

# Propitiation

Thank you guys for being here tonight for our Good Friday Gathering. If I can, what I want to do for the next little while is spend some time unpacking just why Good Friday is so good to us as followers of Jesus. Because on the surface, it doesn't seem like such a good day. It's the day that Christianity's hero was brutally murdered on a Roman cross. But for those of you that have been with us on Sundays for the teaching series we've been in called *It is Finished*, you know that there was actually far more to the story than just Jesus being murdered. It's not just that he died. It's actually that a number of different things were *accomplished* through that death.

But tonight we're going to talk about about the aspect of Jesus' death that is perhaps the most difficult for people to grapple with. We're going to discuss something the bible calls *propitiation*. Here's how I would describe *propitiation*: *we deserved wrath because of our sin, and Jesus intercepted it*. Propitiation has to do with the *wrath* of God.

You know, as a pastor, not too long ago, I would have to spend a lot of time *unpacking* an idea like wrath. People were just immediately turned off by the idea that God might have wrath towards things and especially towards people. And while that idea of a wrathful *God* might still be a difficult concept to some people, I don't think *wrath* itself is a difficult concept anymore. *Wrath* is actually *everywhere* in our society today. If you take a quick look at social media or the news, you'll find *wrath* everywhere. People are constantly expressing their unfiltered outrage towards the things that *they think* are the problem with the world. You'll see *wrath* from the political Left towards the political Right, *wrath* from the Right towards the Left. Wrath from men towards women and wrath from women towards men. Wrath from the religious towards the *irreligious*, wrath from irreligious towards the hypocrisy and intolerance of the religious. *Wrath* is actually expressed on a regular basis in our society.

What I mean is that in our day, **we are keenly aware of everything that is wrong with our world at all times, we are outraged by every single bit of it, and we demand that something be done about all of it.** That's wrath. It's the anger that *demand*s people be held accountable for their actions. It's the outrage that *insists* that people be exposed for the injustice they've caused. **It's our cry for people to have to pay for what they've done.** We want something to be done about the things we are mad about. We want to take it out on someone. Whether we want to take it out on them physically, legally, or just verbally—we demand that something be done. We want someone, somehow, to make it right. And things will not be okay with us until that happens. Until our wrath is satisfied.

And part of the story of the bible is that *God* has wrath too. Romans 1:19 reads:

*For the **wrath of God** is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth.*

Now, some of us do flinch at the mention of a "wrathful" God, because we've been told that "God is *love*." And it's true that God is love—that's from 1 John 4. But God's wrath is not at *odds* with his love—his wrath is *because* of his love. You see love—at least the real, actual, three-dimensional kind of love—*necessitates* wrath. If you *love* something, you are going to instinctively *hate* anything that threatens what you love. If we love *someone*, we hate anything that threatens to harm that *person*. We love our friends and family,

and therefore we hate things like cancer that threaten to destroy them. If you love peace, you will hate war. If you love justice, you will hate injustice. Loving anything will cause you to have strong, even violent reactions to things that threaten *xz*. As the great quote says, the opposite of love is not *hate*, it's *indifference*.

So here's the story of the bible: God *loves* the world. That includes the world *itself*, it includes the way he designed things to function in the world, *and* it includes the people *in* the world. **God loves the world. And because he loves the world, he has *wrath* towards anything that threatens to *harm* the world.** Because God *loves* justice, he *hates* injustice. Because God *loves* peace and wholeness, he *hates* violence and corruption. Because God *loves* healthy, whole, functioning human beings, he *hates* the sin that turns us into selfish, greedy, cruel, and corrupt human beings. God has wrath precisely because he has love.

Now that being said, there *are* some significant *differences* between our anger and God's. One of them is that God's anger is *slow*. In Exodus 34, the first place in the bible where God explicitly describes what he's like to human beings, it says that he is "slow to anger." He's not hot-headed, he's not quick-tempered like we often are. **God is only angry at exactly the right things and in precisely the right proportion.** He's not angry at anything and everything that inconveniences him or rubs him the wrong way. He's not out *looking* for things, *seeking out* things to be offended by. He's *slow* to become angry. That's one way that God's anger is different than ours.

Another is that it *God's* anger is entirely *unbiased*. God is not selective in the types of people he thinks are the problem—he thinks *we all* are the problem. Sometimes in *our own* anger, we have this tendency to believe that the problem is somewhere "out there." "We're the good guys," we think, "and the problem is the *bad* guys." The problem is Republicans. The problem is Democrats. The problem is religious people. The problem is irreligious people. The problem is my circumstances, my upbringing. The problem is my parents' generation. The problem is my children's generation. The problem is the government. **We are absolutely *relentless* in our efforts to locate the source of our anger somewhere *out there*.**

But God knows much better. He knows the problem isn't *out there*, but *in* every single human heart. The problem isn't in *those* people, it's in every single one of us. The sin we hate—the greed, the selfishness, the injustice, the hate, the prejudice—it's in all of us. Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, the Russian novelist, put it this way:

*If only there were **evil people somewhere** insidiously committing evil deeds, and it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them. But **the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being**. And who is willing to destroy a piece of his own heart?*

You have to know that the things we are angry about in the world aren't just *out there*, they're *in here*. **In other words, there truly aren't good people and bad people. There are bad people and Jesus.** So God's wrath isn't like ours—it's not biased. He is angry about every single person who has participated in evil. Every single one of us that has wreaked havoc on ourselves and others. Every single one of us that has corrupted the way things are supposed to work in the world. Every single one of us that has disregarded our neighbor, turned a blind eye to those in need. God's wrath is completely unbiased.

God's anger is different than ours in a number of ways. But one similarity is that **God's anger, like ours, also cries out for something to be done about it. Just like we believe that something *must be done* about the things we're angry about, even moreso, something must be done about the things that God is angry about.** And the word the bible uses for what must be done is the word *atonement*. Now, *atonement* might be an ancient-sounding *word*, but it's actually a very practical, common-sense type of concept. In life, whenever a wrong occurs, in any setting, *atonement* must always be made, whether we call it that or not.

For example, imagine that I let you borrow my car. And while you're driving my car, you're not paying attention, and you wreck my car. My car is no longer driveable as a result. Now to make things right, one of a few things has to happen. Theologically speaking, *atonement* has to be made. One way it could happen is that *you* could *pay* for the damage to my car—that'd be *you* atoning for the damage. The word for that is *restitution*. Another thing could happen is that I could say "you know what, I forgive you, so *I'll* pay for the damages. I'll pay, so that you don't have to." The word for that, theologically is *propitiation*. It's me atoning for the damage on your behalf. Or I could just go without a car. But even then, that's me "paying" for it, just in a different way. *I'm* paying with it by being exactly one car poorer than I was before. Life just got a lot worse for me because of something you did. But either way, the word for *me* paying for the damages, one way or another, theologically speaking, would be *propitiation*: it's me *atoning* for the damages on *your* behalf.

And that's the way the bible says our *sin* is atoned for, via *propitiation*. **Propitiation is God atoning for our sins on our behalf.** And here's why: in the situation we find ourselves in with *God*, *restitution* simply will not work. It's not as if we could just sit down and make a list of all the ways that we have sinned against God and against others, all the way back to when we were born. That wouldn't be *possible* for us to do, and even if it *was*, how could we ever begin to pay God back for that mountain of wrongs? We would spend the rest of our life trying, and still come up short.

So what God does instead is sends Jesus to *atone* for sin on our behalf. He makes Jesus our *propitiation*. We see this on a few different occasions, always referring to Jesus' death on the cross:

- *...for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a **propitiation by his blood**, to be received by faith.* (Romans 3:23-25)
- **He is the propitiation** for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world. (1 John 2:2)
- *In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son **to be the propitiation** for our sins.* (1 John 4:10)

So part of what Jesus' death was about was him being the *propitiation* for our sins. About him becoming the *atonement* that we couldn't offer. Here's how Isaiah 53 describes it:

*[4] Surely he has borne **our griefs** and carried **our sorrows**; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. [5] But **he was pierced for our transgressions**; he was crushed for **our iniquities**; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed. [6] All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned—every one—to his own way; and **the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.***

Isaiah, speaking hundreds of years before Jesus died on the cross, is describing both vividly and theologically what would happen on the cross. It says that on the cross, Jesus bore *our* griefs and our sorrows. *He* was pierced for *our* transgression. Everything that happened to Jesus was him *atoning* for *our* sin. It was *him* making right the wrong that *we* committed. It was *him* receiving the justice and judgment *we* deserved. That's the heart of propitiation.

So in light of that, before we're done today, I just want us to take a look at a few specific things that describe what that looked and felt like exactly. I want us to observe just a handful of the things that happened to Jesus before he died.

## **Jesus was scourged (Matt. 27:26).**

A scourging was essentially to be flogged with with a whip often called a cat of nine tails. It was essentially a handle with 20+ leather strands attached to it. At the end of each strand was a small piece of cut stone, metal, or bone that were specifically designed, with each toss of the whip, to latch into a person's skin and hang onto it before they were violently pulled out, with skin and flesh attached to them. Ancient observers who documented this practice said it wasn't uncommon to see one of these strands pull out a piece of a rib or other bone with it when it detached from the person being flogged.

So Jesus was stripped bare, and our best guess is that he received what was called the "forty lashes minus one." Romans believed that *forty* lashes with one of these cat of nine tails would kill a person. So administering "forty lashes minus one" was a way of bringing the victim up to the very brink of death, of making them experience the maximum amount of agony, but keeping them alive to experience more pain afterwards. Jesus was *scourged*.

## **Jesus was mocked (Matt. 27:27-31).**

After being flogged, with likely most of the flesh on his back and sides torn open, Jesus was hauled off to be mocked by a group of Roman soldiers. Scripture tells us he was stripped naked and given only a scarlet robe and a crown made out of thorns to wear, and a scepter to put in his hand—all of this being a sarcastic way of ridiculing Jesus' claims to be a king. He stood there in pain as they spit on him and mocked him. Periodically, as all this was happening, Scripture says they would rip the scepter from his own hand and use it to bash in his head, like a baseball bat.

## **Jesus was crucified (Matt. 27:32-44).**

What's interesting is that when the early accounts of Jesus' life get to the part about Jesus being crucified, they don't actually give very much detail. They go into painstaking detail about the other events *leading up to* the cross, but when they get to the cross, most of them just say something like "...and then they crucified them." Part of that was because likely the early audience reading the gospels didn't need crucifixion described to them—they saw crucifixions all the time. But you and I *don't* see crucifixions in our day. We're not familiar with its gory detail.

Crucifixion was invented by the Persians but perfected by the Romans. It was a death penalty reserved for the worst kind of criminals. For thieves, murderers, and most often *revolutionaries* who threatened to revolt against the Roman empire. The Romans would hunt those people down and execute them publicly before hundreds of people in the public square, as a way of crushing any future attempts at rebellion against the state.

Crucifixion originated as impaling a person. They would take a large pole, with a sharpened end and pierce it through a person's midsection, and stick the other end of the pole into a hole in the ground and leave them there to die. Eventually though, they determined that impaling a person was too quick. They didn't feel like it inflicted enough suffering on the person being executed. So they began to modify it to make the person's agony last longer.

What they eventually landed on was two beams of wood. One beam was placed vertically and would usually stay put at the site of all the crucifixions. The other beam was the horizontal piece that a person's hands would be stretched out on. Jesus likely carried the *horizontal* portion—usually weighting anywhere from 75 to 100 pounds—on his back on the short hike up the hill to where he would be crucified. Remember, Jesus' back at this point has been completely devastated by the scourging, and now this crossbar made of unfinished wood, likely with splinters on every square inch, is placed on his back. Scripture tells us that Jesus, whose body is likely hemorrhaging from everything it's been through so far, cannot finish carrying the cross up the hill, so another man is selected to carry it for him.

Once atop the hill, Jesus' arms were driven in to the beam using the equivalent of a railroad spikes. Those spikes went through some of the most sensitive nerve endings in the body, in his wrist. And then he was lifted up as that crossbar was attached to the pole already in the ground. Once he was upright, the weight of his body would've caused the vertical pole to drop deeper into the ground, violently shaking Jesus' body on the cross as it hung. His feet were nailed to the vertical beam. So the more he pulled upwards from his arms, the more pain *they* were in. And giving his arms a rest would've caused the nails in his feet to cut deeper and deeper into the foot upwards towards the ankles.

Most people who were crucified would die from asphyxiation, which is basically death by suffocation. It means you gradually lose the ability to breathe, so dying feels like choking to death, but as *slow* as humanly possible. The frequent, irregular breathing would gradually cause damage to one's tissues and veins, causing blood to leak into the lungs and the heart. Eventually each of Jesus' major organs would begin to fail one-by-one and death would soon follow. This is what Jesus suffered on the cross.

But *before* he took his last breath, the gospel of John tells us that Jesus cries out the words, "it is finished." That's the phrase we've been looking at throughout our teaching series over the past month: the phrase "it is finished." What's interesting though, is that that phrase wasn't unique to *Jesus*. There have actually been tax records and bills unearthed from around that time period, with that same phrase written on them: "it is finished." Regularly, when you would pay off a bill or submit a tax payment, they would stamp those words on top of your record as a way of saying "this is done, this is paid for." So part of what Jesus meant when he cried out on the cross was that he had *paid* our debt. He had *atoned* for it—it was finished.

And so I do want to say that my goal in unpacking all of these gory details from the cross this is not just for shock and awe. I'm not trying to just push the envelope and be gratuitously graphic. I wanted to

unpack it for you for two reasons. One, I want you to see the length to which Jesus goes to love us. There's a lot of talk about *love* these days—how we all just need to love one another, how the world just needs more love in its midst. And I agree. But I can't help but think that when we say things like that, we're defining love a lot *cheaper* than Jesus defines it. To Jesus, love isn't just feeling pleasant feelings towards someone or even just being kind to them. To Jesus, **love is the length to which you will go to inconvenience yourself for the good of another.** It's the degree to which you will suffer *for* another person's good. Which is why Jesus says in the gospel of John "greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for their friends." So in recounting the details of Jesus' suffering for us, what we're really looking at is his *love* for us. His willingness to *suffer* for our good.

But the second reason is that I want you to see that what happens leading up to the cross is because of what it tells us about God's sense of justice. A lot of people tend to ask questions like, "if God exists, why doesn't he do something about evil? If God exists, why is there so much injustice? If God exists, why does he let people get away with such horrible things?" But **in the cross and the events leading up to it, we see *precisely* how much God hates injustice.** We see precisely how opposed to it he is. And we see just how determined he is to do something about it.

But we also see him *address* injustice in a way that only God himself could orchestrate. In the cross, God turns all the various forces of evil, back inwards on themselves. You see, Jesus' death on the cross, at a surface level, simply happens because all the unjust people and systems of his day align against him. The hypocritical religious elite who want him dead. The cruel, power-hungry Roman government who thinks he's a rebel. And the public onlookers, many of them complicit in the whole process. All of these various parts of society together put Jesus to death with their injustice. But in a jarring twist, **Jesus leverages all their injustice and wields it as a demonstration of just how much he despises it all.** Of just how high the penalty was *for* their sin. **He turns evil and injustice back on itself. Ironically, the world's own sin became the means by which Jesus atones for their sin. He co-opts evil to punish evil.** That is precisely what makes Good Friday so very Good.

So the question I'll leave us with this evening is very very simple: *was Jesus' propitiation for you? Was what Jesus accomplished for you?* Now, whether or not he *desires* it to be for you is unquestioned. 2 Peter 3:9 says this:

*The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. Instead he is patient with you, **not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.***

When Jesus was enduring the terrors of the cross, he had in mind all of us. What he wanted to make possible was the atonement, the payment of every single one of our debts. That's what he desires. But it's not automatic. God is patient, but he will not wait forever. Your sin *will be* atoned for—that's just how it works. So it will either be atoned for by you—by receiving an eternity separated from God. Or it will be atoned for by Jesus—by him becoming *your propitiation*. So I'll just ask, have you *received the reality* that that propitiation was for you? Has your life been aligned with that reality?

And let me be very clear: by asking that, I'm not asking if you grew up in a Christian home. That's not the question. I don't intend to ask whether or not you made a decision and signed a decision card one time when you were nine years old. That's not the question. I'm also not intending to ask if you are a good

person or not, if you are think of yourself as a *moral* person. None of those are the questions I'm asking. What I am asking is this: was Jesus the atonement for your sins?

When you sin—in those moments—is your hope in the fact that no one saw your sin? Is your hope in the fact that you're mostly a good person and you'll try better at it next time? Is your hope in the fact that you made a decision one time when you were a kid, even though that decision has made next to no difference in your life since then? Are *those things* where your hope lies? Or is your hope in the fact that a Jesus was beaten, was mocked, was tortured, and was nailed to the cross on your behalf? Because at the end of your life—and for every moment until then—that is the question that will matter: *was Jesus' propitiation for you?*

So here's what I want us to do: I'd love for us just to take a few minutes and reflect on that question. I'd love for us to spend some time doing some searching on whether or not that is true for us. I know an awful lot of us are here today precisely because we know Jesus' propitiation *was* for us. But at the same time, I don't want to make any assumptions. **I also know that one of the easiest places for a non-Christian to hide is right smack in the middle of modern evangelicalism. To go through religious motions is easy, especially when you've grown up around it your whole life. But to live your life as if your only hope, as if your life is *about* the death and resurrection of Jesus is a whole other thing entirely.**

So let's just take a minute and ask: *was Jesus' propitiation for me?* If so, we'll respond by celebrating that reality through song here in just a little bit. If the answer is "no," or "I don't know," myself or most anybody else here would love to talk to you about what it looks like *for* it to be for you. We'd love few things more.

Let's pray.