

Sonship Through Propitiation

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In J. I. Packer's classic work, *Knowing God*, he makes the following statement, "Were I asked to focus the New Testament message in three words, my proposal would be adoption through propitiation" (*Knowing God*, 214). Two words were mentioned by Packer that have tremendous significance in the New Testament. They are *adoption* and *propitiation*. These words relate in a profound way to our salvation.

The English word *adoption* comes from the Greek word *huiiothesia*. The Greek word is a compound word made up of *huios*, a son, and *thesis*, a placing, which is akin to *tithēmi*, to place, and signifies the place and condition of a son given to one to whom it does not naturally belong (W. E. Vine, *Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words*, I, 32). The word is found five times in the Greek New Testament (Rom. 8:15; Gal. 4:5; Eph. 1:5; Rom. 8:23, 9:4). It is found only in the writing of the apostle Paul.

Vine makes a significant statement concerning this word, "Adoption is a term involving the dignity of the relationship of believers as sons; it is not a putting into the family by spiritual birth, but a putting into the position of sons" (Vine, I, 32). Spiritual birth and adoption (which simply means *set as sons*) are two different things. One becomes a part of the spiritual family of God by the new birth, i.e. baptism into Christ (John 3:3,5; Gal. 3:26,27; Rom. 6:3,4). The word "except" in John 3:3,5 has the force of "if and only if." There is only one way to become a "child of God." That is by being baptized (immersed) into Christ. We become a child of God by birth. The word *adoption* may mislead some into thinking that they can become children of God by adoption rather than spiritual birth. Bro. Roy Deaver argues strongly against this view

for the following reasons: (1) God does not have two kinds of children in his family, some born, some adopted; (2) because the word “except” (in John 3:3,5-DS) means there is no other way in; (3) because the context demands “sonship”, and (4) because the original word (the Greek word) is “*huiiothesias*”, which is made up of “*huios*” (son) plus “*tithemi*,” (I set, I place); hence, to be set or placed as sons. But, those in Christ are “set as sons” by virtue of their having been born into God’s family (*Romans*, 275). Paul is describing the status of sonship that is the result of the new birth.

Only three of the five passages where *huiiothesia* is found refer to the Christian’s present relationship to God in Christ (Rom. 8:15; Gal. 4:5; Eph. 1:5). Sonship indicates (1) the intimate relationship between the Father and His children, (2) freedom in Christ versus the servitude that is the result of sin, (3) confidence before God instead of fear, (4) the blessing of the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, (5) the privilege to address God as “Abba, Father”, (6) the blessing of being a beneficiary of God’s riches, and (7) fulfillment of God’s eternal purpose in Christ.

The word *propitiation* comes from the Greek words *hilasmos* or *hilasterion*. The phrase *to make propitiation* comes from *hilaskomai*. *Hilaskomai* “was used amongst the Greeks with the significance to make gods propitious, to appease, propitiate, inasmuch as their good will was not conceived as their natural attitude, but something to be earned first. This use of the word is foreign to the Greek Bible, with respect to God, whether in the Sept. or in the N. T. It is never used of any act whereby man brings God into a favorable attitude or gracious disposition” (W. E. Vine, III, 223). There is nothing that man can do to appease the wrath of God. God’s demand for justice is satisfied only through the substitutionary sacrifice of Jesus Christ upon the cross. God’s wrath is His

righteousness executing justice through judgment and punishment. God's wrath is not an uncontrolled outburst of anger as often is the case in human beings. God's wrath is "holiness reacting to evil in a way that is morally right and glorious" (*Knowing God*, 169,170). We are saved from God's wrath through Jesus Christ (Rom. 5:8,9).

The word *propitiation* has two important aspects to it. The first is *appeasement* of God's wrath through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ upon the cross. The second is *expiation* (remission of sins) which is also accomplished by Jesus upon the cross.

There are five passages where *hilasmos*, *hilasterion* and *hilaskomai* are found in the New Testament (Luke 18:13; Rom. 3:21-26; Heb. 2:17; I John 2:1,2; 4:8-10). In Luke 18:13, the verb *hilaskomai* signifies *to be merciful to*. The publican pled that God would be merciful to him because he was a sinner. In Romans 3:21-26, the word *propitiation* is linked to the word *justification*. The word *propitiation* derives from the Greek word *hilasterion* (Rom. 3:25). Justification is a judicial term that indicates *acquittal* before God. The Greek word *dikaioo* denotes an act of pronouncing righteous (W. E. Vine, II, 284,285). The result of justification is that the sinner stands before God as if he had never sinned. We are justified by God's grace. We are justified by faith (an obedient faith, Rom. 1:5, 16:26; 5:1). We are justified through the blood of Christ (Rom. 3:25). Propitiation results in justification before God. It is solely and preeminently the work of Jesus Christ.

In Heb. 2:17, God's Word declares, "Wherefore in all things it behoved him to be made like unto his brethren, that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest in things pertaining to God, to make reconciliation for the sins of the people." The word *reconciliation* in this verse is translated from the Greek word *hilaskomai* (*to make*

propitiation). Propitiation is connected to the incarnation and the function of Jesus as our high priest. The incarnation was an essential aspect of God's plan for Jesus to die upon the cross. Jesus, as the preincarnate Word (John 1:1) could not die. The incarnation (John 1:14) was an important aspect of the high priestly function of Jesus Christ (Heb. 4:14-16). Jesus offers His own blood in our behalf. This He did *once for all* (Heb.7:27, 9:26). Without the incarnation, there is no propitiation.

An advocate is one who pleads the cause of another. In I John 2:1,2, the word *propitiation* is associated with the *advocacy* of Christ in behalf of men. "My little children, these things I write unto you, that ye sin not. And if any man sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous: And he is the propitiation for our sins: and not for ours only, but also for the sins of the whole world." Christians sin inadvertently from time to time. When this happens, Jesus is still a propitiation (*hilasmos*) for their sins. The benefits of Christ's sacrifice upon the cross continue to be received in the life of a Christian. He can be forgiven and he can be saved from the wrath of God. John also affirms that no one is excluded from the scope of God's mercy. The sacrifice of Christ was meant to provide for the forgiveness of the sins of the whole world and save all men from God's wrath.

Finally, in I John 4:8-10, the word *propitiation* (*hilasmos*) is tied to *love*. "Herein is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us, and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins." In this passage love is presented as a **virtue**—God is love. Love is presented as **motive**—God's love for us resulted in God acting for our highest good. Love is presented as **action**—God sent/gave His Son to die for us. The **results** of God's

love are confidently summed up in one word—*propitiation*. God’s love results in man’s forgiveness and the appeasement of God’s wrath.

The meaning of the word propitiation can be summed up in two words—**the cross!** The cross of Christ provides atonement for sin. The cross of Christ reconciles man to God. The cross of Christ justifies freely. The cross of Christ provides for remission of sins. The cross of Christ saves from the wrath of God. The cross of Christ forever stands as the symbol of Christ’s saving work—propitiation.

No wonder J. I. Packer summed up the entire Gospel in three words, i.e. *adoption through propitiation!* Perhaps we can improve on his succinctness. The entire Gospel is summed up in two words—*the Cross!* Could we possibly summarize it in one word—*Christ?*