



Knowing God by J. I. Packer

Chapter 18: The Heart of the Gospel

HPC Trinity Class

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Propitiation = appeasing God's wrath by prayer or sacrifice. (from the Greek word *hilaskomai*)¹

"The idea of propitiation—that is, of averting God's anger by an offering—runs right through the Bible." (pg. 180)

Dr. Packer begins this chapter with a horrific example of how ancient cultures viewed propitiation with their many gods. Legend tells us of Agamemnon, the famous Greek general who attempted to rescue the beautiful wife of Sparta's king. (Today we still remember her as Helen of Troy.) But bad weather constantly prevented any rescue. Agamemnon's only hope, he thought, was to appease the gods for a change in the weather. So he slaughtered his most beloved possession, his own daughter, as a **propitiation**. And it worked!

- Propitiation was very common in cultures having multiple gods.
- Synonyms: satisfaction, atoning sacrifice
- Propitiation is often used in the OT...
 - For example, **[READ NUMBER 16:46]** The Hebrew word for "atonement" is *kāpar*, "one of the most important words in the Bible."²



...but it's rarely in the NT:

Though the word "propitiation" is used only four times in the NT, (Romans 3:21-26; Hebrews 2:17; 1John 2:1-2; and 1John 4:10), the thought of it continues throughout the Bible. (pg.190)

Some examples: **[READ GALATIANS 3:13]** (redemption)]

[JOHN 1:29] (sin-bearing)]

[EPHESIANS 5:1-2] (sacrifice)]

(pgs. 185-89) Propitiation as described by Packer:

1. It is solely the work of God.
2. It was made possible by Christ's death, not his life.
3. It manifests God's righteousness.

Because God loved us he "sent his Son to be a *propitiation* for our sins." (pg. 181)

¹A similar Greek word, *hilastêron*, refers to the "atonement cover," which was a plate covering the ark of the covenant in the OT tabernacle. (Heb. 9:5). [Zondervan, fn to Rom. 3:25, pg. 2297]

² Key Word Bible, "Lexical Aids to the OT," pg. 1523, #4105.

Expiation = God's forgiveness of our sins.

He wipes them out. (pg.182) **[READ 1 JOHN 4:7-10]**

Bottom Line--- **expiation** + **propitiation** = **salvation**

But not everyone agrees with Dr. Packer!



"Nowhere in the NT does the idea of propitiation occur." Instead, the word "expiation" should be used, because "there is no idea in the NT of the wrath of God being propitiated by the sacrifice of Christ. It is God in Christ who reconciles the world to himself (II Cor. 5:19)."³

Packer himself admits that his interpretation of propitiation rubs some Christians wrong (pg. 181ff), and he acknowledges (but disagrees with) the noted theologian C. H. Dodd's opinion that *propitiation* in the NT is not a correct translation; it should be simply be *expiation* instead. **You be the judge.**

This chapter's title, "The Heart of the Gospel," comes to light on pg. 189.

"No version of [the Christian gospel] goes deeper than that which declares man's root problem before God to be his sin, which evokes wrath, and God's basic provision for man to be propitiation, which out of wrath brings peace."

- What "sin" is not. (pg.190)

Dr. Packer wants us to see our lives from a new perspective. If we are to live a truly Christian life, we should not be grabbing and analyzing every "faith" particle minutely. Instead, we should attempt to



g a i n a w i d e r v i e w .

Get the **BIG** picture, not the minutia.

To do this he suggests we focus on five interlocking concepts in the Bible which will act as our guide in becoming faithful Christians.



³ Interpreter's, Vol. 3, "Propitiation" pg. 921. (Dr. Raymond Abba, Head of Dept. of Divinity, U. of Wales.)

1. Jesus knew that his death was imminent. (pg. 192f)

“Four times at least after Peter had hailed him as the Christ at Caesarea Philippi, Jesus predicted that he would be killed and rise....” Thus, “the unique dreadfulness of his death lies in the fact that he tasted on Calvary the wrath of God which was our due, so making propitiation for our sins.”

2. Consider those who reject Christ. (pg. 194f)

Packer focuses on Universalists and all others who reject God.⁴ Their destiny is this:

[READ GALATIANS 6:7-8]

In a moment of reflection Dr. Packer confides that “in ordinary life we never notice how much good we enjoy through God’s common grace till it is taken from us. We never value health, or steady circumstances, or friendship and respect from others, as we should till we have lost them.”

3. God’s gift of peace ≠ a warm, fuzzy feeling of inner tranquility and happiness. (pg. 195f)

Rather, the gift **of** God’s peace hinges upon us having peace **with** God. Having the peace of God gives us resolve to face our own “badness” and failings, and to withstand those who may view our godliness with angry eyes. Basically, for us to acquire the peace of God we must beg for his pardon, and then accept his love as part of our lives.

4. The dimensions of God’s love. (pg.197)

Paul’s message in Ephesians is Dr. Packer’s guide on this subject. The “reality of divine love is inexpressibly great,” and if we study Ephesians 1 and 2 carefully we will discover God’s propitiation sprinkled throughout.

Ephesus was a major banking center in what is now Turkey, but it was also home to the temple of Diana (her Roman name), a.k.a. Artemis (her Greek name). She was a favorite of both the poor (*plebeians*) and slaves, who received asylum in her temples.



⁴ What is Universalism?

- A belief that everyone, good or bad, will eventually have salvation.
- Damnation in hell is for a limited time only, and the time spent there is used for purification, which eventually prepares a soul to become worthy of standing in the presence of God.

5. **The meaning of God's glory.** (pg.197ff) God's glory and His plan for us is depicted after the final dialogue between Jesus and Judas. His disciples could now see Jesus, not as simply a wise and godly teacher, but as the Son of Man depicted in Isaiah 53:

A man of sorrows who took up our infirmities, was pierced for our transgressions, was crushed for our iniquities,⁵ and was to be led like a lamb to the slaughter.



Jesus' crucifixion at Calvary became our propitiation...

...if we will only accept it.



Temple of Artemis at Ephesus: one of the 7 Wonders of the World

Additional Sources

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- *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, vol. 4, "Justification," George A. Buttrick, ed. Abington Press, Nashville, 1962.
- Olson, Roger E., *The Mosaic of Christian Belief*, 2nd ed., Intervarsity Press, Downers Grove, Illinois, 2016.
- *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 2nd ed.,
F. L. Cross, ed., Oxford Univ. Press, England, 1974. ("Propitiation,"
"Expiation")
- *Zondervan NIV Study Bible*, D. A. Carson, ed., Zondervan Press,
Grand Rapids, 2015.

⁵ The Hebrew word quoted here denotes both the misdeed AND its consequences.