

WHAT DO WE MEAN BY *PROPITIATION*? DOES IT ONLY COUNT IF WE ACCEPT IT?

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I. INTRODUCTION

Have you ever heard an illustration like this? A man is spending his last week on death row. Suddenly the warden appears and shows him a piece of paper. The paper is a full pardon signed by the Governor. After the man looks it over, he says, “I don’t want it.” He hands it back to the warden. The illustration ends with the execution of the condemned man.

What’s wrong with this story? Well, to begin with, there is no way a state would execute a pardoned man. The prisoner would be ushered unceremoniously out of his cell—at least eventually, depending on legal technicalities. Yet users of such an illustration think it is a good one. If human beings reject the pardon Jesus Christ bought for them by His death on the cross, they will go to hell and pay for their sins.

Can this be true? No, it cannot.

II. JESUS, OUR PROPITIATION

The illustration above cannot be correct. The reason is that it denies the reality of the propitiation that the Lord Jesus Christ made on the cross. An expected objection must be confronted. Someone might argue this way: “The propitiation that Jesus made on the cross is real. It is fully adequate for all men. However, it is only effective if men believe it.”

This view leads to a new illustration. A man deposits one billion dollars in the bank. Any debtor can come and draw freely on the account. It is sufficient to meet his needs. If he doesn’t draw on it, the account does not pay for his debt. *He* has to pay for it.

What’s wrong with *this* story? The same thing as before. It denies the reality of the propitiation that Jesus made on the cross. Nothing has really been paid for.

Such illustrations fly into the face of the Word of God. Listen to the words of the Apostle John in 1 John 2:2, referring to Jesus Christ: “And He Himself is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the whole world.”

The Greek word translated “propitiation” (*hilasmos*) means either “appeasement necessitated by sin” or “expiation.”¹ The long-running debate centering on the difference between “appeasement” and “expiation” can be ignored. It does not really make a difference to this discussion.

The word “appeasement,” or the softer term “satisfaction,” are each acceptable here. The concept of propitiation refers to something that appeases, or satisfies, the righteous justice of God. The word “satisfaction” is a pretty good equivalent.

But is there anything in 1 John 2:2 about Jesus Christ being *potentially* the “satisfaction” for the sins of the world? No, there is not. The Apostle flatly states that Jesus *is the propitiation* for the sins of “the whole world.” He *is* that. Not that He *can* be, or *potentially* is, but He simply *is*. Note, too, that this statement is exactly parallel to the truth that He is the propitiation for *our* sins. In whatever sense He is the propitiation for *our* sins, He is also the propitiation for the sins of the whole world.

Very simply put, the propitiatory work of our Lord Jesus Christ is *universally* effective. That is true whether anyone believes it or not. On the cross, Jesus paid for every single sin that has ever been committed by any person who has ever lived on the face of the earth. That is magnificent and overwhelming!

Of course, the same truth is stated by the Apostle Paul in 2 Cor 5:19 where he writes, “God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not imputing their trespasses to them . . .” At the cross, God imputed the sins of the *entire world* to Jesus Christ and did *not* impute them to the world.

Paul also expresses this truth in 1 Tim 2:5-6: “For there is one God and one Mediator between God and men, the *Man Christ Jesus, who*

¹ A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature, ed. Frederick William Danker, 3rd ed. (Chicago/London: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 474.

gave Himself a ransom for all, to be testified in due time.” Again, in whatever sense He is a ransom for us, He is a ransom *for all*.

For the same reason, John the Baptist declared in John 1:29: “Behold! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.”

Unfortunately, many Christians do not understand the splendid universal sufficiency of the work of Christ on the cross. They frequently misrepresent it when they evangelize the unconverted. Fortunately, one does not have to have a perfect understanding of the cross to be saved. If that were the case, probably no one would be saved.

III. PROPITIATION AND FINAL JUDGMENT

At this point, someone will ask, “But how can God send anybody to hell if Jesus paid for all their sins on the cross?” Good question. In fact, so good that it is a shame that grace people haven’t tried very often to answer it clearly.

Reformed people, however, have faced this issue and have an answer of their own. In their view, if Christ died for all of a man’s sins, then that man can’t be sent to hell. Therefore, he must be among the elect. This leads directly to the conclusion that Christ really died only for the elect.

This is the doctrine of limited atonement. Christ did not die *effectively* for the sins of all humanity. The key word, of course, is *effectively*. In some sense, a Reformed person might suggest, the cross may be viewed as sufficient for all, but effective only for the elect. Obviously, the Reformed answer is inadequate for grace people. But what should *our* answer be like? Let me state it and then try to support it.

Here it is: Since Christ effectively died for the sins of the entire world, nobody goes to hell for their sins. They go to hell because they do not have eternal life. This suggested answer is confirmed by the biblical account of the final judgment found in Rev 20:11-15.

The first thing that strikes us about this account is that there is no mention of sin. That is very important: *there is no mention of sin in Rev 20:11-15*.

Of course, there *is* mention of men’s works. Revelation 20:12 states, “And I saw the dead, small and great, standing before God, and books were opened. And another book was opened, which is the Book of Life. And the dead were judged according to their works, by the things which were written in the books.” Clearly the things men have done in their lives—their works—are reviewed at the Great White Throne judgment. This is both natural and very much to be expected.

Countless human beings have gone out into eternity convinced that their works will make them acceptable to God on the Day of Judgment. They are wrong, of course. Paul makes this plain in Romans and Galatians.² But many people are still convinced, to the day of their death, that the deciding issue will be their works. They hope that their good works will outweigh their bad works. They hope that God's verdict on their works will result in them going to heaven.

Naturally, God will not ignore this issue in the final judgment. That would be like a judge on earth refusing to hear evidence that a defendant thought would help him. Everything that any man or woman has ever done will be reviewed at the Great White Throne.

Interestingly enough, Revelation 20 does not state the result of this review. But the Book of Revelation was written to Christian churches that already knew what the result would be. Anyone who understands God's plan of salvation also knows that the result of such a review will be negative. It will reinforce the testimony of Scripture that "by the deeds of the law no flesh will be justified in His sight" (Rom 3:20).

To be sure, a review of anyone's works will involve looking at his or her sins. But at the Great White Throne, the issue will not be sins *as such*, but works, both good and bad. And even so, notice one important fact. Men are not condemned to hell even on the basis of their works.

As the text of Revelation makes clear, there is another book opened at the Great White Throne. It is the Book of Life. But this book is consulted only after the review of men's works based on the *other* books. Yet when it *is* consulted, its verdict is clear. We are told, "And anyone not found written in the Book of Life was cast into the lake of fire" (Rev 20:15).

Men do not go to hell because of their sins or their wicked works. They go to hell because their names are not found in the Book of Life. They do not have eternal life.

IV. WHERE DO YOU SEND THE UNRIGHTEOUS?

We all understand that human beings suffer the consequences of their sinful conduct while on earth. Trouble, sickness, rejection and dozens of other experiences—including physical death—are included in the ways in which sinners suffer these consequences.

² For example, Rom 4:5; 11:6; Gal 2:16.

We often call this the law of sowing and reaping. Paul tells us (Gal 6:7) that “whatever a man sows, that he will also reap.” God has built this law into human experience. As long as a man remains a sinner he is subject to this unchanging law.

Christians are also subject to the law of sowing and reaping. Paul makes that clear in Gal 6:7-8. He tells the Galatians, “Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, that he will also reap. For he who sows to his flesh will of the flesh reap corruption, but he who sows to the Spirit will of the Spirit reap everlasting life.”

When any man, including a believer, lives sinfully and thereby sows to his flesh, he reaps corruption. Paul insists on that. But a believer has another option. He can also sow to the Spirit and reap an enrichment of his experience of eternal life. This last fact is important, but only the first part of the statement is pertinent to this article.

Sowing to the flesh produces corruption, no matter who does it. The death of Christ *does not affect* this law, either for the believer or the non-believer. This fact is very important. The word Paul uses for corruption in Gal 6:8 is the Greek word *phthora*, which fundamentally refers to “the breakdown of organic matter.”³ By extension it can refer to moral or spiritual ruin or decay of one kind or another.

The Lord Jesus Christ spoke more often about hell than any person in the New Testament. In one of His most striking discussions of hell, He described it in terms of *corruption*. Mark 9:45-46 illustrates this:

And if your foot causes your downfall, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life lame, than having two feet, to be cast into Gehenna into the fire that shall never be quenched—where their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched (author’s translation).

This memorable description vividly describes a scene of decay and ruin. In Gehenna there is an endlessly burning fire and there are worms whose activity is unceasing. Gehenna, or hell, may be described as a place of *eternal corruption*.

We may think of hell, therefore, as an extension of the law of sowing and reaping. Those who go there are reaping eternal *corruption*. In fact, it is the only suitable place to put unsaved sinners. It is the only place that suitably fits their sinful nature and character.

³ BDAG, 1054.

Hell is justified, therefore, because its inhabitants do not share God's kind of life. They do not have eternal life and, as a result, they cannot live with Him. Instead, they must endure everlasting corruption.

The cross of Christ eliminated sin as the grounds for *judicial condemnation*. It satisfied God's righteous demand for a *judicial* punishment for human sin. It made possible the justification and new birth of all who believe. As Paul puts it so beautifully in Rom 3:26, God can now be "just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus."

In all cultures that I am aware of, there is a distinction made between natural or circumstantial retribution and judicial retribution. This can be easily illustrated.

Here is a man who has long been a drug dealer. One day, in a drug war he is shot and killed. This is clearly a consequence of his drug dealing ways. But it is a natural consequence in the sense that circumstances led to it. On the other hand, he might be arrested and sentenced to death for murdering another dealer. When he is executed, he is suffering the *judicial* consequences of his drug dealing.

The distinction that has just been made is perfectly natural and quite common whenever we talk about consequences. At the cross, Jesus Christ suffered the punishment that God, the Judge of all men, demands for sin. It cannot ever be paid again. No one will ever suffer a *judicial* punishment for sin, because Jesus paid that.

The suffering that Christ endured on the cross was excruciatingly painful, both physically and emotionally. But what He suffered is enough to remove *judicial* punishment from all humanity for all time.

In the following illustration, please don't hold me to a strict literal sense. The illustration is suggestive and thought provoking. Please take it that way.

Going to hell is like being marooned on a rotting boat that is going in circles on a sea of boiling water. That is the natural, future consequence of human sin. The *judicial* consequence would be like being on the same boat but chained to the oars night and day, compelled to row the boat without letup or relief. The first is dreadful enough. The second is far worse.

What is the bottom line? It is this: Men are not sent to hell for their sins. They are sent there because they are not listed in the Book of Life. But the death of Christ does not cancel the law of sowing and reaping. When people who are dead in trespasses and sins go to hell, they are *eternally* reaping what they have sowed.

Hell was originally prepared for the devil and his angels as stated in Matt 25:41. But hell is the only appropriate place to send unregenerate people who die in their sins. As Jesus said in John 8:24, “If you do not believe that I am He, you will die in your sins.”

V. CORRUPTION AND LIFE

Perhaps you noticed in Gal 6:7-8 that the Apostle Paul contrasts *corruption* with *everlasting life*. The Lord Jesus does the same thing in Mark 9:45-46. There He states that “it is better to enter *life* lame, than . . . to be cast into Gehenna . . . where their worm does not die.”

Both Jesus and Paul set *life* and *corruption* before us as opposites. Of course, for the believer here and now there is the potential experience of both things, depending on where he sows—whether to the flesh or to the Spirit. But this, of course, is due to the fact that the believer’s inward nature is regenerate and his body still awaits transformation.

However, the believer yearns for his eternal body as Paul tells us in 2 Cor 5:1-4. Paul’s words are vivid: “For we who are in this tent groan, being burdened, not because we want to be unclothed, but further clothed, that mortality may be swallowed up by life” (2 Cor 5:4).

Just a little earlier (2 Cor 4:16), Paul had stated that “our outward man is perishing, yet the inward man is being renewed day by day.” In other words, we have eternal *life* within us, but our physical body is subject to *corruption and death*.

When the Lord comes, however, our bodies will be changed so that they can fully express the *life* within us. At that point, our “mortality,” Paul says, will be “swallowed up by *life*.” From then on, we will no longer experience *corruption*. Our whole experience will be that of *eternal life*.

What about the unregenerate person? When *he* is raised from the dead to stand at the Great White Throne, his body will *still* be untransformed. It will *still* be an appropriate habitation for his equally untransformed inward man. Where then should such a person be sent?

The unsaved man cannot enter into *life*, since he has no divine life within him. Thus he must be put into the one habitat that is suitable for him. That is Gehenna, where “the fire shall never be quenched” and “where their worm does not die.” The spiritually dead sinner is cast into “the lake of fire” (Rev 20:15) where he continues to reap unending *corruption*.

Lacking eternal life, his doom in Gehenna is sealed. At the Great White Throne he can claim nothing based on his works. And when his name is not found written in the Book of Life, the lake of fire is his only possible destination.

Hell is the inevitable consequence of remaining *dead* in trespasses and sins. This deadness leads first to the death of our physical bodies, and then to the second death, as well. That is, it leads to the lake of fire (Rev 20:14).

VI. CONCLUSION

It is hoped that the result of this brief article will be to magnify our view of the cross of Christ. So splendid is the propitiation accomplished at the cross, that every human being that has ever lived is freed from judicial condemnation for his or her sins.

When we sing, "Jesus paid it all," we mean it. God does not exact from any man the judicial penalty that Jesus paid at the cross. Jesus Christ's completely sufficient suffering on the cross for the sins of the world will never be repeated in the case of any human being whatsoever.

Furthermore, as a result of the cross, every man or woman is eligible for the free gift of eternal life. All they need to do is believe in Jesus for that gift. But those who do not believe remain dead in their sins and subject to the corruption that sin always brings. Though eligible for *life*, they have remained in spiritual death. Hell is the consequence of remaining dead to God.

In hell the law of sowing and reaping goes on and on and on. The fire is never put out and the worms of corruption never die. In hell, the superlative gift of life, paid for by our Savior's blood, has been missed forever. But that splendid gift is for *everybody*, for the simple reason that Christ died for *everybody* equally.

That's wonderful! Let's get out there and tell people about this.