

Propitiation

Opening Hymn: #190 — “The Precious Blood”

1 John 2:2 And he is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only, but also for the sins of the whole world.

1 John 4:10 Herein is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us, and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins.

The word “propitiation” has more or less passed out of our everyday language and means very little to us. So we need a better word. Let’s try the RSV:

1 John 4:10 (RSV) In this is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the **expiation** for our sins.

expiation: the means by which atonement or reparation is made.

atonement: satisfaction or reparation for a wrong or injury; amends

“Expiation” is good and can be used to render the Greek, but somehow the word “atonement” sounds best of all, and that is the way Phillips renders this text:

1 John 4:10 (Phillips) We see real love, not in the fact that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son to make **personal atonement** for our sins.

The entire subject of atonement cannot be discussed within Bible Student circles without considering the atonement sacrifices of the Israelites. The word “atonement” appears 72 times in the books of Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers alone. In fact, the only other scripture that uses the word “propitiation” actually forces us back to the Israelites and their sacrificial arrangements:

Rom. 3:24,25 Being justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God hath set forth to be a propitiation through faith in his blood...

Strong #2435: *an expiatory (place or thing); an atoning victim or the lid of the Ark.*

Rom. 3:25 (Diaglott) whom God has set forth to be a Mercyseat[†] by His own blood...

[†]The Greek word *hilasteerion* never signifies “propitiation,” as it is translated in the common version; but it is always used wherever it occurs, both in the Old Testament and the New, to express the mercy-seat; which was the golden lid of the ark upon which the Shechinah or cloud of glory rested, and from which oracles were dispensed. [end of quote]

We have confirmation that the Diaglott is correct when we turn to the only other place where #2435 is used:

Heb. 9:4,5 [beyond the second veil was] ... the ark of the covenant ... and over it the cherubims of glory shadowing the **mercyseat**; of which we cannot now speak particularly.

So we conclude that the word “atonement” or, in this latter instance, “place of atonement” is a better expression than “propitiation.” We have now examined all three instances where the word “propitiation” is used in the King James. So now let’s turn our attention to...

Sacrifice and the Tabernacle

There is no question that the Tabernacle, its construction and its ceremonies, is meant to teach important lessons. Twelve chapters in the Bible talk about its creation, while only two chapters are devoted to the creation of the world. Noah's ark was the first structure whose plans were provided by God. The Tabernacle was the second, and we are told that the builders had to follow the plans precisely.

Heb. 8:5 [Phillips] [The priests] are serving what is only a pattern or reproduction of things that exist in heaven. Moses, you will remember, when he was going to construct the tabernacle, was cautioned by God in these words: See that thou make all things according to the pattern that was showed thee in the mount.

Large sections of the book of Revelation draw on illustrations that come from the Tabernacle. The entire book of Hebrews explains clearly and concisely what those sacrifices were all about. Without this explanation and a knowledge of the truth, how revolting it all would be. Animals slaughtered in the morning, animals slaughtered in the evening, and the blood seemingly splashed on everything in sight.

But that “pattern that was shown to Moses in the mount” was designed to teach two lessons:

1. Forgiveness comes only through the shedding of blood;
2. Salvation is obtained through atonement.

Paul makes it completely clear what that ancient pattern was all about:

Heb. 9:10-12 [Phillips] The ceremonies are concerned with food and drink, various washings and rules for bodily conduct, and were only intended to be valid until the time when Christ should establish the truth. For now Christ has come among us, the High Priest of the good things which were to come, and has passed through a greater and more perfect tent which no human hand had made. It was not with goats' or calves' blood but with his own blood that he entered once and for all into the Holy of Holies, having won for us men eternal reconciliation with God.

All that blood was necessary to show the concept of “propitiation”—or atonement. That blood and nearly all the symbolism of the Tabernacle was meant to illustrate the great sacrifice for sin that was yet future, and that means the sacrifice of Christ.

Heb. 9:22-24 [Phillips] And you will find that in the Law almost all cleansing is made by means of blood—as the common saying has it: “No shedding of blood, no remission of sin.” It was necessary for the earthly reproductions of heavenly realities to be purified by such methods, but the actual heavenly things could only be made pure in God's sight by higher sacrifices than these. Christ did not therefore enter into any holy places made by human hands ... but he entered Heaven itself to make his appearance before God as High Priest on our behalf.

Christ in the Tabernacle

As we enter the courtyard that surrounds the tabernacle structure, the first thing we see is a large altar, 4½ feet high, and 7½ feet square. We are told that it was to be overlaid with brass (Exod. 27:2) so we call it the Brazen altar. The Hebrew word translated brass is #5178 which Strong's says means copper. In fact this Hebrew word is translated just once as copper (in Ezra 8:27). Yet we believe the altar was not made of pure copper and not an alloy of copper and zinc which is the way you make brass. I have read that zinc was a metal that was unknown in those times. We should call it a Copper Altar, but no one does. It was made of wood sides overlaid with sheets of copper. Actually there were the four sides plus a grate that was positioned at the half way mark.

Ex. 27:5 Thou shalt put [the grate] under the compass of the altar beneath, that the net may be even to the midst* of the altar. [*Rotherham footnote: "half"]

It was on this altar that sacrifices were burned. The halfway mark was 1½ cubits, and that was the height of the mercyseat in the Most Holy. Thus we see that the sacrifice in the courtyard—the blood from which was sprinkled on the mercyseat—was neither higher or lower than the representation in the Most Holy. It was the same sacrifice, but illustrating how the sacrifice was consumed. The “value” of the sacrifice—the blood—was what was carried into the Tabernacle. It was the sacrifice on the Brazen Altar that brought justification, and we know that our justification comes only through Christ:

Rom. 5:9 Much more then, being now **justified** by [Christ's] blood, we shall be saved from wrath through him.

There were so many sacrifices that it is easy to get confused and think of them all as the same thing. Actually two major considerations are all that we need keep in mind: (1) the sin offering; (2) the burnt offering, or "sweet savor" offerings. The sin offering was essential, and it had to be made first. The lesson is that there is no access to God without there first being a sacrifice for sin. After this has been done acceptably, then other offerings—offerings which were considered a sweet savor by God—could be given. This was such an important lesson that we see it being taught at the very first mention of sacrifice in the Bible.

Gen. 4:3-7 [Rotherham] So it came to pass after certain days that Cain brought in of the fruit of the ground a present to Yahweh; Abel also even he brought in of the firstlings of his sheep and of their fat. And Yahweh approved of Abel and of his present, but of Cain and his present he approved not. And it angered Cain greatly and his countenance fell. So then Yahweh said unto Cain, Wherefore hath it angered thee, and wherefore hath thy countenance fallen? Shall it not, if thou do right, be *an uplifting (of my countenance and of thine)?* But if thou do not right, at the entrance a sin-bearer is lying. (*As much as to say: "With which thy brother will supply thee"*) Unto thee, moreover, shall be his longing, though thou rule over him.

Italics represent Rotherham footnotes.

The *Companion Bible* draws our attention to the fact that the Hebrew words say that Abel brought in “the firstlings, and the fattest ones too” yet the text does not say Cain offered his firstfruits. The implication might be that Cain’s offering was not the best he had. The “approval” of God of one

offering and not the other might very well have been shown by fire from heaven. Cain had the chance to do better, but when he talked with his brother, he allowed rage to overpower him and he so killed him. Cain probably couldn't understand why his gift wasn't just as acceptable as Abel's, but when told what to do, he refused and killed his brother out of hatred. "Religion is and ever has been the greatest cause of blood-shedding"—*Companion Bible*.

The Laver

As we proceed from the brazen altar toward the door of the Tabernacle, we encounter the laver—a large bowl made of copper mirrors holding water for cleansing. The priests were instructed to use the laver before entering the tabernacle under penalty of death.

Ex. 30:20 When they go into the tabernacle of the congregation, they shall wash with water, that they die not...

The symbolism is clear: the unwashed priest perishes. Likewise those followers of Jesus at this time must be washed if they are to be acceptable to the Heavenly Father.

Titus 3:5 .. according to his mercy he saved us, by the washing of regeneration, and renewing of the Holy Spirit.

1 Cor. 6:11 [RSV] But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God.

The Incense Altar

As we pass through the door of the tabernacle, we find another altar, made of wood overlaid with gold sheets. It is the incense altar. What does it represent?

Psa. 141:2 Let my prayer be set forth before thee as incense and the lifting up of my hands as the evening sacrifice.

Most expositors suggest that the incense altar shows communion with God in prayer. In fact, Lev. 16:18 says that the altar was "before the Lord"—meaning right in front of the mercyseat (even though there was a veil between).

Lev. 16:18 And he shall go out unto the altar that is before the LORD, and make an atonement for it; and shall take of the blood of the bullock, and of the blood of the goat, and put it upon the horns of the altar round about.

This blood is the blood of the sin offering and includes both the bullock and the goat. God provided two animals for a sin offering because he meant to illustrate two sacrifices—namely, his son Jesus and those who would be associated with him in a life of sacrifice. If in this picture we were to see only the sacrifice of Jesus, only one animal would have been sacrificed.

The offering of incense was perpetual. Aaron offered up incense every morning and every evening [Ex. 30:7,8]. Paul tells the Christian church: "Pray without ceasing" [1 Thess. 5:17].

Rev. 8:3 And another angel came and stood at the altar, having a golden censer, and there was given unto him much incense that he should offer it with the prayers of all saints upon the golden altar which was before the throne.

Although this is a somewhat different vision, there is an interesting lesson in it. The prayers go up **with** the incense. It is Christ's intercession on our behalf that makes our prayers acceptable. Without **his** merit, no prayer goes up.

Rom. 8:34 It is Christ that died, yea rather, that is risen again, who is even at the right hand of God, who also maketh intercession for us.

The day of atonement sacrifices are described in Leviticus, chapter 16. A reading of that chapter seems to imply that only the High Priest was to be involved. Verse 17 even specifically states that no man [excepting the High Priest] was to be in the tabernacle when atonement was being made. We see Christ as our High Priest, officiating over the sacrifice of himself [the bullock] and his body members [the church]. He is both priest and sacrifice:

Isa 53:7,12 He is brought as a lamb to the slaughter ... he hath poured out his soul unto death ... and he bare the sin of many.

The Mercyseat

We must pass under the veil between the Holy and Most Holy. When our Lord died on the cross, the veil in the temple was ripped from top to bottom. Jewish authorities attest that it was four inches thick and tightly woven ... showing the miracle that occurred.

Heb. 10:19-22 [Phillips] So, by virtue of the blood of Jesus, you and I, my brothers, may now have confidence to enter the Holy of Holies by a fresh and living way, which he has opened up for us by himself passing through the curtain, that is, his own human nature. Further, since we have a great High Priest set over the household of God, let us draw near with true hearts and fullest confidence, knowing that our inmost souls have been purified by the sprinkling of his blood just as our bodies are cleansed by the washing of clean water.

When we read about prayers and incense in Rev. 8:3, we are told that the altar was before the heavenly throne. In the tabernacle, the incense altar was before the mercy seat and that mercy seat was also a throne:

Ex. 25:22 And there I will meet with thee [when kings meet others, they are on their throne], and I will commune with thee from above the mercyseat, from between the two cherubims which are upon the ark of the testimony.

The flat lid of the mercyseat represented God's justice, for it was on the lid that the blood was sprinkled. God's wisdom could be pictured in the supernatural light above the lid, and the two cherubims—love and power—look down upon justice, waiting for it to be satisfied with the blood of sacrifice before they can spring into action on behalf of the people.

Lev. 16:14 And [Aaron] shall take of the blood of the bullock and sprinkle it with his finger upon the mercyseat eastward, and before the mercyseat shall he sprinkle of the blood with his finger seven times.

The journey of the blood from the brazen altar here reaches an end. The sprinkling of the blood satisfies justice and instead of a throne of justice, it has become transformed into a throne of grace:

Heb. 4:16 Let us therefore come boldly unto the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

Why was blood necessary? It specifically pictured the giving up of a life:

Lev. 17:11 For the life of the flesh is in the blood; and I have given it to you upon the altar to make an atonement for your souls: for it is the blood that maketh an atonement for the soul.

God's justice could never be satisfied by the blood from animals. It is only when we realize that God was illustrating a great sacrifice to come that we can understand it at all:

Heb. 9:12-14 Neither by the blood of goats and calves, but by his own blood [Christ] entered in once into the holy place, having obtained eternal redemption for us. For if the blood of bulls and of goats and the ashes of a heifer sprinkling the unclean sanctifieth to the purifying of the flesh, how much more shall the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without spot to God purge your conscience from dead works to serve the living God?

Turning again to a scripture we started with...

Rom. 3:25 Whom God hath set forth to be a propitiation through faith in his blood...

“The thought in the O. T. sacrifices and in the N. T. fulfillment is that Christ completely satisfied the just demands of a holy God for judgment on sin by his death on the cross. Propitiation satisfies the righteousness of a holy God, thereby making it possible for him to show mercy righteously.”

——Scofield Reference Bible footnote

As we look down the paths of history, we notice a progression in the way God has manifested himself to his people:

1. A personal and individual revelation existed with those who worshipped him ... includes Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.
2. His presence became more encompassing in the tabernacle arrangement, and in particular the visible cloud that all the people recognized.
3. The glory of the Father that shown out through his son demonstrated to all the people what perfection really was. “We beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth” says John [1:14].
4. The broader manifestation shown by the indwelling of the holy spirit in all of Christ's followers throughout the world during the past 2000 years.
5. The worldwide and universal manifestation to come when the New Jerusalem shall descend upon a glorified earth.

Rev.21:3-5 And I heard a great voice out of heaven saying, Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and he will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself shall be with them, and be their God. And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away. And he that sat upon the throne said, Behold, I make all things new. And he said unto me, Write, for these words are true and faithful.

Closing Hymn: #212—"The Sinner's Friend"

[First given in Los Angeles, June, 1971. Published in The Dawn, March, 1990.]

NOTES:

The Tabernacle; W. G. Moorehead; Kregel Publications, Grand Rapids, 1952. [Originally written around 1895]

Tabernacle of Israel; James Strong; Baker Book House, Grand Rapids, 1952. [Originally written around 1890]