
Propitiation

Romans 3:25-26

Introduction

I'm delighted about the outcome of the 2004 election. President Bush and his administration will, I believe, do well as governing officials. But I'm distressed about something. With all the talk of the religious right, moral issues and the evangelical movement surging forward to shape the future of America, I'm unsettled. And here's why.

I'm a listener of 1290AM radio. Off and on I like listening to the conservative talk radio of Rush Limbaugh and Shawn Hannity. I generally enjoy their stimulating observations. But what has me disturbed lately is the apparent analysis of the outcome of the 2004 election (particularly Mr. Hannity). It seems as though there is an ethos that the time has come for Christian-like morals and ethics to claim the political clout their growing number deserve. And that with this power, worldwide healing could take place. Hope will blossom, nature will be tamed, governments transformed, human suffering dispelled and terrorism eradicated. We can move ahead with confidence and optimism knowing that the solutions to the world's problems are in reach and just around the corner.

Yes, we are the salt of the earth and light in the darkness (Mt.5:13ff). And so, we are not to assimilate into the culture and thus lose our effectiveness nor are we to isolate from the culture and thus lose our effectiveness. We are, in other words, a city on a hill. We have the privilege and the call of reaching out and dispensing the truth and compassion of God to hurting people everywhere. But this does not change an utterly terrifying fact of life. The Bible makes clear that the wrath of God weighs heavy upon this world (cf. Rom.1:18f; John 3:36). To say, "Let not your hearts be troubled. You are a good American" is as a beautician serving a person in an electric chair.

The fury of the fierce anger of God still remains upon the people of America and the people of the world. Remember, the people on the Titanic had their cocktails and band but they still were headed for a terrifying end.

Tonight's Topic

Tonight we want to continue in our series called "The Words of our Salvation". Last week we looked at *Redemption* and the remarkable cost God gave to ransom His people; that is, we looked at Jesus Christ as the Passover Lamb, the ransom for all who believe in Him.

Tonight we will take up the word *Propitiation*. This theological term maintains that we must know – if we are ever to know God – something of the intensity of His wrath; His scathing, reverberating repulsion toward everything that is contrary to holiness. That for us to see God as supremely valuable and thus worthy of worship we must be utterly convinced that there is no compromise with sin in His heart.

To give a sense of the intensity of His wrath listen...

- Thus the LORD, the God of Israel, said to me: “Take from my hand this cup of the wine of wrath, and make all the nations to whom I send you drink it. They shall drink and stagger and be crazed because of the sword that I am sending among them.” (Jer.25:15f)

The wrath of God is so terrifying that even brutal methods of suicide will seem better than to see the face of God as the Scriptures say:

- Then the kings of the earth and the great ones and the generals and the rich and the powerful, and everyone, slave and free, hid themselves in the caves and among the rocks of the mountains, calling to the mountains and rocks, “Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who is seated on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb for the great day of their wrath has come and who can stand?” (Rev.6:15-17)

That this reality of the wrath of God is not merely a future reality is made clear in the New Testament.

- Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him. (John 3:36b)

Now, why all the talk about the fierce and present reality of the fury of God against sin? What does this have to do with this odd word *Propitiation*? How can a message on the wrath of God fuel my love for Him and love for others?

To answer these questions and teach on the propitiation of God we first will define the term. Next we will notice how this applies to God. And then we will conclude by listing some effects this teaching should have on Clearcreek Chapel. Let's begin with a biblical definition of *Propitiation*.

Basic definition of propitiation

To come to a working and accurate definition of *Propitiation* we need to notice how the Apostle Paul used the term. Paul sees God as being angry with sinners. That is the bulk of his massive argument in Romans 1:18-3:20.

- For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men... Rom.1:18a
- But because of your hard and impenitent heart you are storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath ...Rom.2:5
- But if our unrighteousness serves to show the righteousness of God, what shall we say? That God is unrighteous to inflict wrath on us...Rom.3:5

The definition of **propitiation is**: *the turning away of the anger of God and the satisfying of the justice of God*. If this is not the true meaning of the term, Romans 3:25 makes no sense. Let's turn now to the text we find this verse; Rom.3:21-26, to see whether or not this is so.

A basic problem

The Bible commands that we all "love the Lord our God with all our heart and with all our soul and with all our might" (Deut.6:5). But when we take inventory of ourselves we recognize that we fall short of this basic command. We do not love Him with our whole hearts. Instead, we fall in love with creation (Romans 1:25). We exchange the glory of God for other things. We prefer His gifts to Himself. And the Bible says that this is appalling. (cf. Jeremiah 2:11-13) We forsake God in order to pursue other objects that promise satisfaction. God is infinitely valuable. However, we find the stuff of this world more attractive. We treat the Almighty with contempt by not obeying by faith His commands. The net result, says the Bible, is that there is a penalty for this. The way of our hearts is not trivial. It is treason. Disloyalty to the King is punished by the wrath of the King (Rom. 1:18; 2:5,8; 3:5; 9:22; Eph.2:3; 5:6; Col.3:6; 1Thess.2:16; et. al.).

A more basic problem

This is a problem all of mankind faces. However, there is a more basic problem than this. And that is precisely what we find in vv.25-26.

In verse 25 we come across our strange word for tonight; propitiation. Propitiation means to turn away anger and to appease or satisfy something or someone. The Bible says that "God put forward [Christ Jesus] as a propitiation by his blood". When it says, "God put forward", it means that God took the initiative to do something. He put forward

Christ Jesus. God put Christ Jesus on the cross to die a bloody death. Why would He do something like that? “as a propitiation” the Bible says. In other words, God took the initiative to crucify Christ in order to satisfy something. By looking at verse 25, can you see what that is? We are now shifting in the message from a basic definition of propitiation to a basic application of propitiation.

Basic application of propitiation

We noticed that “God put forward Christ Jesus”. And that this was to be the propitiation. But a question still remains: why? What was the fundamental function of this event? As we read on, we come to see how propitiation was basically applied. Verse 25 says, “This was to show God’s righteousness”. “This”, the crucifixion, was to make obvious something about God. He was demonstrating something of His character. If the cross-like death of His Son had not occurred, we would have no hope; for we would have an unrighteous God in heaven. As a keen theologian said, “Without the death of Christ as a propitiation for sins, the problem would not have been the false accusations of men but the real unrighteousness of God (J. Piper; *The Justification of God*; p.143)

Why is this so? The verse goes on to say, “because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins”. Down through the years since Adam and Eve God passed over sins. He did not attend to them in a way that their sins deserved. He overlooked, as it were, the sins of the past. He pardoned their sins without an immediate, corresponding payment. Because of this, His “forbearance” (or patience) could have looked to an onlooker as indifference to the claims of justice. If it were not for the blood-spattered death of Jesus, God would have been unjust to let the guilty go free.

Here is the sight we need to see what propitiation is about. *It first and foremost is about God.* Now don’t miss this. For God to condone or ignore the dishonor heaped upon him by our sins would be saying sin does not matter. More than this, if God closed His eyes to our God-mocking rebellion we might conclude that God does not matter to Himself. It is precisely here that we find the main problem and its ultimate solution. Jesus suffered and died as a propitiation to turn away the anger of God and to satisfy the justice of God. God openly demonstrates through the Cross that sin matters. And that His justice mustn’t be called into question.

Please follow me closely.

“Passing over” former sins could be understood as injustice. Is God righteous? Does He look the other way when sin is trampling upon His glory? Does He extend forgiveness to the very ones who commit treason simply by saying, “Oh, my glory does not matter. It’s ok that you have shown contempt for my infinite worth. I’ll just sweep your sins under the rug and act like nothing happened”. Does that sound like a God you can worship? Does that sound like a God you would desire to spend eternity with? Do you find affectionate admiration welling up in your heart for a president who grants clemency to criminals? Would you respond with pleasure to the judicial system if the headlines tomorrow read “Martha Stewart set free by saying I’m sorry”?

You see, it was necessary for God to provide a means to satisfy His justice if He was to pour out freely mercy upon sinners. And that is exactly what we see in Romans 3:25-26! GOD IS RIGHTEOUS!

Here is the NEWS that needs heralded. Here is the NEWS which far exceeds a man-centered, moralistic, religious, political and social agenda. Our country (and homes and neighborhoods) need to hear, “Extra, Extra, hear all about it. Breaking news: God did not withdraw His righteous anger. He did not retreat His wrath. He spent it on Christ! He is good and blameless and perfect. He is worthy of praise. Hallelujah, holy, holy, holy is the Lord God of Hosts”!

Can you see why this is breaking news? Do you feel why we should shout it from the house tops?

My hope is that we are gaining greater appreciation for propitiation as we see how it is applied to God? God removes His wrath from us through a replacement-kind-of-death. Christ died for my sins. He put Christ on the Cross to propitiate or satisfy His fury for my sin. Jesus turned away God’s wrath by dying for our sins! He can preserve his righteousness while pouring out his mercies through propitiation. The glorification of God and the salvation of his people are accomplished together.

Conclusion

I desire to close this evening's message by listing some implications propitiation has for us.

Basic implication of propitiation

1. God is holy.
 - a. He is best. Unsurpassed and most excellent is he. Nothing can be compared with him. His immeasurable worth and value are witnessed in the absolute uniqueness of his majestic glory. His beauty is beyond degree. His perfections are peerless. Through the doctrine of propitiation we can see the God is holy.
2. God is just.
 - a. He is devoted to what is best. Preserving and promoting Himself continuously are signs of His righteousness and justice. Because of his matchless perfections, he readily and reliably places His heart upon Himself. Anything contrary to His ultimate uniqueness is seen as a challenger for His glorious throne. And the wrath of God burns against such treasonous attempts. At the heart of the doctrine of propitiation is an eternal, unchangeable necessity in the holiness and justice of God that sin is paid for. Through the doctrine of propitiation, we can see that God is just.
3. God is love.
 - a. He promotes what is best. To publicize His perfections and cause a world-wide celebration of His infinite value, he pours out his righteous anger upon His beloved Son. With His justice satisfied he lovingly causes His people to recognize and relish what is best; namely Himself seen in Jesus Christ. Through the doctrine of propitiation, we can see that God is love.

Beloved, we will never sense the holiness of God if we do not sense the love He has for His honor. And we will never sense the love of God for us if we do not sense the seriousness of our sins. We will not be broken over our sins and in awe over God's glory if we do not see His wrath poured out on His Son on the Cross. And we will never be inflamed with love for God in worship and love for people in fellowship and evangelism and missions if we do not take the time to appreciate the doctrine of propitiation.

I ask the Lord to allow this message to assist us in this cause.