Covenant and on the floor in front of it. The figures of two angels faced down over the Ark of the Covenant. God was thought of as having His special presence there. The golden lid was called the “Mercy Seat.” God told Moses: “You shall put the propitiatory cover on top of the Ark, and you shall put the Testimony, which I shall give you, into the Ark. I shall make myself known to you there, and I shall speak to you from above the propitiatory cover, from between the two cherubim that are over the Ark of the Testimony. There I shall speak about everything that I shall command you for the Israelites” (Ex 25:21-22). The word for the “mercy seat” in the Greek translation was “the propitiation.” Some English translations use the expression “the atonement-cover” for it. The two copies of the Ten Commandments, God’s Covenant, were kept inside the Ark of the Covenant. God’s Law called out for redress for the sins of priests and people against this Law. Blood was sprinkled to appease God’s wrath against sin. The ritual for the Day of Atonement was central to the temple worship, just as its location is central in the Book of Leviticus (chapter 16).

The rituals on the Day of Atonement pointed forward to the meaning of Jesus’ work of redemption. In the Gospels Jesus often foretold His suffering and death. In Matthew, Mark, and Luke there are only two places where He explained the meaning. One was that the Son of Man had come to serve, and give His life as a ransom for many (Mt 20:28; Mk 10:45). These days, criminals sometimes kidnap a child and demand a ransom. Many Christians in the early church thought of the ransom that was due for us was paid to the devil. Anselm’s important book, “Why God Became Man” denied this. The devil had no rights over mankind, because he was a usurper. This is a logical difficulty, but the concepts in the New Testament of propitiation and sacrifice show that he was correct. No propitiation or sacrifice was made to the devil.

The other place in the Synoptic Gospels where Jesus explained the meaning of His death was in His institution of the Lord’s Supper. His body would be given for His disciples, and His blood was the blood of the New Testament, which would be poured out for many, for the forgiveness of sins. He understood His death as a sacrifice on behalf of others.

When Paul explained the cost of God’s grace, which brings justification, he wrote, “God has publicly displayed Him as the atonement cover through faith in His blood” (Rm 3:25). The shedding of His blood has stilled the wrath of God against those who have broken His Law and deserved His condemnation. Faith in the blood of Jesus is the heart of the Gospel. His blood is the means of redemption, forgiveness, justification, and reconciliation. Jesus’ death on the cross was the fulfilment of everything association with the Old Testament mercy seat, or atonement-cover.

When the Pharisee prayed in the temple, he was really boasting about his good life. The tax collector said, “God, be merciful to me, a sinner.” He actually meant more. His words were, literally, “God, be propitiated to me, the sinner (Lk 18:13). In spite of the sin of which he was keenly aware, he knew that at the temple, where he was praying, the blood of sacrifices was used to make propitiation for sin. In so many of His parables Jesus was pointing indirectly to Himself. “Propitiate (ἰλάσ-κομαι) is the verb related to the noun “propitiation” (ἰλαστήριον).

This important is used again in Heb 2:17 “Therefore He was obliged to be made like His brothers in every way, in order that He might become a merciful and faithful High Priest in things pertaining to God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people.” God’s mercy is understood in terms of the sacrificial cost, which Jesus has paid.

There are two more uses of another related noun in the New Testament. The noun ἰλασμός is also translated as “propitiation.” John wrote, “If anyone sins, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ, the Righteous One. He is the propitiation for our sins, and not only for ours, but also for the sins of the whole world (1 Jn 2:1-2). The Greek translation of Psalm 130 had used this word for God’s forgiveness: “Nevertheless, with You there is forgiveness, so that You may be feared” (v. 4). John used the word in chapter four of this first epistle, where it can be translated “atoning sacrifice”, in connection with God’s love or grace. “This is what love is: not that we have loved God, but that He has loved us and has sent His Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins” (1 Jn 4:10). As a result, we can have confidence before God (1 Jn 2:28; 4:17). When Christians continue to sin, they do not look inside themselves for assurance, but at Christ’s cross, which has broken the power of sin to condemn them. Although we are liars if we say that we do not sin, “the blood of Jesus, His Son, cleanses us from all sin” (1 Jn 1:7-8).

The reason why the Old Testament could say that sacrifices made by fire gave a pleasing aroma to the LORD (Nm 29:13, etc) was finally that they pointed forward to the sacrificial death of Christ, through which God has made reconciliation, or peace, with sinful mankind. Christ’s one, perfect sacrifice is an objective fact. Notice how in the following two verses His blood is parallel to His death, and “justify” is parallel to “reconcile.” “Much more, therefore, now that we have been justified by His blood, we shall be saved through Him from God’s wrath. For if, while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son, much more, now that we have been reconciled, we shall be saved by His life (Rm 5:9-10). Some writers appear to be terribly nervous about whether “propitiate” or “expiate” are the appropriate words, and whether “propitiate” means “make God gracious.” Our ethical conduct cannot make God gracious. All that we need to say is that God has shown His grace to us through the holy, precious blood of His Son, and His innocent suffering

and death.

Some writers have tried to understand Jesus' ransom in terms of victory over the devil. That is certainly part of a full understanding. Jesus saw His coming passion as a struggle against the devil in which He would be the victor: "I shall not say much to you any more, for the ruler of the world is coming, and he has no hold on Me" (Jn 14:30). He did not descend into hell in order to achieve a victory, but to proclaim the fact of His accomplished victory (1 Pet 3:19).