

Christ the Propitiation for Sins
A Sermon by J. M. Pendleton
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"Herein is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us, and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins" (1 JOHN 4:10).

IF these were not the words of God, I would not believe them. Who could believe them? The strangeness and greatness of the love referred to would excite incredulity. The proof of the love would be thought imaginary, not real. The fact of the propitiation would by its transcendent greatness defy all credence. But it is God who speaks, and incredulity vanishes at his voice, the proof of His love has a majestic conclusiveness in it, and the propitiation though a fathomless mystery is a glorious reality. My theme is

CHRIST THE PROPITIATION FOR SINS.

I call attention to the following points:

I. *The necessity of a propitiation.*

Why necessary? A general answer is because *God is holy and man a sinner*. The holiness of God is His crowning glory. It constitutes the supreme excellence of His character and embraces all the moral perfections belonging to it. From the holiness of God must arise hatred of sin, and opposition to sin. Whatever conflicts with the purity of His nature, God must abhor. Sin does this, and is therefore the object of His detestation. The antagonism between holiness and sin is positive. There can be no compromise. The Bible everywhere teaches that man is a sinner, and all history confirms the teachings of the Bible. How then can a holy God and a sinful man be brought into harmony and fellowship? Here the necessity of a propitiation appears in order to man's justification and sanctification. Both of these great factors in salvation must be regarded. Past guilt must be concealed by justification, but this of itself would not be sufficient; for the heart left unrenewed would lead to sin again. I use the term sanctification in this connection as including the whole, of the moral process which has its beginning in regeneration, and its consummation in perfect conformity to the standard of holiness.

Does anyone ask why there might not have been salvation without a propitiation? I answer that such a salvation would present the character of God in a most unfavorable light. It would be a reflection on his wisdom, his veracity, his justice, his love, and, therefore, on his holiness. In that case wisdom would not consult the best interests of the universe, the divine veracity would become questionable, justice would lose its inflexible firmness, love would degenerate into a blind partiality for man regardless of other orders of beings, while holiness would lose its brightness and glory. Such a salvation would detract from the perfection of the divine law and encourage rebellion against God. It would shake the divine throne to its center and unsettle every principle of the divine government. There is no salvation worthy of God apart from a propitiation for sins.

II. *In Christ we have the needed propitiation.*

He is the Godman. His deity was necessary to His becoming a propitiation because it was necessary to His substitution. The Creator could take the place of creatures, but no creature can take the place of another creature. The reason is plain: All creatures by reason of their relation to God are under obligation to love and serve him to the utmost extent of their ability. "All thy strength," is

the language of the law which asserts its claims throughout the realm of creatureship. No angel therefore can act in the room of a man, for whatever the angel can do is due, on his own personal account to God. For the same reason no man can act in the place of another man. Now if Jesus Christ is a created being, if, as Arius said, he is "next to God, but not God," then is he by virtue of his relation as a creature to the Creator, under obligation to render on his own account, whatever he can do, and this part would make it impossible for him to act in the room of others.

But the glory of Christianity is that its Author is divine. The Word who in the beginning was with God was God. He was above law, was not under law till made under it, as He was not man till made or born of a woman. Voluntarily taking on himself the legal responsibilities of those he came to save, he obeyed the precepts and suffered the penalty of the law in their stead. By his obedience and death, for his obedience was unto death. He made an atonement for sin. This atonement, referred to in the text as a "propitiation," rendered satisfaction to the claims of the law, and sustained its majesty in the view of all worlds. The law being just, that which meets its

demands, meets also the coincident demands of justice. It is because Christ has been set forth as a propitiation, that God can be just and the justifier of those who believe. To them Christ becomes the end of the law for righteousness. The reason is the law receives full satisfaction in His atoning death. We see therefore, that in Christ we have the needed propitiation which removes all legal barriers out of the way of the consistent exercise of mercy. But there are moral barriers also. These owe their existence to the depravity of the heart, its opposition and enmity to God, and unless removed will as certainly prevent salvation as would the legal barriers if permitted to remain.

It is a precious truth that Christ's propitiation puts into operation influences counter-active of man's depravity. It secures the agency of the Holy Spirit in renewing the heart, so that the words "born of the Spirit," are full of meaning. Indeed, the agency of the Spirit is as indispensable in the regeneration of the heart, as is the blood of Christ in the expiation of sin. Neither can be dispensed with in the matter of salvation. The propitiation of Christ allies sanctification to justification. It provides not only for the pardon of sin, but for holiness of heart and life. Hence it is written in Romans 8:3, 4, as follows: "For what the law could not do, in that it was weak through the flesh, God sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and for sin, condemned sin in the flesh: That the righteousness of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit."

Christ was "in the likeness of sinful flesh," but was infinitely free from sin in the sense of being a sinner; and God in sending him for sin" to die for sin, "condemned sin in the flesh," that is, in human nature which had sinned. In connection with these facts we can see ample reasons for a sinner's justification, and these reasons have to do with deliverance from the curse of the law. This is one result of Christ's propitiation, but there is another expressed in the words, "that the righteousness of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit." Here "the righteousness of the law" doubtless means the righteous precepts of the law. These precepts are fulfilled or obeyed by Christians, and the reason is they have been born of the Spirit, and therefore "walk not after the flesh but after the Spirit." These precepts have to do with the heart and the life, and righteousness of heart insures righteousness of life.

Thus does it appear that in Christ we have the needed propitiation; for through it both our justification and sanctification are secured. This propitiation gives the brightest exhibition of the character of God, and promotes the best interests of the universe. The majesty of the law is seen in the very expedient by which its thunders of condemnation are hushed. The evil of sin and God's hatred of it are seen in the very medium through which it is pardoned, and therefore the manner in

which a sinner is pardoned inspires him with the purpose to be holy in heart and life. What sublime wonders are these!

III. *That Christ has become a propitiation is traceable to the love of God.*

Well does the text say, "Herein is love," as if the beloved disciple had said, "This is love in its supreme manifestation." Such love cannot elsewhere be found. That God is good, the works of creation in all their delightful variety declare; and the works of providence, in all their rich diversity, emphasize the declaration. But if we would see how good God is, how full of love his heart is, we must look from creation and providence to redemption. When He gave his Son to be "the propitiation for our sins," his love reached its utmost limit. Such a gift exhausted the treasury of heaven, so that God never gives anything else except in connection with his Son and for his sake. Yes, heaven was impoverished that earth might be enriched. This was love, the strength and fulness of which no language can adequately define. Let us notice some of the peculiarities of this love.

1. *It was not excited by anything lovely in man.* Human love is excited by some real or imaginary excellence in its object. Not so with the love of God. He saw wretchedness and ruin in man's condition, but no excellence, no attractiveness of moral character. So far from it everything was odious and repulsive to the divine holiness. The world was at enmity with God, and in rebellion against his government. It had renounced allegiance to the divine throne and was in a state of captivity to sin and Satan. What was there loved in the moral character of the world to excite the love of God? Absolutely nothing. But in the absence of all loveliness we have a supreme epitome of the gospel in these words "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life."

We cannot tell why God loved the world, why he loved fallen men rather than fallen angels, but we know that his love was not excited by anything loved in man. It was a self-originated love, springing spontaneously from the depths of the Divine Heart.

2. *It was not a reciprocation of man's love.* The text says, "Not that we loved God, but that he loved us." According to our way of thinking, we can imagine that if we had loved God, it would have called forth responsive love from him, so that there would have been a blessed reciprocity. But we have seen that there was nothing of this kind, and, so far from it, there was hatred instead of love. There was no love to be reciprocated. God did not love us because we loved Him, but in spite of our enmity to Him; for we never love Him till His love for us awakens our love to Him. Antecedent love, love in its first impulses, is found in God. It cannot therefore be a reciprocation of man's love. "Not that we loved God, but that he loved us."

3. *It was intensely fervent love.* Think what it made God willing for his Son to become and suffer. Ponder the words *incarnation* and *death*. God's love made him willing for his Son to become incarnate. We can form only a feeble conception of what this implies. The incarnation of the Son of God involved the laying aside of the glory he had with the Father before the world was, and his assumption of a finite nature, and not only finite, but dishonored by sin. He appeared in "the likeness of sinful flesh," though no stain of sin rested on him, and took humanity into union with his divinity. Though he was "rich" he became "poor." Who can tell how rich he was, and how poor he became? Now God so loved our ruined race that he was willing for his Son to become incarnate, and to incur all the privations of the incarnation. It was his love that made him willing, for nothing but love induced the willingness. But this is not all: God gave his Son knowing that he must suffer. He gave him that he might suffer, and that his sufferings might result in death. He gave him though he knew that under the pressure of sorrow Gethsemane would be vocal with his cries of anguish, and Calvary would be bathed in his blood. He gave him to die the death of the cross, a death

specially replete with pain and agony, while the pains of physical death were as nothing compared with the excruciating sorrows of his son. God's love made him willing for his Son having become incarnate to suffer all this, that he might lay broad and deep the foundation of man's redemption. Was it not an intensely fervent love!

4. *It was a world-wide love.* God loved the world and Christ is the Lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world, while the Holy Spirit reproves the world. All this shows that the plan of redemption has a benevolent reference to the human race. Jews and Gentiles equally share in the blessings of God's love. It was long the belief of the Jews that the advantages of the Messiah's reign would be confined to the seed of Abraham, and it required a miracle to convince the apostle Peter that God is no respecter of persons. But Paul tells us that the mystery kept secret for ages, and made known by the gospel, was that "the Gentiles should be fellow heirs and of the same body "with the Jews. The great commission therefore requires that all nations shall be discipled to Christ, and that the gospel shall be preached in all the world to every creature. The offer of salvation is made to men indiscriminately from the equator to the poles, and no clime has been found in which the blood of atonement is not efficacious to save from sin. God is a general Savior in the sense that he has provided, and that he offers salvation to all men; while he is specially the Savior of those who believe. The genius of the gospel economy indicates that the love of God is a world-wide love.

5. *This love will appear wonderful in the salvation of the redeemed.* Those who shall see really what John saw in vision, will behold "a great multitude" before the throne, "of all nations, and kindreds, and people, and tongues," clothed with robes of spotless white with palms in their hands. It will be known that all these redeemed ones were once enemies of God, but by his omnipotent grace were made his friends; were once condemned, but delivered from the curse of the law, once denied with sin, but washed in the blood of the Lamb from all its stains and made as pure as the angels of light. It will be seen that all these and kindred wonders were accomplished by the love of God which put into operation all the agencies and means by which they were accomplished. How this will aggrandize the love of God in the view of all intelligent beings and call forth their adoring praise!

6. *This love will illustrate the justice of the damnation of the lost.*

It will be a fearful thing to incur the wrath of God which is excited by a neglect of the salvation provided by his love. What solemn words are these! "He that despised Moses' law died without mercy under two or three witnesses; of how much sorer punishment, suppose ye, shall he be thought worthy, who hath trodden underfoot the Son of God"? Dying "without mercy" under the Mosaic Economy, must have been a terrible death; but there is a "sorer punishment" for those who reject the salvation of God. Whatever is supremely fearful in divine wrath awaits them. Is this strange? By no means. The world was lost, guilty, helpless, and God sent his Son "not to condemn the world, but that the world through him might be saved." But impenitent sinners refuse to be saved. If they were without excuse in involving themselves in ruin by means of sin, much more are they inexcusable in refusing to be saved from that ruin. If there is aggravated guilt in transgressing the law of God, there is guilt more aggravated in rejecting the salvation of the gospel. It is appalling to contemplate these two species of guilt in the person of an impenitent sinner, guilt incurred by a violation of the divine law, joined to the greater guilt of rejecting the gospel. Alas, how much there is in such to attract the lightning's of God's wrath, and to awake the thunders of his indignation!

The love of God which has provided salvation will fully illustrate the justice of the damnation of those who reject it.