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# Propitiation

## Isaiah 53

### Illustration

One of the biggest problems for church buildings is **lightning**. Churches are often the tallest building in a town and so are the most likely building to be hit by lightning. There is enough energy in a lightning bolt to charge 50,000 iPhones, so you can imagine what that could do to a structure. Wooden beams could explode, metal can melt, any moisture can turn to steam...

But Benjamin Franklin had an idea to protect buildings. He was one of the first to use a lightning rod: a simple metal connector that gives the lightning bolt an easy path to earth, redirecting the dangerous energy and saving the building. The rod might get damaged itself but that's ok as **it will have been sacrificed for the safety of those in the church.**

### The Sin Problem

The **biggest problem for mankind is sin**, and its consequences. When we read our Bibles we find some fairly foundational facts:

- God is holy (Isaiah 6v3 - holy, holy holy is the Lord of hosts)
- Man is sinful (Romans 3v23 - all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God)
- God's holiness demands justice (Isaiah 61v8 - For I, the Lord, love justice)
- Therefore sin must be punished (Romans 2v12 - all who sin under the law will be judged)
- The judgement for sin is death (Romans 6v23 - for the wages of sin is death)
- We can't do anything to change this situation (John 15v5 - apart from me you can do nothing)
- By ourselves we are doomed

### God's Solution

God has a solution to the sin problem and it is the **substitutionary sacrifice** of the lord Jesus Christ. Like the lightning rod, he **diverts the judgement** of the father by taking our sin upon himself, sacrificing himself for the sake of the Church. In doing this he becomes our propitiation.

Let's look at Romans 3 v 21-25

Paul wants to show us how we can be made **righteous**. Not by obeying god's **law**, because that's impossible for us. Instead we gain righteousness by **faith** in Jesus Christ. It is a **gift** of God. By his sacrifice he has **redeemed** us, bought us back. And in doing so he becomes our **propitiation**.

## Definition

Warren Wiersbe defines propitiation in the following way: "**the work of Jesus Christ on the cross by which he satisfies God's righteous, holy judgement, that we deserve, so God could extend mercy to lost sinners**". It's a Greek word used to refer to appeasing a god. But in New testament usage it has different connotations. Let's look at some things it isn't.

1. It's **not the removal of just punishment**. The Greek idea is of placating a god, dampening their anger. But god's holiness demands justice and judgement on sin. Jesus don't stop the father's judgement, he took it on himself, so that justice was satisfied, not removed.

2. It's **not turning the hatred of God into love**. Right from the beginning we learn that God loves us. It is because he loves us that he sent his son. His hatred, his wrath, is on sin, and by taking our sin upon himself Jesus acts as our lightning rod and takes the punishment for our sin, in our place. God's wrath is spent and we are made righteous, able to receive his mercy and grace.

3. It is **not the work of man**. There is nothing we can do to reduce, resist or avoid the judgement of God. It's all done by Jesus as he takes the punishment on the cross. He is our propitiation.

So let's look at the definition again. "**Propitiation is the work of Jesus Christ on the cross by which he satisfies God's righteous, holy judgement, that we deserve, so God could extend mercy to lost sinners**"

Think of the picture of the lightning storm again. It's dangerous for the man to approach the storm as that huge build up of energy has to ground itself somehow. The lightning rod channels the energy away from the person and into the ground. **There is now no charge in the air** and no danger between the man and the clouds. In fact the air feels clear and calm, the tension has been removed.

In a similar way man cannot approach God. His sin makes such an approach deadly, he would be struck down by the wrath of God. But Jesus took that wrath upon himself on Calvary. For the saved person there is no longer any danger. God's wrath had been spent, he

has been made righteous and can come into the presence of God without fear. Our relationship with God is restored and we are **brought into his good favour**.

This is propitiation.

## Application

The word is used four times in our ESV translation. We've already read it in Romans, and Paul uses it in **Hebrews 2:17** - Jesus as our great high priest is able to make propitiation for the sins of the people. This points us to where the same Greek word is used to refer to the cover of the ark of the covenant, in **Hebrews 9v5** (source: W.E. Vine).

## Mercy Seat

We know it as the mercy seat, but we could also translate it the "propitiation cover". That cover for the ark is where the high priest would sprinkle the blood of the lamb once a year, on the day of atonement, for the sins of the people. Jesus is the fulfilment of that old testament picture. His blood was poured out for our sins.

Look at John 20:11-12 -

*But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb, and as she wept she stooped to look into the tomb. And she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had lain, one at the head and one at the feet.*

maybe this is coincidental but the position of the two angels seems to reflect the two golden angels on the mercy seat. Between them is the place where Jesus lay, the propitiation for our sins.

The other place where this word is used is in **1 John. Chapter 2:2** tells us he is the propitiation for the sins of the whole world. This identifies the magnitude of his propitiation. John had just said that as Christians we should not sin, but when we do we know we have an advocate, that our sins are paid for.

**Chapter 4:10** looks at the love of God, who sent his son to pay the price, to take the judgement for sin upon himself and become our propitiation.

And in case we think this is some new idea in the new testament, look back to our passage, **Isaiah 53. Read v4-6**. The first verse I ever memorised was verse 6, and it is a lovely picture of the propitiation of the son of God, taking the punishment for my sin on himself that I could receive god's mercy. Then look at **v11** - I am accounted righteous because he bore the punishment for my sins.