

Propitiation: What is it, and where made?

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The truth of propitiation lies at the very foundation of our faith, and on this very account it is of the first importance that the teaching of the scripture respecting it should be correctly apprehended. The word is not used in the Old Testament, though the thing itself, as we shall hope to see, is clearly distinguished in the rites of the great day of atonement. It is only found some four times in the New Testament — it is twice employed by the apostle John (1 John 2: 2; 1 John 4: 10); it is once used in its verbal form in the gospel of Luke, where it is translated, "God, *be merciful* to me a sinner" (Luke 18: 13); and lastly, it occurs in Hebrews (chapter 2: 17), where it is rendered "to make reconciliation," instead of, as it should be, "to make propitiation." That there might be no doubt as to the significance of the word, two other forms of it are also found — one in Romans 3: 25, the other in Hebrews 9: 5. In these cases it is *ἰλαστήριον* and not *ἰλασμός*, and is given in Romans as "propitiation," and in Hebrews as "mercy-seat." The latter rendering is correct; and it is important to maintain it, because the Spirit of God thereby reveals to us the connection between the mercy-seat and the propitiation, and in this way affords us the key to its proper meaning.

It is to be gathered therefore that in the Old Testament propitiation was made on the mercy-seat in the holy of holies, and thus if we turn to the details of what took place on the great day of atonement, as described in Leviticus 16, we shall be able to understand its import. In the rites of that solemn day we find then the manner of Aaron's entrance into the sanctuary prescribed; but we need only concern ourselves for the present purpose with the mode of his dealing with the blood of the sin-offering, whether that of the bullock, which was for himself and his house, or that of the goat, which was the sin-offering for the people. It should be noted, however, that before the blood of these offerings was dealt with Aaron was directed to "take a censer full of burning coals of fire from off the altar before the Lord, and his hands full of sweet incense beaten small, and bring it within the veil: and he shall put the incense upon the fire before the Lord, that the cloud of the incense may cover the mercy-seat that is upon the testimony, that he die not." (vv. 12, 13.) This burning incense, with the sweet and acceptable odours which it emitted when brought into contact with the holy fire, is a figure of the fragrant perfections and graces of Christ Himself to God, and is therefore a precious reminder that the person and the work of Christ can never be separated, and that indeed His perfect and finished work derives all its efficacy from what He was in Himself, that all the value and preciousness of His person to God enter into His work.

This being done, the directions concerning the blood follow — "And he shall take of the blood of the bullock, and sprinkle it with his finger upon the mercy-seat eastward; and before the mercy-seat shall he sprinkle of the blood with his finger seven times." So also with the blood of the goat of the sin-offering. It was to be brought within the veil, and Aaron was to do with this

"as he did with the blood of the bullock, and sprinkle it upon the mercy-seat, and before the mercy-seat." (vv. 14, 15.) Into the details of the sin-offering we need not here enter further than to remind the reader that the bodies of the animals so offered were consumed with fire without the camp — the fat having been burnt on the altar (vv. 25-27; compare Hebrews 13: 11-13), as our concern is especially with the blood. This was sprinkled then upon — once upon and seven times before — the mercy-seat. A few words on each of these actions will explain the subject.

In the first place the blood was sprinkled upon the mercy-seat, and it was this sprinkling that constituted propitiation; for the mercy-seat was God's throne in the midst of Israel. He dwelt between the cherubim (1 Samuel 4: 4; Psalm 80: 1, etc.), which represented the attributes of His government, being thus the upholders of His throne, and which consequently possessed a judicial character towards Israel, inasmuch as they were sinners. Jehovah was holy, and as such claimed holiness from His people; and He maintained His government in their midst according to what He was as thus revealed, and the law was given as the standard of His requirements. But no sooner was the law given than it was transgressed, whereby its righteous penalty of death was incurred; and this penalty must have been exacted had no way been found to satisfy the claims of a holy God upon a nation of sinners. God Himself promulgated the righteous foundation on which atonement could be made for their sins, and on which He could still dwell in their midst and maintain towards them relationships of grace; and this foundation was found in the blood of the sin-offering which was annually sprinkled on the great day of atonement upon the mercy-seat. The fire which consumed the body of the sin-offering without the camp told of holy judgment against sin, the fat burnt upon the altar spoke of the inward perfection and acceptability of the victim, that is, of Christ as typified by it, while the blood sprinkled on the mercy-seat, representing as it did the life of the victim which had been laid down under judgment, met on behalf of the people all the holy claims of Jehovah which He had against them because of their sins. (See Lev. 17: 11.) When therefore the eye of God rested on the sprinkled blood He was satisfied, and He could righteously pass over the sins of His people from year to year, and still dwell in their midst, and maintain the relationships which He had established.

But this early ceremony was typical, foreshadowing as it did the one perfect sacrifice of Christ. (See Heb. 9, 10; also Heb. 13: 11-13.) The apostle John therefore tells us that Jesus Christ, the righteous, is the propitiation for our sins and also for the whole world. (1 John 2: 2; also 1 John 4: 10.) And from this we learn that the blood of Christ has done once and for all what the blood of the sin-offering accomplished in type for the year on the day of atonement; that is, it has made propitiation. It is true that John says that Christ Himself is the propitiation; but we also read that God has set Him forth a propitiatory (or mercy-seat) *through faith, in His blood* (Rom. 3: 25), whence we understand that the blood of Christ, deriving, as we have before seen, all its ineffable value from what He was in Himself, has answered all the claims of God on sinful men, has glorified Him in all that He is concerning the question of sin and sins. Hence it is that God can now righteously justify everyone who believes in Jesus (Rom. 3: 26), and that He can send forth the gospel of His grace to the whole world.

Secondly, the blood was sprinkled seven times before the mercy-seat. This was the place of the high priest's approach, and which in this way represented his standing before God. The blood was sprinkled there in testimony that propitiation had been made, and seven times that it might be a perfect testimony. Once was enough for the eye of God, in token that the sacrifice had been

offered, and all His claims met; but man needed, or, to speak more exactly, God vouchsafed to man, a perfect assurance that propitiation had been accomplished, and accordingly it was sprinkled before the mercy-seat seven times. Whoever, therefore, receives the testimony of God in the gospel, and thus approaches the mercy-seat (Christ), "through faith in His blood," finds in the very presence of God the perfect witness that propitiation has been made for his sins, as well as that they have been borne by another, and borne away for ever. (See Lev. 16: 21, 22.)

Such, then, is propitiation, and we now proceed with the second branch of our enquiry, viz., *Where was it made?* In the olden economy it was clearly made in the holiest, and it has been contended that the propitiation therefore which Christ made was in heaven, in the heavenly sanctuary, or otherwise the thing typified would not correspond with the type. Furthermore, it is urged that Christ entered heaven for its accomplishment after death and before His resurrection, and the epistle to the Hebrews is appealed to in support of these contentions. Let us then examine a scripture or two from the epistle to the Hebrews on the subject.

First, let us turn to Hebrews 9: 24-28. We cite the whole passage, italicizing the words to which we call attention: "For Christ is not entered into the holy places made with hands, which are the figures of the true; but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God for us: nor yet that He should offer Himself often, as the high priest entereth into the holy place every year with the blood of others; for then must He often have suffered since the foundation of the world: *but now once in the end of the world hath He appeared to put away sin by the sacrifice of Himself.* And as it is appointed unto men once to die, but after this the judgment: so *Christ was once offered* to bear the sins of many; and unto them that look for Him shall He appear the second time without sin unto salvation." The allusion in all this scripture is to the rites of the great day of atonement, and it is on this very account that this scripture speaks with authority upon the points raised; and the reader will scarcely fail to note that it is a contrast, rather than a comparison, drawn between Christ and the Jewish high priest. Thus, in the first place, Christ has entered into heaven itself, and not into the holy places made with hands, which are the figures (antitypes) of the true; secondly, His one sacrifice is contrasted with the annual sacrifices of the Jews; thirdly, He was once offered to bear the sins of many — an allusion to the scapegoat bearing every year the sins of Israel confessed over it by the high priest; and, lastly (and this point is comparison), just as the Jewish people waited for the coming of the high priest out of the tabernacle in proof of the accomplishment of the work of atonement, so now God's people look for the appearance of Christ a second time without sin unto salvation.

We have indicated these several points to show beyond all doubt that the reference is to the day of atonement, so that we may be the better able to judge if Christ entered heaven, as the high priest did into the holiest, to make propitiation. Let us then observe the actual language employed. We are distinctly told that the high priest of old (and we know the fact. also from the Old Testament scriptures) entered into the holy place every year with the blood of others; but when giving that which corresponds to this in the work of our Lord — that is, the propitiatory part of His work — the Holy Spirit says, "Once in the end of the world [consummation of the ages] hath He APPEARED [has been manifested] to put away sin by the sacrifice of Himself." That this is propitiation all are agreed, because it is the ground on which sin will be ultimately entirely put away (compare John 1: 29); and hence, if the contention is correct, that Christ made propitiation in heaven because the high priest did in the holiest, the word "entered" would

certainly have been chosen rather than "appeared." Instead of that, the Holy Ghost turns aside to mark the contrast, and causes the word "appeared" (or "hath been manifested") to be written, and thereby connects the work of propitiation with the presence of Christ in the world. Observe, moreover, that it says, that He "appeared to put away sin by *the sacrifice of Himself*;" and this emphatically links propitiation with the finished work, with the sacrifice, of Christ on the cross. The conclusion therefore is evident, from the very terms of this scripture, that while the high priest of Israel made propitiation in the earthly sanctuary, it was on the cross that Christ made propitiation. And it is not without significance that the very apostle who speaks twice of Christ as the propitiation should be one chosen to bear record that, when the soldier with a spear pierced the side of a dead Christ, there forthwith came out BLOOD and water — the blood of expiation and the water of purification; another proof that propitiation was completed on the cross. Again, when speaking of the substitutionary part of our Lord's work, the Spirit of God says, "Once offered to bear the sins of many," thereby identifying this part of His work also with the sacrifice of Himself.*

*In support of the above statements the reader may also be referred to the fact that the veil was rent immediately upon the death of our Lord (Matt. 27: 50, 51) — another proof that propitiation was made on the Cross.

There is yet another scripture in this same chapter of Hebrews on which the contention referred to is directly based. This must, therefore, be also passed under review. It is as follows: "But Christ being come an high priest of good things to come, by a greater and more perfect tabernacle, not made with hands, that is to say, not of this building; neither by the blood of goats and calves, but by His own blood He entered in once into the holy place, having obtained eternal redemption." (vv. 11-12.) According to the punctuation of this passage in the Authorized Version of the Scriptures Christ is made to enter the holy place "by His own blood," and this having been commonly accepted, many different interpretations of these words have been offered. But a closer inspection of this scripture shows that this punctuation is based upon a misconception; viz., upon a supposed correspondence between the entrance of the high priest of old into the holiest with the blood of the sin-offering, and the entrance of Christ with His own blood into heaven. And yet the very words employed might have indicated the mistake; for the phrase διὰ τοῦ ἰδίου αἵματος (by His own blood) is peculiar, and could not be translated by either "with" or "in virtue of His own blood." The question then is whether the words "by His own blood" are necessarily connected at all with the word "entered." We unhesitatingly answer in the negative; and as confidently affirm that they are connected with the commencement of verse 11. To show this we leave out, for the moment, the intervening words, and it will then read thus: "But Christ being come . . . neither by the blood of goats and calves, but by His own blood, He entered in once into the holy place having obtained eternal redemption."* Before we point out the force of the passage, as so explained, we may cite 1 John 5: 6 in confirmation. We read there, "This is He that came by water and blood" (δι' ὕδατος καὶ αἵματος), where the preposition and the case governed by it are the same; and this entirely supports the view given in the note from the New Translation, that the preposition δια in Heb. 9: 11, 12 is characteristic of Christ's coming, and not of His entering into heaven.

*It has been stated that the late J. N. D. was opposed to this rendering. It is quite true that, when touching upon the great day of atonement, or the priesthood of Christ, he often spoke in a

general way of Christ entering into the heavenly sanctuary with His own blood; but the following note from the New Translation will show what his exact thought was. He says, "διὰ here is, I doubt not at all, characteristic of His coming. He came in that way, His coming being in the power of, and characterized by, these things; not the place through, nor the means by which" (i.e., we may explain, not the perfect tabernacle through which as a place, nor the blood as the means by which). "See this use of διὰ with the genitive in Rom. 2: 27. In Rom. 4: 13 we see the transition to this use of it."

There are then three distinct points to be noted in our scripture: First, "Christ being come an high priest of good things to come;" secondly, His coming being in the power of and characterized by the "greater and more perfect tabernacle, not made with hands, that is to say, not of this building," and "by His own blood" (in contrast with the earthly sanctuary, and with the blood of goats and calves); and thirdly, that Christ entered in once into the holy place, on the ground of having obtained eternal redemption.*

*The reader will therefore perceive that the attempt to render the word εὐράμμενος in any other way than "having found," is to contradict the plain teaching of this scripture.

We find then that this scripture is in entire harmony (as of necessity it must be) - with that already considered; that both alike teach, plainly and indubitably, that **THE WORK OF PROPITIATION WAS MADE, COMPLETED, ON THE CROSS**, and that the entrance of Christ once into the holy place was on the ground of having found an eternal redemption. There on Calvary His work of expiation was finished — finished by the sacrifice of Himself, when He, through the eternal Spirit, offered Himself there without spot to God. The contention therefore that His entrance into heaven in this epistle took place after His death and before His resurrection, in order to make propitiation, is nothing but a fiction of the imagination, even as also we believe it to be, however unintentionally, a depreciation of that one perfect and completed work wrought out on the cross, if not derogatory to the Person of Him who glorified God on the earth, and finished the work which was given Him to do. The Lord give us, in view of the serious issues involved, to contend all the more earnestly for the faith once delivered to the saints.

For the instruction and edification of the reader a few words may be added to collect and present the effects of propitiation. In the first place, as already pointed out, God has been glorified by it, according to all that He is as now fully revealed in and through the person and cross of Christ. "The blood was presented to God, whose holy presence had been dishonoured and offended by sin. So Christ has perfectly glorified God in the place of sin, by His perfect obedience and love to His Father, in His being made sin who knew no sin. God's majesty, righteousness, love, truth, all that He is, was glorified in the work wrought by Christ, and of this the blood was witness in the holy place itself;" i.e., on the great day of atonement. Secondly, Christ was the propitiation for the sins of His people: (1 John 2: 2.) The two goats of Leviticus 16 do but present different aspects of the one work of Christ; for the One who made propitiation for the sins of the people (Heb. 2: 17) was also their substitute; and as such He was wounded for their transgressions, bruised for their iniquities, was once offered to bear the sins of many. (Isa.

53: 5; Heb. 9: 28.) Whoever, therefore, receives God's testimony concerning the death of Christ as having made propitiation, finds, when he comes into the presence of God, that Christ also, His own self, bare his sins in His own body on the tree. (1 Peter 2: 24.) Moreover, the propitiation is the ground on which God sends out the entreating message of the gospel to the whole world. Having been fully glorified concerning sin and sins, He can satisfy His own heart by causing the mighty streams of His grace to flow out to every creature under heaven, and by issuing the proclamation, "*Whosoever will*, let him take the water of life freely." (Rev. 22: 17.) He can thus be just, and the justifier of everyone who believes in Jesus. Lastly, on this same ground, the sin of the world (not the sins, but the sin of the world) will be entirely taken away (John 1: 29; Heb. 9: 26); and God has been pleased to disclose to us the scene in which this has been accomplished — in the new heaven and new earth, wherein dwelleth righteousness. Hence it is that then "There shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away." (Rev. 21: 4.)

From this outline of the effects of propitiation the reader will perceive that it is the all-
efficacious ground on which God will accomplish the whole of His counsels of grace; for
thereby He Himself has been infinitely glorified, and He in response to that wondrous and
perfect work has glorified His beloved Son at His own right hand, and thereby He has given the
pledge that all who are His shall be glorified together with Him, that Israel now scattered shall be
gathered in perfect blessing under the sway of their glorious Messiah, that all nations shall share
in the blessings of that millennial reign, that creation itself shall be delivered from the bondage
of corruption into the liberty of the glory of the children of God, and that finally, as we have
seen, these heavens and this earth will be displaced by a scene wherein God will be all in all.

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