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Propitiation

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PARTICIPANT'S GUIDE

Author: Rev. Mark Surburg

Pastor, Good Shepherd Lutheran Church, Marion, Ill.
pastormarksurburg@frontier.com

General Editor: Rev. Mark W. Love

Pastor, St. Peter's Lutheran Church, Rockford, Mich.
markwlove@gmail.com



FOCUS

“Propitiation” is a relatively rare word in the New Testament. It only occurs twice as a noun (1 John 2:2; 4:10) and twice as a verb (Luke 18:13; Heb. 2:17), along with one other occasion when a different word is used that is often interpreted to mean propitiation (Rom. 3:25). However, its conceptual importance for Scripture as a whole far outstrips the frequency with which it appears. This truth is confirmed by the manner in which the Lutheran Confessions discuss it.

It is also a word that is often unknown or unfamiliar to our congregation members. It is not a term that they encounter often in everyday life. The familiarity they do have with it may include ideas that appear to contradict the Gospel.

The leader may initiate a brief discussion about how pastors think the word is understood by their congregation members.

This study will emphasize the importance of the word “propitiation” for understanding Scripture as a whole and consider how its importance goes beyond the handful of verses where it occurs in the New Testament. In the course of doing so, we will see that “propitiation” highlights two truths that are central to understanding the Gospel: (1) The wrath of God against sin, and (2) The exclusive and comprehensive sufficiency of Christ’s sacrifice for our sin.

SCRIPTURAL USAGE AND UNDERSTANDING OF PROPITIATION

Basic considerations

Webster’s dictionary defines “propitiate” as “to make favorably inclined; appease; conciliate.”¹ It describes the act of gaining a favorable disposition from another, usually when something has been done against him or her that threatens this disposition.

1. Based on this definition, in whose direction does propitiation move and who is doing the action when dealing with God?

Propitiation assumes that something has happened that threatens God’s favorable disposition toward us. Normally this is some wrong that an individual has done. This wrong must be addressed in an appropriate manner so that God will be propitiated. This action is normally designated using the word “expiate.” Webster’s dictionary defines “expiate” as “to atone for; make amends or reparation for” where “atone” is “to make amends or reparation, as for an offense or crime.”²

2. What problems of vocabulary arise when we begin talking about propitiation?

Hebrew Old Testament

The Old Testament basis for understanding propitiation is the Hebrew root *kpr*. It is used in the Piel to mean “atone.” This verb is used in conjunction with sin (using *min* and *’al*), people (using *’al* and *ba’adh*) and things (using *’al*).³

1. Lev. 4:26; 16:32–33 In these verses, we see atonement addressed to sin, people and things. What does this tell us about the Old Testament’s understanding of sin and the answer needed for it?
2. Ps. 5:4–6 What is the consequence of sin for the individual as he stands in relation to God? What is necessary to change this situation?

God provided the sacrifices that took place at the tabernacle and then the temple as the means of providing atonement to Israel. Through these sacrifices, He removed the sin that was blocking fellowship with God. The three kinds of sacrifice that involved the death of an animal were the whole burnt offering (*’olah*) (Lev. 1:1–17), the sin offering (*khata’ah*) (Lev. 5:1–13) and the guilt offering (*’asham*) (Lev. 5:14–6:7). They are all described using the verb *kpr* in the Piel.

3. Lev. 1:4 In each of these animal sacrifices, the individual bringing the animal was directed to place his hand on the head of the animal to be sacrificed. What did this action mean?

¹ Webster’s Encyclopedic Unabridged Dictionary of the English Language (New York: Portland House, 1989), 1153.

² Webster’s 502; 95.

³ F. Brown, S.R. Driver, and C.A. Briggs, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Oxford, 1907), 497.

4. Lev. 17:11 How does this verse explain the substitutionary character of the animal sacrifice?
5. Lev. 4:20 (see also 4:26, 31, 35) What was the outcome of sacrifice and the atonement it accomplished?

The Old Testament sacrifices expiated sin. The life of the animal was given in place of the individual who had sinned as a death occurred in punishment for sin. This averted God's wrath and propitiated God. It caused God again to have a favorable disposition toward the individual. Language of propitiating the gods was common in Near Eastern religion as man sought to win the favor of his gods through sacrifices.

6. What made the Old Testament's sacrifices different from those of paganism?

The word *kipurim* provided the noun that expressed this idea (such as "day of atonement" in Lev. 23:27). The term *kaporeth*, "mercy seat," was used to refer to the cover of the Ark of the Covenant (Ex. 25:17–18).

7. Lev. 16:11–16 What role did the mercy seat (*kaporeth*) have in maintaining Israel's relationship with Yahweh?

Septuagint (LXX)

In the vast majority of instances, the LXX used *echilaskomai* to translate the Piel of *kpr*, and it conveys the same basic meaning. The noun *echilasmos* is used to translate "atonement," "to make a sin offering" and "sin offering." The verb *ilaskomai* occurs much less frequently. It translates "forgive" and the Piel of *kpr*. The noun *ilasmos* is used to translate "atonement," "sin offering," "guilt offering" and "forgiveness." With the exception of three verses in Ezekiel, every instance of "mercy seat" (*kaporeth*) is translated by *ilasterion*.⁴

Based on this evidence, what shift do we find in the way *echilasmos* and *ilasmos* are used to translate the Hebrew?

New Testament

1. Heb. 2:17; 9:11–12; 10:11–18 The writer to the Hebrews draws heavily upon the Old Testament background of the tabernacle/temple and the sacrifices. Based on the material we have looked at, how would the statement in Heb. 2:17 normally be understood? How do Hebrews 9–10 completely change this?
2. 1 John 2:2; 4:10 How does the Old Testament background shape our understanding of these verses? What new information does 4:10 add?
3. Rom. 3:25 Paul says that God set forth Christ as an *ilasterion*, which in the LXX translates *kaporeth* or "mercy seat." What are the challenges for interpreting this verse? What is Paul saying?
4. The suffering Servant of Isaiah 53 provides the most important means by which the New Testament understands the substitutionary death of Jesus Christ (53:4–5). In 53:10, the Servant is described as a guilt offering (*'asham*). While the word "propitiation" occurs only a few times, how does the concept provide the basis for understanding verses that discuss Jesus' death such as the following: 1 Peter 1:18–19; 1 John 1:7–9; Eph. 5:2; Mark 10:45?

⁴ *echilasmos* for "atonement" (*kipurim*; Ex. 30:10; Lev. 23:27–28), "mercy seat" (*kaporeth*; 1 Chron. 28:11), "to make a sin offering" (Piel of *kht*; Ezek. 43:23) and "sin offering" (*khata'a*; Ezek. 43:23); *ilaskomai* on five occasions translates "forgive" (*slkh*; 4 Kgdms 5:18; 24:4; 2 Chron. 6:30; Ps. 24:11; Lam. 3:42) and three times translates the Piel of *kpr* (Ps. 64:4; 77:38; 78:9). *ilasmos* for "atonement" (*kipurim*; Lev. 25:9; Num. 5:8), "sin offering" (*khata'ah*; Ezek. 44:27), "guilt offering" (*'asham*; Am. 8:14) and "forgiveness" (*silikah*; Ps. 130:4).

CONFESSIONAL USAGE AND UNDERSTANDING OF PROPITIATION

1. “Thus because faith, which freely receives the forgiveness of sins, sets against the wrath of God Christ as the mediator and propitiator, it does not offer up our merits or love” (Apology 4.46).⁵

What presupposition do the Confessions hold about the sinner’s situation before God (*coram Deo*)?

2. “Therefore whenever we speak about justifying faith, we must understand that these three elements belong together: the promise itself; the fact that the promise is free; and the merits of Christ as the payment and atoning sacrifice (*pretium et propitiationem*). The promise is received by faith; the word “free” excludes our merits and means that the blessing is offered only through mercy; the merits of Christ are the payment (*pretium*) because there must be some definite atoning sacrifice for our sins (*certam propitiationem*)” (Apology 4.53).⁶

According to the Confessions, what is necessary in order to avert the wrath of God from the sinner and receive forgiveness and salvation? To what does this stand in contrast?

3. “But wherever works are mentioned, the opponents attach their own ungodly opinions: that we merit the forgiveness of sins through good works; that good works are the atoning sacrifice and payment (*propitiation ac pretium*) on account of which God is reconciled to us; that good works conquer the terrors of sin and death, that good works are acceptable in God’s sight on account of their own intrinsic goodness; and they neither need mercy nor Christ as the propitiator” (Apology 4.244).⁷

How did the opponents of the confessors think they were able stand before God? Did they reject the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ? What does this tell us?

4. “We are debating about an important matter, namely, about the honor of Christ and the source from which the faithful might seek a sure and certain consolation — whether we place our confidence in Christ or in our own works. But if we put it in our works, Christ will be robbed of his honor as our mediator and propitiator. And, faced with God’s judgment, we will discover that such confidence was futile, and consciences will then plunge into despair” (Apology 4.156-157).⁸

According to the Confessions, what two issues are at stake when we consider the word “propitiation”?

TEACHING AND PREACHING PROPITIATION

1. Consider the following sets of words: (1) holy, just, wrathful and (2) loving, gracious, merciful. Which set is emphasized in our world today? What will our teaching and preaching need to do with these two sets in order to help congregation members understand propitiation?
2. Propitiation involves averting God’s wrath and causing God to be favorable. The idea of changing God’s disposition is sometimes described as being contrary to Christianity. What explanation must be provided?

3. The New Testament’s teaching about propitiation assumes what the Old Testament says about the sacrifices of the tabernacle/temple. What challenge does this present to us today? How can we address this?

⁵Robert Kolb and Timothy Wengert, eds. *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*. (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2000), p. 127.

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 128–129.

⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 157–158.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 145.

DISCUSSION

1. Christians often say, “God hates sin but loves the sinner.” Based on Scripture’s teaching about propitiation, how would you respond to this?
2. When talking about propitiation, the confessors responded to the fact that their opponents, while believing in Christ’s death, included their own efforts in obtaining salvation. Discuss the following statement: In a different way, American evangelicalism does the same thing as the Roman Catholic Church by including human effort in the process by which we are saved.
3. The Lutheran Confessions repeatedly describe Christ as “mediator and propitiator” (Apology 4.46, 81, 387; 12.43, 76; 24.57). What is the relationship between these descriptions? How can these descriptions be used to bring comfort to Christians?