

The Cross and Satisfaction

No Justice, No Peace

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Propitiation is a Prerequisite

In this issue dedicated to appreciating the wondrous cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, we will learn the importance of some direct doctrinal terms connected with Golgotha. Justification, redemption, reconciliation and sanctification are all words that highlight the favour flowing from the fountain that is Calvary. But before any of these actions could occur, a transaction must take place that has less to do with the granting of these blessings and everything to do with the character of the Blessor.

While this paper doesn't focus on many technical teachings surrounding propitiation and its use as a theme in the scriptures, we must address some essential points related to the concept. From Luke's penitent publican to John's first epistle, we can follow this family of words in the New Testament and learn the importance of God's satisfaction. Mercy could only be shown to the tax collector on the grounds of a sacrifice (Luke 18:13). The same word is used to prove the necessity of Christ's humanity for His High Priesthood in order to make "propitiation for the sins of the people" (Heb 2:17, JND). John further develops the teaching when he speaks about the Lord Jesus Himself being the satisfaction for our sins (1 John 2:2, 1 John 4:10).

Propitiation's Person and Place

But one word in particular, mentioned twice in the New Testament, brings us to this article's aim. In Hebrews 9:5, as the writer recounts the items in the Tabernacle, he mentions the "mercy seat." Obviously, in this statement, he was referring to the actual physical lid of the ark of the covenant. This mercy seat is where God would meet with His people (Ex 25:22). Of course, the meeting place was linked to the blood sprinkled on it and the sacrifice that blood represented. This use of the word helps us understand its meaning in the other passage. That passage is in Romans chapter three. As the case is being made for justification by faith and not by works, the problem arises that God's character may have been compromised by "passing over" (RV) sins in past dispensations. Since we know that all of the Old Testament saints were imperfect sinners, the accusation could be made that God had sacrificed His uprightness in favour of His mercy by ignoring sin and justifying evil-doers. To dispel any thoughts of a sin-tolerating God, the "checkmate" in the argument is made when we read these words: "...Christ Jesus; whom God has set forth a mercy seat... in his blood." (Rom 3:24-25 JND). The cross, and the Man of the cross, has satisfied God in His blood and is now His meeting place with humanity.

Propitiation is Proof

The point is made that the writings of Moses and the Prophets looked forward to a time when God's righteousness would be revealed outside of the law. The propitiation at the cross and subsequent justification by faith is the fulfillment of those writings (Rom 3:21). But the

satisfactory sacrifice is not just a revelation; it's also a demonstration of compelling proof (*to declare, KJV*) that God remains right when He justifies those who believe (Rom 3:25-26).

Propitiation in Psalm

Considering that the core concern of propitiation is the satisfaction of Jehovah's righteousness and safeguarding His Holy Character, the words of the 85th Psalm can apply to the cross and help our understanding, appreciation and devotion.

*Mercy and truth are met together;
Righteousness and peace have kissed each other. Ps 85:10*

Think of these words as intrinsic characteristics of God. The word truth (*Hebrew 'ěmet*) suggests more than just the opposite of falsehood. It conveys the idea of something firm and foundational, certain and unchanging. We are glad that the character of Jehovah exudes this truth so that our faith and hope don't equate to speculation and superstition but are secured on a bedrock of certainty. Here, righteousness (*Hebrew šedeq*) has everything to do with justice.

Having started out as a word that meant straight, it eventually became used to express conformity to an ethical or moral standard. If we¹ follow the course of scripture, we must conclude that justice was not just something God expected of His people; it is a part of His own essential character. This unchanging, firm God who demands justice is contrasted with unstable and unrighteous rebels throughout the entire story of the Bible.

But what about mercy (*Hebrew ḥesed*) and peace (*Hebrew šālôm*)? These traits seem to be at odds with the description of Jehovah we have already been considering, but are they? Does this God of concrete, unchanging truth not also delight in showing loving kindness (Mic 7:18)? Does His insistence on complete, transparent justice change His nature as the God of love and peace (2 Cor 13:11)? Of course not! But how can the Holy One restore relationship with a guilt laden race of sinners? For these attributes to be reconciled, there must be a meeting place.

Allow yourself to be transported to an arena full of participants and spectators. On one side is God dwelling in such light that no man can approach Him. On the other is fallen humanity: defiled, depraved and at a distance. Angels look on intently, and the Devil himself is there hurling slander and accusations of unrighteousness, watching to see what God will do. Jehovah's lovingkindness motivates Him to restore His relationship with mankind, but truth and justice will not allow compromise. The purpose of justifying the ungodly can never be realized as long as sin remains unaddressed; any and all hope seems lost.

¹ Harold G. Stigers, "[1879 צדק](#)," ed. R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer Jr., and Bruce K. Waltke, ¹ *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1999), 752

Then, all eyes turn to a Man suffering on a Roman cross. A darkness that can be felt causes a silent hush of awe and reverence as mercy and truth move from different corners to converge in harmony on this Man. As the accuser roars of sins passed over from the beginning of time, justice and peace make their way toward the cross and embrace each other! Upon the death of the Sufferer, God's righteous claims against sin are met: there is no compromise, only complete satisfaction. God is propitiated, and Satan's arguments against God's character are silenced.

Propitiation's Proclamation

Now, pointing to the cross and its accomplishment, and having found complete satisfaction in that Man and that sacrifice, God declares to all of humanity, "There will I meet with thee..." (Exodus 25:22)