

In accordance with its centrality in Old Testament prophetic revelation, the concept of redemption as realized in Christ's cross is of utmost significance to the biblical gospel. Defined most generically, redemption is the deliverance or liberation of someone or something through the payment of a price, or *ransom*. It has been shown that in the Bible it is used in numerous ways, though it is most concerned with God's delivering activity on behalf of His covenant people.

- In each instance God sovereignly redeemed Israel from her various circumstances of bondage and oppression by His mighty "outstretched arm" (cf. Exodus 6:1-8; Judges 6:1-16, 10:1-14; Jeremiah 32:1-44; Ezekiel 20:1-44; etc.). However, He did so through the instrumentality of chosen deliverers, including Moses, judges, kings, and even the pagan Medo-Persian ruler Cyrus.
- Moreover, every act of redemption of whatever sort came at the price of a ransom. In the Exodus that price was the lives of the first-born of Egypt (Exodus 11:1-12:41); the redemption of the first-born of Israel cost five shekels of silver (Numbers 18:15-16); the ransom, or price of redemption, of indentured servants or consecrated property was based on the number of years until the Jubilee (Leviticus 25:47-52, 27:14-24); Israel's redemption from her numerous enslavements came at the price of her own suffering and the desolation of her oppressors (Isaiah 43:1-4, 47:1-14; etc.).
- So also the prophets spoke of the future, comprehensive redemption to come in terms of the payment of a ransom. As with Israel's temporal redemptive events, in most contexts the ransom is associated with God's punishment of His people and the destruction of His enemies (cf. Isaiah 1:1-28, 34:1-35:10). At the same time, this final redemption is directly associated with Yahweh and the work of His Servant, particularly in Isaiah's prophecy (42:1-43:8, 49:1-13, 52:1-15, 54:1-55:13, 59:1-63:19).

It is in the context of Isaiah's Servant prophecies that the matter of Yahweh's redemption takes on the nature of a substitutionary sacrifice. By His own vicarious suffering the Lord's Righteous Servant would justify the many, bearing in Himself their iniquities (53:1-12). This is a crucial passage, for it gives prophetic insight into the mechanism by which Yahweh would redeem His people. Not only does it show that substitutionary atonement was to be the mechanism of God's final redemption, it provides indication that the enemies to be vanquished are not physical, but the spiritual subjugators that are sin and its instigator. Sin and Satan are the true enemies of man, and God's great redemption was to bring their destruction and overturn sin's curse upon the entire created order (Genesis 3:14-15; Isaiah 11:1-16, 65:1-25, 66:10-24; etc.).

- 3) In Yahweh's faithful Servant all of the devastation associated with Adam's sin was to be purged and restored. As the agent of His redemption, the Righteous One would recover Yahweh's people and gather them back to the Lord their God, that they should serve Him in peace, security, and blessedness forever. This restoration was necessary because sin, as the exaltation of self to the place of God, had resulted in man's estrangement and brought him under God's fierce displeasure.

Therefore, if communion were to be restored - and the prophets promised it would be - there must first be reconciliation between God and men. God's wrath against estranged sinners must be appeased, and the prophets revealed that this appeasement would come through the sacrifice of the Sin-Bearer; the promised Branch of David (Isaiah 53:1-55:13; cf. also Jeremiah 30:1-31:14, 33:1-26; Hosea 1:1-3:5; Amos 9:1-15; etc.). In accordance with the divine promise, in the fullness of the times the Redeemer came into the world, "*whom God displayed publicly as a propitiation in His blood through faith*" (3:25a).

This clause also has crucial significance, for it indicates the goal God had in bringing redemption in Christ. His design was not simply the deliverance of men from their bondage to sin, but *their reconciliation to Himself*; their restoration to their created purpose as image-bearers. And precisely because this work implicates all men as sinners, Christ's redemption was a matter of *public display*. God set Him forth openly that all would be faced with their predicament and lack of personal remedy. Man was created in God's image for the purpose of communion, but Adam's insistence upon autonomy brought the "death" that is separation from God. Harmonious communion was replaced with alienation, fear, and distrust. In seeking to become more god-like, man had lost his own identity and plunged himself into ruin and misery. From that moment in Eden God's righteous wrath hung over humanity, and communion could never be restored until the enmity was removed (Isaiah 59:1-2). This problem of enmity and its resolution is the concern of *propitiation*.

- a) Like the previous two doctrines - *justification by grace* and *redemption* - propitiation is here introduced for the first time in the Roman epistle. More importantly, this is the only occurrence of this term or any of its cognates in all of Paul's writings. Altogether, this word in any of its related forms occurs only six times in the entire New Testament.

In the most general sense propitiation speaks of the appeasement of an offended party, and in the Bible it always has reference to God's offence with men (cf. Luke 18:13; Hebrews 2:17; 1 John 2:2, 4:10). Sin has rendered God the offended party, so that it is His indignation, and not man's, that must be propitiated.

It is noteworthy that the author of Hebrews uses the same adjectival form as Paul does to refer to the *mercy seat* in the Holy of Holies - the gold cover on the Ark of the Covenant. This term is used in the same way in the Greek Old Testament (cf. Exodus 25:17-21; Leviticus 16:13-15; etc.). Because the mercy seat was the focal point of the sprinkling of the blood of atonement on Yom Kippur, it came to be known as the *place of atonement*.

Given that Paul was a Pharisee who had been strictly committed to the Old Covenant, many have argued that this imagery was in his mind. If this is the case, then he was indicating to the Romans that Christ is the antitypical fulfillment of the Old Covenant mercy seat as the place of atonement where God and Israel were reconciled each year. Douglas Moo observes: “*What in the Old Testament was hidden from public view behind the veil has now been ‘publicly displayed’ as the Old Testament ritual is fulfilled and brought to an end in Christ’s ‘once-for-all’ sacrifice.*” Whether Paul made this association or not, it is undeniable that he understood Christ’s death as appeasing God’s wrath against sin, thereby reconciling Him to His image-bearers (Romans 5:1-11).

- b) The fact that Christ’s redeeming work was a propitiation indicates that it was also an act of *expiation*. This is so because expiation speaks of the satisfaction of the demands of justice against the guilt of sin and transgression, and the satisfaction of divine justice is the necessary basis of appeasement. For God cannot be reconciled to men and receive them back as sons until such time as their offences against Him are justly punished, and the “*wages of sin is death*” (Romans 6:23; cf. Isaiah 53:12; Romans 5:11-17).

This is the reason for Paul’s assertion that propitiation is *in Christ’s blood* (3:25a). By referring to Christ’s blood Paul was implicating His *substitutionary death*. There was nothing unique in the blood of Christ, and the Levitical sacrificial system of which Christ’s atonement was the fulfillment makes it clear that the issue was not the shedding of blood per se, but the death of the appointed sacrifice. God was emphatic to Israel that “*the soul who sins shall die,*” so that any substitutionary atonement likewise demands the death of the substitute: “*without shedding of blood there is no forgiveness*” (Ezekiel 18:4; Hebrews 9:22). The pouring out of the substitute’s blood was the pouring out of its life:

“*For the life of the flesh is in the blood, and I have given it to you on the altar to make atonement for your souls; for it is the blood by reason of the life that makes atonement...For as for the life of all flesh, its blood is identified with its life.*” (Leviticus 17:11, 14)

- c) Finally, Paul stated that the propitiation in Christ's blood is "through faith" (3:25a). This prepositional phrase is easily overlooked in the grandeur of the language of atonement, but it is as important to Paul's argumentation as any of the other components. For as the justification of sinners stands upon God's grace in His own self-propitiation through Christ's act of redemption, so also *that gracious justification is appropriated by the individual sinner solely through faith.*

The significance of Paul's language must not be overlooked: Paul's gospel has God taking the initiative and exerting Himself toward His own self-propitiation; men do not in any way or to any extent appease His just indignation; He appeases Himself. Grasping this truth is vitally important, for it guards against the all-too-common assumption that Jesus Christ has lovingly interjected Himself to keep an angry God from destroying sinful men. Paul's insistence - consistent with the uniform witness of the Scripture - is that *God* set forth Christ as a propitiation; indeed, any accurate Trinitarian theology must view the wills of the Father and Son as both seeking reconciliation with Adam's estranged race. Philip Hughes has rightly observed: "*Our own justification before God rests on the solid reality that the fulfilling of God's justice in Christ was at the same time the fulfilling of this love for us.*" So also P. T. Forsyth: "*The prime doer in Christ's cross was God. Christ was God reconciling. He was God doing the very best for man, and not man doing his very best for God.*"

As previously indicated, the gravity and glory of Paul's gospel lie in its attributing all activity regarding the salvation of men to God alone. It was God's good pleasure and love that devised the grand plan of redemption, even as it was the exercise of His power that accomplished the Incarnation, set forth the Son as Redeemer, and through His redemption propitiated His own just indignation in order to restore and reclaim to Himself His fallen image-bearers. It is God who gives His Spirit to quicken men to life and transform them into the likeness of the God-Man, so as to present them complete and spotless in the day of Christ Jesus.

*If, therefore, all saving activity lies with God, what remains for the objects of His grace but to believe? What God requires of men is to entrust themselves to His power and goodness in devoted submission. The glory of the gospel - for men as also for God - is that it presents a salvation that is of the Lord from first to last: "But by His doing you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification, and redemption, that, just as it is written, 'Let him who boasts, boast in the Lord.'"*