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BIBLICAL REFLECTIONS

Propitiation and Expiation

Just a Thought · Romans 3:25

By John L. Wheeler

“whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith.” Romans 3:25

Some words are difficult simply because they are unfamiliar. Propitiation and expiation are two of them.

The first time I encountered words like these in the Bible, I was a child reading the King James Version. I probably had trouble pronouncing them, much less understanding them. I did what children were taught to do when they encountered an unfamiliar word: I looked it up in the dictionary. That gave me a definition, but a definition is not necessarily understanding. The words still had to be fitted into a young mind and connected with what Scripture was teaching. Even after a lifetime of reading the Bible, there can still be that moment when one of these words appears and the mind asks, Now, exactly what does that mean?

Perhaps that is why many Christians simply read over them.

But some words are worth stopping for.

Vocabulary is one of the ways knowledge is stored. In medicine, the word ischemia communicates in a single word what would otherwise require a sentence to explain. Once its meaning is understood, the word carries that knowledge with it. Theology also has words that encapsulate great truths. Propitiation and expiation are such words.

Expiation concerns the removal of sin and its guilt. To expiate is to make atonement for wrongdoing, dealing with the offense so that guilt is removed. Scripture may not commonly use the English word expiation, but the truth it describes runs throughout the biblical teaching concerning the sacrifice of Christ.

Propitiation concerns God's righteous wrath against sin. Sin is not merely a defect in human behavior. It is rebellion against a holy God, and His wrath against it is righteous. Propitiation means that this wrath has been satisfied by the sacrifice Christ offered.

The distinction is important.

Expiation deals with our sin.

Propitiation deals with God's wrath against our sin.

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Yet these are not two unrelated works of Christ. They meet at the same cross.

Paul spent the opening chapters of Romans demonstrating the seriousness of the problem. “For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men” (Romans 1:18). Then he establishes the universality of human guilt: “for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23).

What can sinful man do about that?

Nothing.

Then comes the gospel. God did what man could not do. Christ Jesus was the one “whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith” (Romans 3:25).

God did not pretend that sin did not matter. He did not simply overlook it. The guilt had to be dealt with, and the righteous judgment of God had to be satisfied.

At the cross, both were accomplished.

Our sin was laid upon Christ. Its guilt was dealt with. That is expiation.

Christ bore the judgment that sin deserved. God's righteous wrath against sin was satisfied. That is propitiation.

This is why learning theological vocabulary matters. These are not merely large words belonging in dictionaries, seminaries, and theology books. They describe what happened when Jesus Christ died for sinners.

The Christian does not stand forgiven because God decided that sin was not as serious as He once said it was. The Christian stands forgiven because sin was dealt with completely in Christ. God's justice was not suspended in order for grace to triumph. His justice was satisfied, and His grace was displayed through the same sacrifice.

So perhaps the next time we encounter one of those difficult words in Scripture, we should not simply read past it. Stop. Look it up. Learn what it means. Think about what truth has been compressed into that one unfamiliar word.

Sometimes a difficult word contains a glorious truth.

Our sin was expiated.

God's wrath was propitiated.

Christ accomplished both.

Just a thought.

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