

The Heart of the Gospel

by Coty Pinckney 08/28/08

What is the heart of the Gospel? What does the Gospel teach at its core?

In our adult Core Seminar this week, we consider this issue by means of J.I. Packer's "The Heart of the Gospel," chapter 18 from *Knowing God* (republished by Crossway this year in *In My Place Condemned He Stood: Celebrating the Glory of the Atonement*). In this chapter Packer explains the central importance of propitiation - that is, of averting God's anger over sin by an offering. He explains the reason why so many take offense at the idea, the biblical support for the idea, and the importance of the idea in our Christian walk.

Here is a brief outline of the chapter to whet your appetite. Please read it if at all possible, and join us this Sunday as we glory in Christ's work on our behalf.

Section I: Propitiation is Biblical

Paganism centers on propitiation: Offering a sacrifice to appease capricious, potentially angry gods.

We might expect the Bible, which repudiates paganism, to repudiate the idea of propitiation also. But it doesn't. Instead "the 'propitiation' word-group appears in four passages of . . . transcendent importance:"

- Romans 3:21-26, the rationale of God's justification of sinners
- Hebrews 2:17, the rationale for the incarnation
- 1 John 2:1-2, the continuing, present ministry of the risen Christ
- 1 John 4:8-10, the definition of the love of God

Many today are offended by this doctrine, thinking of it as vestigial paganism. But "a gospel without propitiation at its heart is another gospel than that which Paul preached."

Section II: Expiation vs Propitiation

Some translations substitute the word (or the idea) of expiation for propitiation. Expiation is "the covering, putting away or rubbing out of sin so that it no longer constitutes a barrier to friendly fellowship between man and God."

Propitiation includes that biblical idea, but goes further; it also denotes the pacifying of the wrath of God.

In Romans 3:25, the context - building from the statement in 1:18 that "the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men" - demands the idea of the pacification of God's wrath.

Section III: The Nature of God's Wrath

God's wrath is not capricious, bad-tempered, or malicious.

It is instead the logical result of His perfect holiness. It is the "right reaction of the moral perfection in the Creator towards moral perversity in the creature."

He is the moral authority in the universe, and He must inflict on sin the penalty it deserves.

Section IV: Three Facts about Propitiation

1) Propitiation is the Work of God Himself

In paganism, humans work to avert God's anger. In the Bible, God Himself provides the propitiation in His Son.

It is not that the Son decided to avert His Father's anger. The Father Himself sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins (1 John 4:9-10).

2) Propitiation was Made by the Death of Jesus Christ

The sacrificial system teaches the necessity of death, the spilling of blood, to make atonement (Leviticus 17:11). Thus Paul says propitiation is "by His blood" (Romans 3:25). It is Jesus' death rather than His perfect life or His moral example that averts God's wrath. He died as our *representative substitute* (Galatians 3:13, 2 Corinthians 5:14, 18-21). This fulfills the idea acted out in both the regular sacrificial system and on the Day of Atonement (Leviticus 4 and 16).

3) Propitiation Manifests God's Righteousness

In Romans 3:25-26, Paul says that propitiation is necessary to show that God is just. He had passed over former sins by guilty people, not since the flood condemning all mankind as they deserved. Jesus' death on the cross was the payment, the punishment required, for all the sins of all those who trust in Him, before and after the cross.

Section V: The Heart of the Gospel

The Gospel fundamentally is the solution of man's problem with God's wrath. The Gospel is not fundamentally the solution of man's problem with man, or man's problem with his environment (though the Gospel has implications for these areas of concern). Any biblical presentation of the Gospel must make this distinction clear.

The idea of the need for and God's provision of propitiation pervades the New Testament, often using different vocabulary, such as reconciliation, redemption, sacrifice, self-giving, sin-bearing, and blood-shedding. All these words portray different facets of the work of propitiation.

Understanding propitiation is necessary for understanding other central biblical issues; the remainder of the chapter looks at five of these.

Section VI: The Driving Force in the Life of Jesus

Read the Gospel of Mark straight through and your impression of Jesus will include at least four features: He is a man of action, He knew He was divine, He knew He came to die, and His experience of death was a fearful ordeal.

Note in particular the last. Socrates and others faced death fearlessly. Why Gethsemane? Why the forsaken cry from the cross?

The doctrine of propitiation makes all this clear. On the cross Jesus was made to be sin; He had to take on Himself the eternal punishment deserved by millions of sinners. "The Lord has laid on Him the iniquity of us all" (Isaiah 53:6).

Section VII: The Destiny of Those Who Reject God

We get a notion of the destiny of those who remain under God's wrath by looking at the cross. There we see "withdrawal and the deprivation of good." Jesus lost His sense of the Father's presence, all enjoyment of the Father, and experienced instead loneliness, pain, and human malice. While there was terrible physical pain, the spiritual and mental suffering was far greater.

Similarly, those who remain under God's wrath will lose all good. In ordinary life, we enjoy a great deal of good that we rarely notice: health, friendship, respect. Ultimately all that we value will be lost if we remain under God's wrath.

Section VIII: God's Gift of Peace

God's peace does not mean being shielded "from life's hardest knocks." Instead it is peace with God, as our status changes from His being *against* us to His being *for* us (Colossians 1:20). We cannot understand this concept unless we see our original state, and the propitiatory sacrifice of Christ that was required to change our state.

Section IX: The Dimensions of the Love of God

In Ephesians 3:18-20, Paul prays that his readers might be able to comprehend God's love that surpasses knowledge. The context shows us what Paul means by God's love: The redemption that is ours through Christ's blood (1:7, 2:13). Paul also emphasizes the free nature of that love, shown to those under His wrath (2:1-8), the eternal nature of that love, decided upon by God toward sinners before the foundation of the world (1:4); and the assured nature of that love, guaranteed, despite our sinfulness (1:14).

Section X: The Meaning of God's Glory

After Judas leaves the Last Supper, Jesus says, "Now is the Son of Man glorified, and God is glorified in him" (John 13:31). Jesus sees the cross as a display of God's glory: His "wisdom, power, righteousness, truth, and love . . . in the making of propitiation for our sins."

Packer closes the chapter with these words: "The joyful news of redeeming love and propitiating mercy, which is the heart of the gospel, spurs [the heirs of heaven] to never-ending praise. Are you among their number?"