**Propitious by Means of Propitiation**

*by Jeremiah Cox*

One of the wonders of the revelation of God’s will is His immutable nature. It is unchangeable, and thus impervious to self-contradiction. Hence, the wonder of His consistent justice existing with His loving mercy. How can God be both *“just and the justifier”* (Romans 3:26) of sinful man? The answer lies within the Biblical concept of *propitiation*.

The lush garden was given by God for man’s use with one restriction. In the midst of that vast garden was *“the tree of the knowledge of good and evil”* (Genesis 2:9), a tree from which man was forbidden to eat. The consequences for failure to acknowledge this positive command of God would prove most troubling, and destructive – *“for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die”* (Genesis 2:17). And despite the clarity of God’s word, man ate – *“Therefore, just as through one man sin entered the world, and death through sin, and thus death spread to all men, because all sinned”* (Romans 5:12). This posed the question, how can God, who must keep His promise of death, yet is not willing that any should perish, be merciful and just without contradiction? This is a situation God already knew would arise, and praise be to Him for His eternally devised solution!

**Propitiation – *hilaskomai***

The Greek word, *hilaskomai*, is used twice in the New Testament. In Luke’s 18th chapter, Jesus spoke a parable considering the demeanor of both a Pharisee and a tax collector. While the self-righteous Pharisee stood erect in pride, the tax collector lowered his eyes, beat his breast, and cried for mercy. He said, *“God, be [hilaskomai] to me a sinner”* (Luke 18:13). Here the man, the sinner, is the object of the verb *hilaskomai*. His cry was for God to be propitious, or merciful to him, a sinner. The mantle of mercy is one that God has carried from the beginning, but with other truths in place.

That same word appears a second time in the epistle to the Hebrews. There, the writer explains a facet of Jesus redemptive work – *“Therefore, in all things He had to be made like His brethren, that He might be a merciful and faithful High Priest in things pertaining to God, to make [hilaskomai] for the sins of the people”* (Hebrews 2:17). This passage presents sin as the object of the verb. Sin is that which provokes the wrath of God. Thus, in order for a sinner to be reconciled unto God there must first be an appeasement of God’s wrath. Jesus made propitiation, or expiation, when He partook of flesh and blood, and died on the cross. God’s wrath toward the sin of mankind was satisfied in the death of Jesus. Thus, God is just, for Jesus died – Hebrews 2:17 (*hilaskomai* – propitiation) – and the justifier because He gives mercy – Luke 18:13 (*hilaskomai* – mercy).

**The Wrath of God**

The wrath of God must be understood in light of His immutable nature. He is morally pure, and consistently just. He declared the wages of sin to be death (cf. Romans 6:23), and He must follow through with the just punishment. The all wise Creator of heaven and earth does not fly off the handle. He makes a conscious and deliberate decision to render what is due.

It is not that God is an unforgiving brute who takes pleasure in punishment, but One who must give death in response to sin. He is *“not willing that any should perish”* (2 Peter 3:9). However, when man sins the wages of that sin remain to be paid. Ergo, Jesus, God in the flesh, made propitiation for the sins of man. I.e. He appeased God’s judicial wrath toward sin by dying on the cross in our stead.

**Propitiation – *hilasmos***

The Greek word, *hilasmos* – akin to *hileos* meaning merciful or propitious, is used twice in the New Testament as well. This noun appears both times in John’s first epistle, and is used as Christ Himself – *“And He Himself is the [hilasmos] for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the whole world”* (1 John 2:2). *“In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the [hilasmos] for our sins”* (1 John 4:10). Jesus is the means by which God shows mercy to the whole world. Because of sin His wrath was aroused. The only way for His judicial wrath to be satisfied, while remaining a merciful God, was to send Jesus as the atoning victim. Mankind is deserving of death because of sin, but by the grace and mercy of God Jesus paid the price. However, Him being the propitiation, or expiatory sacrifice, for the entire world is a provision. *“For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men”* (Titus 2:11), but in order for that expiatory sacrifice to be accessed by an individual he must believe on Jesus (cf. Romans 5:2).

**Propitiation – *hilastērion***

*Hilastērion* is a Greek word which also appears twice in the New Testament. Of the two, one appearance is in the 9th chapter of Hebrews. The context speaks of the limitations of the earthly service of priests. The chapter begins by describing the earthly sanctuary, which is merely a type of the true sanctuary in which Jesus actually appears in the presence of God for us (cf. Hebrews 9:24). Describing the contents of the Holiest of All which included the ark of the covenant, the text reads, *“and above [the ark] were the cherubim of glory overshadowing the [hilastērion]. Of these things we cannot now speak in detail”* (Hebrews 9:5). In this text, *hilastērion* is translated, *“mercy seat.”* The *“mercy seat”* was the place of appeasement of God’s wrath on the day of atonement – *“Then he shall kill the goat of the sin offering, which is for the people, bring its blood inside the veil, do with that blood as he did with the blood of the bull, and sprinkle it on the mercy seat and before the mercy seat”* (Leviticus 16:15). *“For the life of the flesh is in the blood, and I have given it to you upon the altar to make atonement for your souls; for it is the blood that makes atonement for the soul”* (Leviticus 17:11). The sprinkling of blood meant the price of death was paid. I.e. the expiatory sacrifice was given, and God’s wrath was appeased. Of course, this was merely a type, and not sufficient (cf. Hebrews 10:4).

*Hilastērion* also appears in Romans chapter 3, where the sin and justification of man is discussed. In this process the righteousness of God is revealed – *“for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, being justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God set forth as a [hilastērion] by His blood, through faith, to demonstrate His righteousness”* (Romans 3:23-25a). Here, Jesus is Himself the propitiation. He is the expiatory sacrifice, the atoning victim. By metonymy, “blood” is put for “death,” *“for the life…is in the blood”* (Leviticus 17:11). God’s wrath was appeased by means of Christ Jesus’ death – *“Much more then, having now been justified by His blood, we shall be saved from wrath through Him”* (Romans 5:9). Sin occurred. The wages of sin is death. Christ received the wage. Thus, God is ***Propitious by Means of Propitiation***.

Yet, in order to access this great gift of God one must meet the conditions placed by Him – *“because in His forbearance God had passed over the sins that were previously committed, to demonstrate at the present time His righteousness, that He might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus”* (Romans 3:25b-26).