

BIG WORDS series: Propitiation

The Bible uses some “big words” to convey some complex ideas that are important for us to understand. Unfortunately we often breeze by them, thinking that we have an idea of what these words mean, but we miss the full impact that a true understanding can give us. So, for August, I would like to take a closer look at a bunch of “big words”, words that we have heard in sermons or come across in our Bible reading, but may not have grasped.

The first of these words is “propitiation”. It comes from the Greek word *hilasterion* which means “that which expiates or propitiates”. Now, don’t you feel better. “Ah, that which expiates or propitiates . . . now I understand.” What isn’t immediately clear is that many of our bibles mistranslate this word. They ignore the core meaning because they think that it puts God in a bad light, and they substitute the meanings of other Greek words. The NIV says that Jesus is a sacrifice of atonement, the New Living uses the phrase “sacrifice for sin”, the Message says, “to clear the world of sin” and various other translations use those phrases or ones similar. The ESV and the New American Standard use the word “propitiation”, but why?

Here’s the controversy: Propitiation means the turning away of anger by the offering of a gift. When we see that and define that from our human perspective, it seems almost like buying your way out of trouble, trying to turn God’s anger away from us by giving Him something. So that makes some people want to translate this word a little bit differently, like “sacrifice of atonement” or “sacrifice for sin”. Some scholars don’t like the idea of God being angry, especially if they think that His anger can be appeased with some kind of gift or offering. And others don’t like the fact that this same word was used by the pagans of the ancient world who thought of their gods as unpredictable, maybe temperamental, easily upset and liable to get angry with humans for some little trifling matter.

For all of those reasons, the word propitiation has become rare among the modern translations. And yet this Greek word, *hilasterion*, appears in some important New Testament passages. Let me read three:

All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely by His grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. God presented Him as a propitiation through faith in His blood. He did this to demonstrate His justice, because in His forbearance He had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished. (Rom.3:23-5)

If you don’t know what propitiation means, you don’t get any sense of God’s anger at sin in these verses. It just seems that God sees that humans fall short of His glory, so He justifies us freely if we put our faith in Jesus’ sacrifice.

But the rest of verse 25 talks about God demonstrating His justice; having allowed sin to go unpunished, He was now saying, “No, this can’t be overlooked. Your rebellion against Me must be dealt with and it will be dealt with through the cross.” Overlooking

crimes is not justice. Refusing to deal with evil, pretending that everything is going to be alright, is not justice. And God is just, and He chooses to mete out justice in such a way that the penalty for sin falls on Himself. Jesus is 'propitiation', meaning that Jesus' gift of Himself on the cross, satisfies the anger of God against human sin. It appeases the Father. More on that in a minute, but now the second text:

For this reason (Jesus) had to be made like His brothers in every way, in order that He might become a merciful and faithful high priest in service to God and that He might make propitiation for the sins of the people. For since He Himself suffered when He was tempted, He is able to help those who are being tempted. (Hebrews 2:17,18)

Notice that Jesus fully takes on the human condition, being made like His brothers in every way, in order that He might serve us and serve God. Who does that? The priest. The priest was the person in the Old Testament who stood between sinful man and holy God and offered sacrifices to pay for sin. The priest represented God to humans and humans to their God. And here we read that Jesus was made to be like us so that He could become a merciful and faithful high priest in service to God. Next, the verse says, "AND, that He might make propitiation for the sins of the people." He became like us, so that He could represent us to the Father and He offered Himself so that He could satisfy the righteous anger of God against our sin.

Two more, from 1 John:

If anybody does sin, we have one who speaks to the Father in our defense -- Jesus Christ the Righteous One. He is the propitiation for our sins, and not only for ours, but also for the sins of the whole world. (1 John 2:1,2)

This is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son as a propitiation for our sins. (1 John 4:10)

Again, if you don't think of propitiation as having something to do with satisfying anger, you don't pick up that tone from this verse. You don't feel God's anger at sin; what you feel is God's love and willingness to suffer on our behalf, to give us what we don't deserve.

Clearly, it's important to understand the anger side of this, so that we can fully understand this word in the contexts in which it has been used in Romans, Hebrews and 1 John. What happens inside you when you hear that some strong man comes to the home of an older woman who has just lost her husband and demands that she leave, now!? This happens in many parts of Africa -- it's almost expected. What happens inside you when you hear that one of your neighbours has a daughter who has been missing for weeks? And when you read that there are more slaves in the world today than ever before in history? And that the majority of these slaves are forced into the sex trade?

What happens inside you when you see pictures or read descriptions of ISIS fighters destroying centuries-old artifacts, burning churches, raping and killing women and children, beheading people who don't want to be Muslim?

If you don't feel some measure of anger at the cruelty and oppression that takes place on a regular basis, if you don't react to the evil and violence that stalk the streets of cities everywhere, you're missing the heart of God. He is angry at sin, at the pain that it causes the innocent and at the violence that our sin does to His character and to His purposes on the earth. It's part of who God is that He loves justice and righteousness. It's in His nature to hate evil acts that deprive people of the beauty and wonder of life that He has created for our good, for us to enjoy and thrive in. And so, when God sees the evil that occurs all over the world, it makes Him angry.

Two more things about God's anger:

1. This is not a surprise to anyone who has read the Bible - even a little bit. You read in many places that God is angry at sin, that He hates evil. You read how He guides His people to deal with the evil they encounter in various parts of their journey as a nation. You see even in the language of Paul in Ephesians, and we'll see it again in the language of John in the book of Revelation, that God calls us to be armed and ready to withstand all the attacks of the evil one. He doesn't want us to get taken in by the spirit of the age, the spirit of selfishness and violence that rises up -- in all times, in all ages -- against the love and the justice and the holiness of God.

2. The second thing that influences our view of God's anger is the fact that, in the ancient world, people viewed the gods as removed from human emotion, untouched by our issues and concerns. Their gods had emotions, and lived like the humans below them, with all kinds of rivalries and envy and pride and anger - but they didn't care what effect their actions might have on those humans. Instead, they looked to the humans to provide them with something, like a bribe, in a way, a payment, a propitiation, to satisfy their desire for vengeance or whatever it was they wanted. When scholars saw that this word "propitiation" that was used to describe the appeasement of the whims of pagan gods was also being used to describe the sacrifice of Christ for us, they naturally wanted to interpret it in a different way.

The reality is that this is a good word. It is based in the certainty that God is angered by the destructive behavior of human sin. We should find that a positive, a good thing. Let me read you an excerpt from an update I received recently from George Otis Jr., the man behind the whole "Transformations" movement, where prayer is the catalyst for cultural change in nations around the world. This update concerns the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation in South Dakota and the horrific numbers of youth suicides among that First Nation -- claiming about 300 lives in just the past few months.

The sadness across the reservation is palpable. Parents and young friends were holding pictures of those lost and were wailing in pain. Tribal leaders, shaken to the core, launched a study to better understand what was behind this catastrophe. This took place in early March and involved interviews with a large group of mainly middle and high school youth. Their paramount desires were:

- 1. To know their true identity*
- 2. To have safe places (because their homes and their streets are not safe). They need places where they can do homework and get help, counseling*
- 3. Most importantly, they want their parents to act like parents -- to stop drinking,*

doing drugs and abusing their kids.

It is abundantly clear that the primary problems on the reservation are linked to sexual abuse and witchcraft. Despite protests from many traditionalists and their Anglo apologists, a lot of the Native "medicine" is no longer merely herbal and ceremonial. It is dark ritual called Yuwipi . . . It is apparent that the recent spate of suicides was launched on the reservation through one of these rituals. Indeed, the medicine man's own daughter was the first victim. Most concerning is the fact that young people are being recruited into these rituals (which include self mutilation and other perverse activities) in large numbers. "Witchcraft provides a dark love," as one Native girl put it. "There is no drug like it."

Should God not be angry, when people choose Satan's spirituality and the darkness and death it brings to their own children, instead of the light and love that He has shown us through Jesus? Should God not feel anything when we descend into the pit of darkness and drag others with us, destroying their lives in the process? Of course He does and He stirs us up to pray, and I can tell you that He responds in powerful ways to the prayers of His people.

Just so I don't leave this scene in South Dakota without hope, I can tell you that a strong Christian woman who is part of that people group named Norma Blacksmith is gathering intercessors to pray into this darkness. One spot that she and one other intercessor targeted for prayer was the wrecking yard that served as a front for a notorious drug dealer. After that prayer, a tornado touched down on just this one spot, touching nothing else around it, and destroyed the place. Not satisfied, she asked God to do something about 15 drug dealers -- ALL 15 were arrested in the weeks that followed her prayers.

Otis comments on this prayer movement:

It is not the casual, disconnected prayer so many Christians engage in when they think time is on their side. This has been consistent, heartfelt prayer flowing out of desperation.

That's important perspective on this situation, but the main point in describing this tragedy is to say that a word which describes God as being angry at human behaviour is a very appropriate word -- it fits the need.

The other part of the word has to do with a payment, an offering that turns away God's anger. When we're talking about the ancient pagan gods with their capricious ways, their impulsive emotions and vengeful motives, we rightly see a bribe, a payoff that benefits the god, an injustice from the gods' side that adds to the wrong rather than dealing with it. But when we're talking about the God of Scripture we're no longer dealing with this motivation or this outcome. We're now talking about a God of justice, whose ways are righteous and whose motives are loving. For Him to receive satisfaction, a payment for sin, is not a personal benefit demanded by a petulant but powerful being. When God requires a payment it has to do with justice being served.

Let's step back and look at the big picture. Every person has done things we shouldn't do and failed to do things we should do. Every one of us has, in Paul's words in Romans 3, fallen short of the glory of God. We've missed the target of righteous living that our Creator established for us to aim for. Because of that, there is a lot of pain and suffering in the world that wouldn't be there if we'd done it right. The pain and suffering that humans have caused, not only to one another and to the rest of creation, but to God Himself, has made Him both angry and incredibly sad. This has to be paid for somehow. It has to be remedied. The God who looked at everything He had made and pronounced it "very good", won't just shrug at the devastation that now mars His creation and say, "Oh, well." When we get to the book of Revelation, we will see that in God's ultimate plan, the Creation gets restored, it is healed. God has a redemptive purpose for ALL He has made and He has not, nor will He, simply abandon it to evil.

How does a God of justice - who does things right - how does He deal with the injustice caused by human sin, by human rebellion against His plan and purpose? He pays for it Himself. As the judge He renders the verdict that we are guilty and then offers, at His cost, the gift that turns away righteous anger and allows us to go free. So when we read in Hebrews that Jesus was made like His brothers in every way so that He could make propitiation for the sins of the people, we are seeing the generous mercy of God. He pays the price, all of it. And when we read in 1 John 4 that God loved us and sent His Son as a propitiation for our sins, we understand His motivation. All that the Lord God has done for us, continues to do for us and will do for us in the future, comes from His love for us. Perhaps the whole equation for how God can offer the propitiation for human sin is summed up in James 2:13 in the phrase, "Mercy triumphs over judgment!"

One other aspect of this word that I haven't mentioned is the idea of "covering". The word *hilasterion* is used in the Greek translation of the Old Testament to describe the covering of the ark of the covenant, also called the "mercy-seat". Our sins are covered over, taken out of view and so no longer visible. The result of all this is that sin has been dealt with, fully, completely, and we are free beings.

Applications:

1. My first application today is a call to prayer. When you hear about evil things going on in the world, instead of worrying or getting angry, ask God to bring mercy and love to bear on that situation. I think about the devastation that has taken place in the Pine Ridge Reservation and how it has only been prayer that has begun to turn things around. What we want in this world is to see God's kingdom come and His will being done and the primary thing we can do to bring that about is to pray that He will act.
2. My second application is that we are invited to live freely and fully. God doesn't ask us or expect us to live in guilt or shame, but in joyful recognition that our sin is covered over, the price is paid, the future is secured and the present is an opportunity to walk with God, to bring His Kingdom wherever we live and work and move. We do that best when we do it in the freedom and love that God's grace provides for us.

3. Finally, I think it's compulsory for a believer to live in gratitude. We need to be grateful every day for the gifts of life and love and grace that the Father gives to us through Jesus and His sacrifice for us. Let's honour Him by living thankfully, by praising Him often, and by being as willing to extend grace to others as He has been in extending grace to us.