

PROPITIATION AND SUBSTITUTION

The Old Testament abounds with types of the sacrifice of Christ, but not until we come to the doctrines of the Gospel as set forth in the **Epistle to the Romans** do we meet with the first of the two words that stand at the head of this chapter. The words themselves express the two great aspects of His atoning death.

First, let us recall that all sin is against God. It affects Him and not only us who are sinners. Truly, it ruins us and brings us under the power of death and judgment; but it is also an outrage upon His holy nature, a flouting of His authority, an attempt to dishonour Him in the sight of His creatures. Hence the sacrifice of atoning virtue must not only be such as shall relieve the sinner by removing his sin, but shall also, and *first*, meet all the demands of God's holy nature, and of His righteous throne, and so thoroughly vindicate Him.

This is clearly recognized as a righteous principle amongst men. If an offence arises between two parties both are affected, and the first consideration must be for the offended party. Take the matter of debt, for instance. The debtor, if a right-minded man, is oppressed. He acknowledges the debt but cannot pay it and is miserable. We are sorry and anxious to relieve him, but we must not expend all our pity upon him. What about the creditor? He perhaps is not a man of wealth and cannot afford to lose what is rightly his, and hence he is oppressed as much, if not more than, the debtor.

How can the situation be relieved? Only by the intervention of a third party in such a way that the creditor's claims are properly met. The deliverance of the debtor follows as a matter of course. There can be no question as to the relative order: it is, *first* the creditor's claims, *second* the debtor's necessities.

All this is quite simple, yet when we turn to the work of Christ, with which we as sinners are so vitally concerned, how easy for us practically to forget God's side of the question in occupation with our own. Let us observe the way in which the death of the Lord Jesus is presented in **Romans 3 and 4** as an antidote against this.

The first two and a half chapters of that Epistle reveal the total bankruptcy of mankind, and from **Romans 3: 21** we read of the steps God has taken to meet the situation; for the great Creditor Himself has acted in the matter. What has He done? He has manifested his *righteousness* in such a way that it rests as a shield of protection "upon all them that believe" **(v. 22)** instead of falling upon them as an avalanche of destruction as we might have expected.

But *where* was righteousness of this kind manifested? we may well ask. The answer is — at the CROSS.

But *how*? we further enquire. What particular feature in and about the Cross of Christ accounts for righteousness of this character? What is it that has enlisted God's righteousness on our side, and not merely sheltered us by the wing of compassion and mercy from the onslaught of the righteousness which otherwise would condemn? The answer is: **PROPITIATION**.

At the Cross God "*set forth*" the Lord Jesus "*a propitiation through faith in His blood*" **(v. 25)**. The word used here is "propitiatory" or "mercy seat" — not propitiation exactly but rather the *place* where, under the law of Moses, the propitiation was made. The force of this will be apparent if we turn to **Leviticus 16** where we have the appointed order of the offerings on the great day of atonement in Israel, which occurred annually on the tenth day of the seventh month. On that day the high priest slew a bullock as a sin-offering for himself and his house, and a goat as a sin-offering for the people. The blood of these two victims was not applied in any way to the people, but was carried into the holiest of all and sprinkled on and before the mercy seat, and later was sprinkled on the altar of burnt offering. Thus in type God's claims were met and His character vindicated in view of the sins of the people.

What the mercy seat was in this typical system, this region of shadows, the Lord Jesus is in the great reality itself. The mercy seat was the place where God met with man **(see Ex. 25: 21, 22)** and He is the One in whom God has put Himself into touch with men in a manner and degree altogether unknown before. All, too, has become effective "in His blood" just as the "mercy seat" only became effectively a seat of mercy because of the sprinkled blood. Otherwise it would have speedily proved itself to be a seat of *judgment*.

What, then, is the effect of Christ's propitiation as recorded in **Romans 3**?

Just this, that God has been vindicated as regards His dealings with sin and with sinners, as shown in **verses 25 and 26**. In times past He had passed over the sins of His saints in anticipation of those sins being dealt with at the Cross; in this present gospel age He is not merely "remitting" or "passing over" sins, but positively justifying believers in Jesus. Propitiation thus fully made, His righteousness in both these actions is fully declared. No voice can now for one instant be rightly raised to criticize what He has done. Before the death of Christ unbelief might question, though faith, even when confronted with God's dealings which seemed most perplexing, always said with Abraham, "*Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?*"

Still, now such a question is needless. HE HAS DONE RIGHT. In Christ's propitiatory work we see every satisfaction due to Divine righteousness and holiness rendered in supreme and surpassing degree. We see every sanction of the law upheld, and every attribute of the Divine nature displayed in harmonious completeness.

The consequence of all this is that God now presents Himself to men universally as a Saviour-God. **Verse 22** of our chapter speaks of "*the righteousness of God which is by faith of Jesus Christ unto all and upon all them that believe . . . for all have sinned.*"

The preposition "**unto**" indicates the scope or bearing of the thing in question, whereas "**upon**" indicates rather its actual effect. The **need** to which the Gospel addresses itself is absolutely universal. No less universal is the bearing of the Gospel offer. The actual **effect** of the Gospel is more limited; the words now are "*all that believe.*" The Gospel offer in its universality thus rests upon propitiation as its basis. Because God has been completely satisfied as to all that sin is and has done, and therefore every hindrance on His side is removed, He presents Himself to man universally as a forgiving, a justifying God. Except, however, the hindrances upon man's side be removed — hindrances such as pride, self-complacency, and unbelief — the gracious Gospel offer does not come to fruition. It is only when a sinner comes to repentance and faith in Christ that Divine righteousness is "upon" him in blessing. Justification belongs to "all them that believe," and to them alone.

But this brings us to the second aspect of Christ's atoning death. The actual word "**substitution**" does not occur in Scripture. That which the word expresses is found again and again: indeed in one Old Testament chapter it is found quite ten times. We refer to **Isaiah 53**. In one verse of that chapter we get it four times:

"He was wounded for our transgressions, He was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon Him; and with His stripes we are healed". **(v. 5)**

The essence of substitution is that one is put in the room and stead of another, and each of the four clauses of this great verse contains that idea. The great and glorious "He" stands in the room and stead of the poor and sinful "us." The transgressions and the iniquities were *ours*; the wounding and the bruising were *His*. Ours are the peace and the healing; *His* were the chastisement and the stripes that purchased it.

Now if we turn to the closing verse of **Romans 4** and the opening verse of **Romans 5** the same truth confronts us, only stated with a clearness of detail impossible in Old Testament times. "*Jesus our Lord . . . was delivered for our offences and raised again for our justification. Therefore being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.*"

Here note again the "our" and the "we." He truly was delivered up to death and judgment, but it was for our offences and not for everybody's, though as the propitiation He has settled the whole question of sin so that the Gospel can be offered to all. He was raised again for our justification, i.e. the justification of all who believe; for we are "*justified by faith,*" as the next verse shows.

When we consider Christ's death in its substitutionary aspect, then, we are looking at it not from God's side but from ours. The point is not how His sacrifice has satisfied the Creditor, but rather how fully He has intervened on behalf of the debtors and of the full clearance which is theirs as a result; always bearing in mind that only those who believe can reckon upon Him as their substitute.

An illustration may help to set the two aspects more clearly before us.

Years ago a popular accident insurance scheme was much advertised in the daily press as offering benefits for practically nothing. All you had to do was to give a definite order for the paper in question to a newsagent, and then register as having done so. "A *registered* reader is an *insured* reader," is what one of the papers said.

"How very simple!" you might have exclaimed, "have I nothing to do beyond that?" Nothing! But you must not overlook the fact that the newspaper proprietors had a very big thing to do before the offer was made. The thousands of little registration transactions cost but the stamp that posts them to the office, but behind these lies the great transaction when the newspaper proprietors drew the big cheque running into many thousands of pounds in favour of the insurance company that undertook the liability.

Now that big premium payment, in view of which the offer went freely forth to all buyers of the paper, is not a bad illustration of propitiation. The offer of God's forgiveness goes forth on the ground of Christ's propitiatory sacrifice, and its scope and bearing is nothing less than *all men*.

When the premium was paid no questions, as to any particular individuals benefiting under the scheme, were raised. The point was that the insurance company was so satisfied that it was able to issue the offer upon a sound basis.

The act of registering under the scheme was on the other hand, purely individual. After all, only the registered reader was the insured reader, and therefore only the one who had registered had the right to speak of the premium paid by the proprietors as a *substitute* for the premium they otherwise must have paid, had they as individuals approached the insurance company to insure against similar risks. The registration very well illustrates what takes place when a sinner turns to God in repentance and faith. He registers, so to speak, under God's great salvation scheme. Such an one alone can rightly speak of Christ as being a Substitute for himself, and bearing his sins in His own body on the tree.

We have not laboured this point at unnecessary length, for it is a matter of vast importance.

The Gospel can only be declared with clearness and consistency by those who see the relative place of **propitiation** and **substitution**, and thus make the former the great theme of their preaching when addressing themselves as heralds to men at large, and give to the latter its distinctive place as instruction to those who believe. And, further, a correct grasp of these things goes a long way towards solving those intellectual difficulties which so many have found in putting together the two things equally taught in Scripture — the sovereignty of God and the responsibility of man, connected with the free offers of God's grace.

By some propitiation is derided upon the pretext that it reduces God to the level of some heathen deity who is supposed to be only kept in good temper by sacrifices of blood. How would you answer them?

By asserting two things:

First, that the teaching of the Bible is NOT that God is ill-disposed toward us, a frowning Deity to be continually pacified by propitiatory sacrifices which change His feelings toward us. That is the corrupt heathen conception. The Bible presentation of the truth runs thus, "*Herein 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: 10)** Far from our having to change His heart toward us by a propitiatory sacrifice, His heart which is toward man is the very source of all our blessing. Our sins had made propitiation necessary, but He Himself provided the necessary sacrifice.

Secondly, we point out who the propitiation was. He "*sent His Son*." One who Himself was God became the propitiation! A profound mystery, surely, but how far removed from the degrading heathen ideas which have been quoted. Propitiation emphatically was not needed to change God's heart from being against us to being for us. It was rather the most perfect expression of His love. This the Apostle points out, exclaiming, "*Herein is love!*"

If propitiation was not needed to change God's disposition in regard to us, in what did the necessity for it lie?

The answer is: **In the essential holiness of His nature and the righteousness of His throne.**

It must never be forgotten that God is the supreme Governor of the universe. If He permits any moral laxity, any deviation from strict righteousness, who will maintain what is right anywhere? God's righteousness, maintained unflinchingly and without compromise, is the sheet anchor upon which everything depends. If that drags the whole universe would drift upon the rocks of utter wrong.

Therefore it is that the maintenance of righteousness and holiness always stands first with Him, and nothing in the way of blessing can reach sinners except their every claim and demand is first met.

Propitiation is the meeting of all those prior claims in such full fashion that instead of righteousness being totally against man it is now "unto all". **(Rom. 3: 22)** On the ground of propitiation righteousness stands, as it were, with outstretched arms bidding any and every man to find shelter in its bosom. And the propitiation itself is the fruit of the love of God.

With propitiation we generally connect the idea of appeasing wrath. Is this correct in regard to God?

Clearly it is. Righteousness and wrath stand closely connected as a matter of eternal fact. Wrath gives sanction to righteousness and enforces it. Without it righteousness would be impotent. The practice of government amongst men is an illustration of this. No matter how righteous and virtuous a government may be, without powers and penalties to enforce its decrees it comes to grief.

Righteousness and wrath are also closely connected in Scripture. **Verses 17 and 18 of Romans 1** are a proof of this.

In the presence of sin God's righteousness has tremendous claims. He also has infinite power and will execute wrath and vengeance as **Romans 2: 2-9** states.

Does the fact of propitiation authorize us to go to any man and tell him that his sins are forgiven?

It does not. It quite authorizes us to go to any man and tell him that Christ has died for him, and consequently forgiveness is preached to him. **(Acts 13: 38)** This we can do because as a propitiation He gave Himself "a ransom for all," **(1 Tim. 2:6)** He died "for the ungodly". **(Rom. 5:6)** The forgiveness of sins, however, is the portion of those who believe only, inasmuch as it involves substitution.

Forgiveness may indeed be freely preached to all men, but only those who believe *are forgiven*.

The Lord's parable of the two debtors in **Luke 7** would seem to imply that Simon, the unbelieving Pharisee, was as much forgiven as the penitent woman. Is this interpretation of the Lord's words a correct one?

Our English translation runs: "When they had nothing to pay he frankly forgave them both" **(v. 42)**, and this quite seems to support the interpretation you name. But, as a matter of fact, the word used here and translated "frankly forgave" in **verse 42** and "forgave" in **verse 43** is one which means *to be gracious or favourable to*; whereas the word used by the Lord in **verses 47 and 48** is the usual word for forgive, meaning to *send off or away*. See JND translation.

The creditor of the Lord's parable was gracious to both debtors in view of their bankrupt condition, just as God, on the ground of propitiation, is at the present acting in grace towards all men, and presenting to them in the Gospel forgiveness of sins. The woman who drew near to Jesus with tears of repentance and faith had her sins actually forgiven. "Thy sins are forgiven" — i.e. sent away — dismissed. *That* was never said to Simon the Pharisee.

Does not such a statement, as that "Christ was once offered to bear the sins of many," make it appear that Christ only died for the elect?

Such a scripture views His death strictly from the standpoint of substitution and is concerned only with the actual effects of His work amongst men. From this standpoint He bore the sins only of those who believe, and these are the elect.

A similar scripture is: "The Son of Man came . . . to give His life a ransom for many". **(Mark 10: 45)** Here again the actual result of His death *amongst men* is in question. But we also read: "The Man Christ Jesus, who gave Himself a ransom for all". **(1 Tim. 2: 5, 6)** Here, taking up the standpoint of propitiation, the value of His death *before God* is in question, and hence the scope and bearing of His death towards all men comes into view.

Does not the teaching that Christ died for all logically lead to universal salvation?

The teaching that Christ died as a *Substitute* for all would obviously lead to universal salvation as a logical conclusion; but the Bible teaching is not that, but that He is the *propitiation* for "the whole world." **(1 John 2: 2)** This no more involves the ultimate salvation of everybody than the newspaper's big premium payment involved the definite insurance of every one of its readers.

It did involve this: That every reader was eligible for the insurance and had the offer of it; just as propitiation involves an open door into salvation for all, and a world-wide gospel message.

But definite insurance was secured by registration. "A registered reader is an insured reader," was the slogan adopted. We may take upon our lips the statement that "a repentant and believing sinner is a forgiven sinner." This, thank God, is the truth of the Gospel.

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The Burnt Offering and the Acceptance of the believer is not considered in this article but is precious and important and gives us wonderful peace. See **John 17:23b**