

Lesson 3

What Jesus Accomplished at the Cross

Understanding Propitiation

Introduction

To this point we have learned of our great need for salvation because we have sinned against God and find ourselves under condemnation of eternal death. This is the case for every person, Romans 3.10-18, 23. We are powerless to remove ourselves from the situation we have created and are in desperate need for *outside* intervention. We need someone who has the power to remove our guilt, as no person can be saved while he or she is guilty. The only One who can help is God.

Thankfully, Scripture reveals that it is God who took the initiative, Ephesians 2.4-6; Titus 3.4. Certainly, we were in no position to do it. It goes beyond human comprehension in contemplating the fact that while we were still guilty God devised a plan to forgive our sin. How could the God who is repulsed by sin and must punish it, also be moved from a sense of love and grace to try to save us from His wrath? His righteousness demands *both*. How did God respond to the dilemma? In Romans 5.8-9 Paul explains how Jesus is the solution:

But God proves his own love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

How much more then, since we have now been justified by his blood, will we be saved through him from wrath.

Salvation is accessible solely by way of the sacrificial act carried out on the cross. In a divine strategy wrought by God's infinite wisdom, Christ took on human flesh. By enduring the punishment meant for our transgressions, He bridges the gap for all humankind. This divine act reconciles the seemingly opposing facets of God's character, allowing Him to concurrently uphold justice while extending justification to those who place their faith in Jesus, as emphasized in Romans 3.26.

Therefore, the foundation upon which sinners are justified does not rest upon their own merits or actions but is firmly established in the redemptive sacrifice of Jesus, who bore our sins. Paul emphasizes this in Romans 3.21-26, describing the cross as an act of both *redemption* and *appeasement*.

Christ is the Offering That Turns Away God's Wrath

We stand guilty of sin before God. Our sin is *against Him*. We cannot remove our guilt. We are targets for God's wrath. So whatever work is done to save us *must* appease God while simultaneously erasing our guilt. *The work of Christ in saving man must relate to both God and man.*⁵ Therefore, Jesus' work on the cross is both an expression of God's infinite love *and* a sufficient sacrifice to carry out justice. The matter of salvation is essentially a salvation *from* God's wrath and a salvation *for* redemption.

How the Cross Relates to God

The best term to describe Jesus' action on the cross as it relates to God's justice is **propitiation**, which is *the removal of wrath by the offering of a gift.*⁶ The emphasis in the meaning of the word is on satisfaction.

Throughout the New Testament, the apostolic writers continually affirm that Jesus' death fully satisfied the demands of God's justice.

and He Himself is the propitiation for our sins; and not for ours only, but also for the sins of the whole world, 1 John 2.2 NASB.⁷

God's Wrath is a Reality

The wrath of God is something modern audiences tend to shy away from, and yet it is clearly seen throughout Scripture. Its reality must not be denied. Some struggle with the concept as they see it incompatible with the love of God. Some say this portrays the notion of an angry or vindictive deity, as the pagans see their gods. Such concerns are unfounded. J. I. Packer⁸ has written:

God's wrath in the Bible is never the capricious, self-indulgent, irritable, morally ignoble thing that human anger so often is. It is, instead, a right and necessary reaction to objective moral evil.

Because of His absolute holiness, God's wrath for sin is the proper reaction to it. Morris has written:

...the men of the OT had no such inhibitions. For them 'God is angry with the wicked every day' (Psalm. 7:11, av). They had no doubt that sin inevitably arouses the strongest reaction from God. God is not to be accused of moral flabbiness. He is vigorously opposed to evil in every shape and form while he may be 'slow to anger' (Nehemiah. 9:17, etc.), his anger is yet certain in the face of sin. We may even read 'The Lord is slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, forgiving iniquity and transgression, but he will by no means clear the guilty' (Numbers 14:18).⁹

As you think about this passage in Numbers, see how even in a passage that stresses the mercy and forgiveness of God that His punishment of sin is not left out. The good news of God's love and patience to humankind is amazing, beautiful, and real. It is beyond comprehension, but *it is totally unexpected*.¹⁰ The New Testament contains several references to "the wrath of God," but this concept is not limited only to explicit expressions. Instead, we observe a consistent portrayal of God actively opposing evil. Sinners find themselves in a perilous position, having wronged God and deserving nothing less than severe divine judgment. The Bible clearly teaches that sin receives a forceful response from God. The message is clear - those who rebel against God can expect His vigorous disapproval and punishment for their wrongdoing.

And in contrast to pagan religions, where the gods sat around waiting to be placated by an anxious sinner, *God Himself* is the one who initiated the propitiatory offering.

By this the love of God was revealed in us, that God has sent His only Son into the world so that we may live through Him. In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins, 1 John 4.9-10 NASB.

Forgiveness is not something we coerce from a reluctant and stingy God. Rather, it is the generous gift of the God who delights in mercy.

But He, being compassionate, forgave their wrongdoing and did not destroy them; And often He restrained His anger And did not stir up all His wrath. So He remembered that they were only flesh, A wind that passes and does not return, Psalm 78.38.

Averting divine judgment is not something we accomplish on our own. It stems solely from God's character, for He *restrained His anger*. Scripture makes clear that pardon is not obtained by human effort but only granted freely by a God who restrains His fury and extends kindness. It is God Himself who chooses to divert wrath, not because of anything we have done, but because of His inherent compassion and gracious nature. Our sins are remitted not by our persuasiveness or works, but by the lovingkindness of a God eager to forgive those who turn to Him.

God's wrath is certainly in the background of the early chapters of Romans.¹¹ Judgment and God's wrath are inseparable. The whole world stands condemned, Romans 3.19. Jesus did not save people from nothing. He rescued them from a very real danger. A sentence of condemnation has been passed against humanity. God's judgment looms over us. As Paul emphasizes throughout these opening chapters, the wrath of God poses a serious danger.

Therefore, Christ's crucifixion was for the purpose of delivering people from this divine wrath. Paul describes this deliverance using the word "propitiation." Romans 3.25 outlines how God addressed this aspect of our problem, there is no better term than "propitiation" to convey this idea. The passage leaves no other reasonable conclusion than that Christ's sacrifice propitiated or turned away the wrath that otherwise would have fallen upon those He saved.

If we are to be saved, that wrath must be somehow averted, and that is the point of Romans 3.21-26. I especially like how the NASB translates this passage and want to highlight in bold why God put Jesus on the cross:

But now apart from the Law the righteousness of God has been revealed, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets, but it is the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all those who believe; for there is no distinction, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, being justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus, whom **God displayed publicly as a propitiation in His blood through faith**. This was to demonstrate His righteousness, because in God's merciful restraint He let the sins previously committed go unpunished; for the demonstration, that is, of His righteousness at the present time, so that He would be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.

So, when we think of the wrath of God, it is not, as Morris¹² has written, "some irrational passion bursting forth uncontrollably, but a burning zeal for the right coupled with a perfect hatred for everything that is evil." Given the divine abhorrence for sin, it is unmistakable that intervention is necessary for us, flawed by sin as we are, if we hope to ever stand accepted in the presence of God.

What Accomplished Propitiation?

Jack Cottrell¹³ stresses that the critical element of salvation is not found in Jesus' life alone, which encompasses His ministry, His sinlessness, or His example. Nor is it founded in His prophetic functions of teaching and unveiling the nature of the Father. Rather, our salvation is bound up in His crucifixion. At Golgotha, Jesus voluntarily became a sacrificial offering to deflect the wrath of God from humanity. It is His sacrificial death and the shedding of His blood that constitute the means of propitiation; Christ crucified is the atonement for our sins. This point is unmistakable.

but if we walk in the Light as He Himself is in the Light, we have fellowship with one another, and **the blood of Jesus His Son cleanses us from all sin**, 1 John 1.7.

Romans 3:25a underscores this by declaring that God presented Jesus as a public manifestation of propitiation:

whom God displayed publicly as a propitiation in His blood through faith.

How was He displayed? Through His crucifixion. This is evident from the phrase "in His blood." Propitiation is accomplished solely by means of His blood.

Christ Stood in Our Place

This logically brings us to the question of *how* Jesus' blood turns away God's wrath. Since God was not willing to let humanity bear the full brunt of sin's consequences, Christ endured suffering on our behalf. Christ gave His life for sinners, thereby fulfilling the demands of justice for sin. He took on God's wrath *for us*. He allowed our sins to be counted as His own. God deemed Christ's death an adequate basis to cancel the judgment previously held against those who believe. It was a sacrifice offered *on our behalf* to God. We were the ones entangled in sin, and it was directed *to God* because it is His laws that were transgressed.

- Isaiah 53:5-6: *But he was pierced **because of our rebellion**, crushed **because of our iniquities**; punishment for our peace was on him, and we are healed by his wounds. We all went astray like sheep; we all have turned to our own way; and **the Lord has punished him for the iniquity of us all**.*
- 1 Corinthians 15:3: *Christ died **for our sins** according to the scriptures.*
- 2 Corinthians 5:19: *That is, in Christ, God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and he has committed the message of reconciliation to us.*
- 2 Corinthians 5:21: *He made the one who did not know sin to be sin **for us**, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.*
- 1 Peter 2:24: ***He himself bore our sins in his body** on the tree; so that, having died to sins, we might live for righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed.*
- Galatians 3:13: *Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law **by becoming a curse for us**, because it is written, Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree.*
- Ephesians 5:2: *... Christ also loved us and gave himself **for us**, a sacrificial and fragrant offering to God.*

Note again the term Paul uses in Ephesians 5:2. Jesus' death was a *fragrant offering to God*. If He truly stood in for us in receiving divine judgment, it indicates Jesus experienced the full severity of God's wrath against evil in our place. The suffering Christ endured was of such magnitude that it satisfied all that justice demanded as atonement for the sins of those who would believe. While the exact nature and duration of Christ's suffering cannot be fully comprehended, Scripture portrays it as immeasurably intense, reflecting the infinite cost of redeeming fallen humanity. In sacrificing Himself, Jesus absorbed God's righteous fury toward sin and judgment so that believers might be reconciled to God. His substitutionary atonement was complete and sufficient to accomplish our salvation.

The depth of Jesus' suffering cannot be fully quantified, as it reflected the immense weight of bearing the sins of all humanity. His atoning work on the cross satisfied God's justice completely for all who would

repent and believe. While Scripture does not provide specifics about the exact nature or duration of Christ's suffering, it is clear that His death was sufficient to redeem all people throughout time and history. Rather than try to place limits on the atonement, we can simply acknowledge with gratitude that Christ's offering was infinitely valuable and powerful for the salvation of all who turn to Him in faith. The magnitude of His sacrifice reflects the boundless love and mercy of God toward sinners. Through His death, Jesus overcame the power and condemnation of sin for every person, making salvation a reality for all who accept this gracious gift.

How God Justifies the Person with Faith

The death of Jesus as the propitiation or atoning sacrifice for God's wrath is the basis by which those who trust in Christ are justified. Because of the cross, God can forgive sins without compromising His holy nature. Christ's sacrifice made forgiveness possible in a way that maintains both God's justice and His love for humanity. By satisfying the demands of God's justice through His death, Jesus resolved the tension between God's holiness and His desire to show mercy.

God presented him to demonstrate his righteousness at the present time, so that he would be just and justify the one who has faith in Jesus, Romans 3.26.

We are only justified by what Jesus accomplished on the cross. His blood payment satisfied the wrath due for sin once and for all.

While Christ's atoning work was sufficient for the sins of the whole world, John 3.16; 1 John 2.2, this does not guarantee salvation for all. Justification comes not only by Christ's shed blood but also by personal faith, Romans 3.28; 5.1. The forgiveness purchased by His sacrifice is offered freely, but *it must be received by trusting in Jesus and what He has done for them*.¹⁴ Sadly, not everyone chooses to accept this gift. Eternal life is a *gift* to all who believe, not something automatically bestowed on all people. Christ died for the world, but salvation is appropriated only through our response by faith, repentance, and baptism.

This is as Packer¹⁵ writes, *the real heart of the gospel*: that Jesus Christ, by virtue of His death on the cross as our substitute and sin-bearer, is the propitiation for our sins. If we are in Christ, through faith, then we are justified through His cross, and the wrath will never touch us, neither here nor hereafter. Jesus *rescues us from the coming wrath*, 1 Thessalonians 1.10. If we fail to understand the gospel of salvation from wrath, nor Christ's achievement of the cross, we will never understand the wonder of the redeeming love of God.

What's In This for Us?

1. **Recognizing Our Need for Salvation:** We've learned that all have sinned and fall short of God's glory, Romans 3.23. Our own efforts can't save us—we need God's intervention. Therefore, salvation is by the work of Jesus. His crucifixion was to save us from God's wrath. Salvation a gift made possible through His sacrifice, Romans 3.25.
2. **Appreciating God's Initiative:** God loved us first. While we were still sinners, He made a way for our redemption, Ephesians 2.4-6; Titus 3.4; Romans 5.8-9.

3. **Understanding Propitiation:** Jesus' death on the cross was the removal of wrath by the offering of a gift. His sacrifice satisfied the demands of God's justice, 1 John 2.2. The cross was not just an event; it is the means by which we're cleansed from sin. It's an atonement powerful enough to save anyone who believes, 1 John 1.7.
4. **God's Wrath and Love:** God's wrath towards sin reflects His holiness, and His love is demonstrated in His willingness to forgive, Psalm 78.38, Numbers 14.18.
5. **The Significance of Faith:** While Jesus' sacrifice is sufficient for all, it becomes effective for us by faith. Justification is not automatic or universal; it requires a response of trust in Jesus, Romans 3.28, 5.1. Our righteousness comes from faith in Jesus. His propitiatory death allows God to remain just while justifying those who have faith in Christ, Romans 3.26.
6. **Christ as Our Substitute:** Jesus bore our sins and took on the punishment we deserved. This substitutionary act makes us right with God and spares us from judgment, Isaiah 53.5-6, 2 Corinthians 5.19-21.
7. **Responding to the Gospel:** The true heart of the gospel is that Jesus saves us from the wrath to come. Our part is to embrace this salvation through faith, repentance, and baptism, entering the life Jesus has won for us, 1 Thessalonians 1.10.

Conclusion

In this lesson, we have explored the depths of our need for salvation, confronted the reality of God's just wrath against sin, and been amazed by the incredible love of God that initiated our redemption.

In Christ's sacrificial death, we find the ultimate expression of God's love meeting His justice. Jesus, as our propitiation, has not only turned away the wrath of God that we deserved, but has also opened the door to a relationship with the Father marked by forgiveness and grace. Through faith in Christ's atoning work, we are justified and reconciled to God, a truth that should inspire both humility and immense gratitude in our hearts.

Allow what you've studied to renew your sense of awe for the lengths to which God has gone to save you. May the knowledge of Christ as your propitiatory sacrifice motivate you to live a life of faithful obedience, passionate worship, and fervent evangelism. Never forget that salvation is not an entitlement but a free gift, available to all who will receive it by faith.

Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ,
Romans 5.1.

May this peace, which comes from our Justifier and our loving Savior, rule in our hearts today and always.

For Class Interaction and Discussion

Lesson Outline

1. Introduction to Propitiation

- The human condition: Sin and the need for salvation, Romans 3.10-18, 23
- The divine solution: God's initiative and love, Ephesians 2.4-6; Titus 3.4; Romans 5.8-9

2. The Nature of God's Wrath

- The reality of God's wrath and its compatibility with His love
- The biblical portrayal of God's just response to sin

3. Christ's Atoning Work

- The concept of propitiation: Christ as the offering that turns away God's wrath, 1 John 2.2
- The cross as the intersection of God's love and justice, Romans 3.26

4. The Role of Faith in Justification

- Faith as the means by which we receive Christ's propitiatory work, Romans 3.28; 5.1
- The necessity of a personal response to the gospel

For Thought and Discussion

1. How does understanding our sinfulness and need for salvation impact our view of God's grace?
2. In what ways does God's initiative in salvation demonstrate His character?
3. How do you reconcile the concepts of God's wrath with His love? Can both exist simultaneously?
4. Why is propitiation a necessary component of the gospel message?
5. How does the cross display both the justice and the love of God?
6. What does it mean to be justified by faith? How does this differ from being justified by works?
7. How can we explain the concept of propitiation to someone who is unfamiliar with Christian terminology?

8. Is it possible to accept God's forgiveness without faith in Christ? Why or why not?
9. In what practical ways can we demonstrate our gratitude for Christ's sacrificial death?
10. How can we better communicate the urgency and necessity of responding to the gospel?

Group Activities:

1. **Role Play:** Divide into pairs. One person plays the role of a Christian explaining propitiation to a non-believer, while the other plays the role of someone hearing the gospel for the first time.
2. **Debate:** Organize a friendly debate on the compatibility of God's wrath and love, using Scripture to support your positions.
3. **Memory Verse Challenge:** Memorize key verses from the lesson (e.g., Romans 3.25, 1 John 2.2) and share why these verses are meaningful.

Final Encouraging Word

May our hearts be filled with the immense gratitude and awe that is fitting for receiving such a magnificent gift. What has been discussed in this lesson is not just for intellectual contemplation; it is the very lifeblood of your faith. May the reality of Christ's sacrifice embolden you to live fearlessly in a world that desperately needs the light of His truth. Let the love that motivated the cross be the love that you carry and share in every word you speak, in every action you take, and in every life you touch.

Take heart, for the work of Jesus on the cross is complete, perfect, and all-encompassing. You are justified, redeemed, and eternally loved by the Creator of the universe. There is no condemnation for those in Christ Jesus, and nothing can separate you from the love of God, Romans 8.1, 38-39. Move forward in courage, knowing that the same power that raised Christ from the dead dwells in you, Romans 8.11. You are equipped, you are called, and you are sent forth with the greatest message ever known to humankind.

⁵ Moser, p. 25.

⁶ Morris, L. "Propitiate; Propitiation." *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia, Revised*. Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1979–1988, Vol. 3, p. 1004.

⁷ Leon Morris writes: "Notice how Jesus is described as 'the propitiation for our sins'. In the previous verse he is our 'advocate with the Father'. If we need an advocate with God, then our position is indeed a dangerous one. We are in dire peril. ... Jesus' activity for men is described as turning away the divine wrath." See "Propitiation." *New Bible Dictionary*. Leicester, England; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996, p. 975.

⁸ Packer, J. I., and Kevin J. Vanhoozer. *Knowing God*. Westmont, IL: IVP, 2023, p. 151.

⁹ Morris, "Propitiation." p. 975.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 975.

¹¹ See Romans 1.18; 2.5-9; 3.9-20.

¹² Morris, Leon. *The Apostolic Preaching of the Cross*. Third Edition. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1965, p. 208.

¹³ Cottrell, *What the Bible Says About Grace*, p. 182-83.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 185.

¹⁵ Packer, p. 156.