

The Wrath of God is Satisfied: The Efficacy and Particularity of Propitiation

Selected Scriptures

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Introduction

Well, we return again this morning to our series entitled, *O Perfect Redemption!*—a study on the atoning work of Christ. And we are asking the question, “Given that Christ’s atonement was a perfect redemption—given the perfection of the atonement as that saving act of God whereby He accomplishes salvation for sinners—what bearing does the nature of the atonement as a perfect redemption have on the extent of the atonement?” Given (a), what God intended to accomplish by the cross, and (b), what He actually did accomplish by the cross, what can we conclude about (c) for whom Christ died on the cross? In other words, how do the design and nature of the atonement bear on the extent of the atonement?

And our answer has been, both the design and the nature of the atonement help us understand that the extent of Christ’s atonement is limited to those particular people that the Father chose from before the foundation of the world, who, by the work of the Holy Spirit, actually come into possession of the saving benefits purchased by the atonement, and thus who are finally saved. Christ atoned for the elect alone, and not all without exception. And that is because, 1 Timothy 1:15, “Christ Jesus came into the world to *save* sinners”—not to make sinners savable, or make salvation possible, but actually to *save* sinners. The design of the atonement—actually to save sinners—and the nature of the atonement—as an efficacious accomplishment—helps us see that the extent of the atonement is limited to those who are actually saved by it.

A classic way to illustrate the difference between a universal and particular redemption is to think of the two models of atonement as two different kinds of bridges. Universal atonement is like a bridge designed to fit as many people as possible onto it. It’s a wide bridge—so wide that there is room for every person who has ever lived in history to walk across it if they wish. The problem is: the bridge doesn’t quite extend all the way across the river it traverses. It’s incomplete. It’s wide enough for everybody, but it stops just short of land on the other side. The bridge makes getting across the river *possible*; it provides for the *potential* of rescue from the raging waters of the turbulent river below it. But those on the bridge have to take that running leap of faith and hope they land safely on the other side. Particular redemption, on the other hand, is like a bridge that goes all the way across the river. It is perfectly complete. Nothing at all needs to be added to it to make it effective in accomplishing its design. But this bridge is narrow.

It's not been designed to hold everybody who has ever lived. It's been designed for a specific, limited number of people. But it gets those people it's been designed for all the way across.

And so, after an introduction, and then two messages on the design of the atonement—speaking of Trinitarian unity and the single saving intention of God in the cross—we came in our last message to begin discussing the nature of the atonement. And we saw that it is a work of penal substitution—whereby Christ pays the penalty for our sins by becoming a substitute for us. And then we pressed further and saw that Scripture presents this penal substitutionary atonement according to **four motifs**: expiation, propitiation, reconciliation, and redemption. And each of these motifs corresponds to the various ways our sin has broken the relationship between us and God. By breaking God's law, we have become guilty. And so we stand in need of expiation. We need our sins to be taken away—for our guilt to be borne by a substitute. By offending God's holiness, we have become the objects of God's holy wrath. The perfectly righteous God hates sin with a perfect hatred. And so if we are going to be restored to Him, we need a propitiation—a means by which we can satisfy the righteous wrath of God against our sin. Our sin alienates us from God; it makes us His enemies. And therefore we stand in need of reconciliation to overcome the enmity between us and restore us to peace. And Scripture also says that we are in bondage to our sin—spiritual slaves to sin and death. And so we stand in need of redemption, whereby a sufficient ransom price is paid to free us from our captivity.

And in Christ's perfect redemption, we have each and every one of those benefits. And when we dig into Scripture to find the biblical definitions of expiation, propitiation, reconciliation, and redemption, we find that the nature of the atonement is perfectly efficacious. And an atonement of unlimited power and perfect efficacy must necessarily be limited in extent to those who actually enjoy its benefits.

Last time, we pressed into the atonement as an expiatory sacrifice—that the death of Jesus Christ was the fulfillment of (a) the Old Testament Levitical sacrifices, (b) the Passover Sacrifice, and (c) the rituals of Israel's Day of Atonement. Hebrews 9:26 says, "But now once at the consummation of the ages He has been manifested to *put away sin* by the **sacrifice** of Himself." And I refer you to the previous message for more details on that. This morning, we're going to press in to that second motif of the nature of the atonement—**propitiation**. Christ's death is not only an expiatory sacrifice, it is a propitiatory sacrifice.

And I don't know if I can overestimate the theological significance of the concept of propitiation. The doctrine of propitiation is the beating heart of the Gospel of Christ. It is absolutely central to the Christian faith itself. Why do I say that? Because there is no greater, more significant question that has ever been asked than "How can sinful man be made right with Holy God?" "How can God be just—which means His holy nature must always punish sin wherever He finds

it—while at the same time being merciful, and gracious, and forgiving to sinners?” And the answer to that question is: propitiation.

You say, “How can propitiation be the very heart of the Gospel? I don’t even know what the word means!” Well, the word “propitiation” just means “appeasement” or “satisfaction.” But what does the death of Christ “appease,” or “satisfy”? Answer: the wrath of God. The wrath of God that burns hot against our sin. You see, because God is a good God, because He is a just God, because He is a holy and righteous God, God’s response to human sin is to be justly stirred to holy fury.

You say, “No, no, no! I don’t like that! I don’t want to hear about a God of wrath!” Well, my friend, then you don’t want to hear about the God of the Bible. In Genesis 3, when Adam and Eve sinned, the Holy God’s response was to curse them both, along with the entire creation, expel them from the Garden, and guard its entrance with a flaming sword. In Genesis 6, when God “saw that the wickedness of man was great on the earth, and that every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually,” it grieved His heart that He ever made man, and He drowned the entire planet in the Great Flood. After the flood, in Genesis 19, when the men of Sodom so seethed in their abominable lust that they nearly beat the door of Lot’s house down in order to rape the angels they thought were men, God rained hell out of heaven, and destroyed every soul in Sodom and Gomorrah—even the plants that grew on the ground.

You say, “Oh, but that’s the angry God of the *Old* Testament! Everyone knows that the God of the *New* Testament is loving, and forgiving, and merciful!” Well, yes, He *is* loving and forgiving and merciful, but that does not mean that He is not a God of wrath. In John chapter 3, verse 36, John writes that “he who does not obey the Son will not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him.” Ephesians 5:5–6 speaks of immorality, impurity, covetousness, and idolatry, and says, “because of these things the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience.” And in Revelation 14:10, the angel says that idolaters “will drink of the wine of the wrath of God, which is mixed in full strength in the cup of His anger; and he will be tormented with fire and brimstone in the presence of the holy angels and in the presence of the Lamb.”

When the image-bearers of God deface that very image in them by sinning against their Creator, they provoke His wrath against them. And that’s why if anyone is going to be saved, we need God’s wrath against us to be appeased, to be satisfied, to be extinguished by some just means of satisfaction. And that is why Scripture speaks of Christ’s atonement as a propitiation. As 1 Thessalonians 1:10 says, “Jesus...rescues us from the wrath to come.” How does He do that? By receiving in Himself the full exercise of the Father’s wrath that burned hot against the sins of His people. He became a curse in our place. By pouring out His blood to death, He satisfied the Father’s righteous anger, and turned away His wrath from us, who, were it not for our Substitute, were bound to suffer under that wrath for ourselves. Romans 3:24–25 says, “[We] 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, [...] received by faith.”

Can you see why I say that propitiation is the beating heart of the Gospel? First John 4:10 says that very thing: “In this is love,” says the Apostle John, not that we have loved God but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the **propitiation** for our sins.” You say, “Mike, I don’t like all this *wrath* talk! God is a God of *love*!” My friend, you can’t begin to comprehend the love of God until you realize that that love *consists* in the just satisfaction of His holy wrath. The great theologian B. B. Warfield wrote, “The love of God cannot be apprehended in its length and breadth and height and depth ... [except] as it is apprehended as the love of a God who turns from the sight of sin with inexpressible abhorrence, and burns against it with unquenchable indignation.” “In this is love”! In this is the Gospel! Love *consists* in propitiation—in the Father’s sending of His Son to bear the divine wrath in the place of His people, to make satisfaction to the justice of God for our sins. The love of God consists in the sending of the Son of God to turn away the wrath of God from the people of God.

And so we must study the atonement as a propitiation. And like our last message, we’ll do that in two parts. First, we’ll seek to define propitiation from Scripture, and see how the very heart of Christ’s atoning death is that it is the efficacious satisfaction of divine wrath against sin. Number one, then, the **nature** of propitiation. Second, we’ll look to the text to see for whom this propitiation was accomplished. Number two: the **particularity** of propitiation.

I. The Nature of Propitiation

First, the **nature** of propitiation as the **efficacious satisfaction of divine wrath** against sin. The New Testament words are translated “propitiation” in the verses we’ve referenced are *hilaskomai*, *hilasmos*, and *hilastērion*, which, as you can hear, all come from the same root. And in the Septuagint—the Greek translation of the Old Testament—*hilaskomai* translates the Hebrew word *kāphar*, the most common Hebrew term for “to make atonement.” And while it’s true that *kāphar* has a range of meanings—including *forgiveness* (e.g., Lev 4:20), *cleansing* (e.g., Lev 14:18–20), and *ransom* (e.g., Num 35:29–34), there are several key texts in which it’s unmistakable that *kāphar* is used to refer to propitiation, to the concept of turning away God’s wrath. And I want to take you to a few of these.

First, turn with me to Exodus 32. As Moses was on Mount Sinai receiving the covenant law from God Himself, Israel had already flung herself into brazen idolatry with this golden calf. And in response to their sin, God responds in wrath. In Exodus 32:10 he says, “Now then let Me alone, that My anger may burn against them and that I may destroy them; and I will make of you a great nation.” “I’m going to wipe them all out and start over with you, Moses!” Skip down to verse 30. The next day, Moses tells the people of his intentions to intercede with God on their behalf. He

says, “You yourselves have committed a great sin; and now I am going up to the LORD, perhaps I can *make atonement* for your sin.” And that word for “make atonement” is *kāphar*—again, the word for propitiation. So Moses clearly understood the problem: God’s wrath was kindled against the sin of His people. And his instinctive solution was to try to “make atonement” for their sin—that is, to turn God’s wrath away from His people.

We see a similar scene in Numbers 25; turn there with me. As God was leading Israel through the wilderness and preparing them to enter the land of Canaan, the people began committing sexual immorality with Moabite women and worshiping the gods of Moab (vv. 1–2). Here again, the Lord responds in wrath to His people’s idolatry. Verse 3 says, “And the anger of Yahweh was kindled against Israel” (ESV). That anger was exercised upon them in the form of a plague that, verse 9 tells us, killed 24,000 people. Verse 4 says that God directed Moses to kill the leaders of Israel so that His wrath might be turned away from them. And just as God said that, another Israelite had brought a Midianite woman to his family’s tent, apparently intending to follow in the immorality of the rest of the people.

Then Phinehas, one of the priests, was so incensed by such outright rebellion that, verse 7, he “took a spear in his hand, ⁸and he went after the man of Israel into the tent and pierced both of them through, the man of Israel and the woman, through the body.” As a result of Phinehas’ zeal, God’s wrath was propitiated and the plague was stopped. Verses 11 to 13, God says: “Phinehas the son of Eleazar, son of Aaron the priest, *has turned back my wrath* from the people of Israel, in that he was jealous with my jealousy among them, so that I did not consume the people of Israel in my jealousy. Therefore say, “Behold, I give to him my covenant of peace, and it shall be to him and to his descendants after him the covenant of a perpetual priesthood, because he was jealous for his God and **made atonement** for the people of Israel.” And there’s our word again: *kāphar*, propitiation. Clearly, the concept of turning back God’s wrath is synonymous with making atonement.

One final example: turn to Numbers 16. Korah had enlisted 250 leaders of the congregation of Israel to mutiny against Moses and Aaron, and God responded by opening the ground and swallowing them into the heart of the earth. But in verse 41, the people continue to grumble. And in response to this rebellion, God’s wrath was again kindled against Israel, and again in the form of a plague that eventually killed 14,700 people, verse 49. In verse 45, He tells Moses and Aaron, “Get away from the midst of this congregation, that I may consume them in a moment.” And so Moses says to Aaron, verse 46, “Take your censer and put in it fire from the altar, and lay incense on it; then bring it quickly to the congregation and **make atonement** for them, for *wrath* has gone forth from the LORD; the plague has begun!” So Aaron did what Moses said, verse 47: “And he put on the incense and **made atonement** for the people. And he stood between the dead and the living, and the plague was stopped” (vv. 47–48). Once again, you see this clear

parallelism between making atonement and turning away God's wrath against sin as exercised in the form of a plague.

Now, consider what these texts teach us about the **efficacy** inherent to the biblical concept of propitiation. What is atonement, according to these passages? It is the efficacious satisfaction, or turning away, of divine wrath. In each scenario, when propitiation was made, the wrath that had been expressed in the form of a plague was stopped. This propitiation was not provisional. The Israelites were not required to "subjectively appropriate" Phinehas's execution for God's wrath to be turned away from them. Nobody had to add anything to Aaron's incense offering in order to turn a potential provision of atonement into an actual atonement. No, the act of atonement itself efficaciously satisfied the divine anger against their sin.

And so when we come to the New Testament, and we see the authors of Scripture using this same word group, we can't escape the conclusion that the word signifies the same concept of propitiation—of wrath-satisfying appeasement—just as it did in the Old Testament. And so by the time Paul calls Jesus' death a propitiation in Romans chapter 3, he's already spent two chapters detailing how the wrath of God is kindled against the sin of all mankind. Chapter 1 verse 18: "For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men who suppress the truth in unrighteousness." In chapter 2, we discover that God's wrath abides not only on the Gentiles but also on the Jews. Romans 2:5, "Because of your stubbornness and unrepentant heart you are storing up wrath for yourself in the day of wrath when and revelation of the righteous judgment of God." In verse 8, "those who are selfishly ambitious and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness," they can expect only "wrath and indignation." In chapter 3 verse 5, Paul calls God "the God who inflicts wrath." And so there can be no mistake: God is angry with sinners. Every righteous fiber of His holy being is aroused with just hatred of unrighteousness. And you and I are unrighteous!

And so the thread of divine wrath has been so woven through this opening section of Romans that the reader is left asking, "If this is the miserable state of sinful mankind—hopeless under the righteous wrath of Almighty God—how will we ever be able to be in a right relationship with Him?" "How will sinful man escape the wrath of a God who is too holy not to punish sin?" And the answer comes to us in the beating heart of the Gospel itself, Romans 3:21–26. God has accomplished righteousness—not through the law; we've all broken the law. Not to be received through our good works, because we could never perform enough good works to satisfy the inflexible demands of divine holiness and justice. But He has accomplished righteousness, verse 25, by publicly displaying His own Son the Lord Jesus Christ, "as a **propitiation** in His blood through faith." Look at it: "This was to demonstrate His righteousness," verse 26, "so that He would be just and justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus."

How can God be just—so that as a righteous judge He by no means leaves the guilty unpunished—while at the same time being justifier—declaring guilty sinners righteous and forgiving their sins? Propitiation! God Himself has satisfied His own wrath against sin by sprinkling the blood of the spotless Lamb upon the mercy seat of the heavenly altar. He has punished the sins of His people in a Substitute, and therefore, in unspeakable grace, His wrath has been turned away from us.

Christ's atonement is a wrath-averting sacrifice. It is a propitiation. Sin will not be overlooked; God's forgiveness does not mean that He just sweeps sin under the rug. He would never so violate His own holiness. No, the Holy One of Israel will ever and always punish sin—in one of two places: (a) sin will be punished in the sinner in hell, or (b) it will be punished in Christ-the-Substitute on the cross.

And that propitiation, Christian, is **efficacious**. Christ's death actually satisfies God's wrath. If Christ has died for you, then all the wrath you rightly deserved—every ounce of the unmixed fury that God would have visited upon you in the eternal torments of hell—was fully poured out on this Substitute in those three terrible hours on Calvary. And because of that, there is no longer any wrath left for Christ's people. God is propitious toward us, because our sin has been paid for. Our punishment has been borne. "There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" (Rom 8:1). "I have been crucified with Christ" (Gal 2:20). "And if we have become united with Him in the likeness of His death, certainly we shall also be in the likeness of His resurrection" (Rom 6:5). "Death and the curse were in our cup: / O Christ, 'twas full for Thee; / But Thou hast drained the last dark drop, / 'Tis empty now for me! / That bitter cup, love drank it up; / Now blessing's draught for me!" Does that sound like Good News? The full, free, efficacious satisfaction of wrath against us? Indeed, it is!

But let me tell you what that must mean. It means that Christ did not die for those who perish under the wrath of God in hell for eternity. If Christ's death is a propitiation, and if propitiation is the **efficacious** satisfaction of divine wrath, then Christ has not propitiated the wrath of God in the case of those who experience God's wrath in hell. If there is wrath left to pour out on the unbelieving sinner, then—no matter what way you slice it—that wrath was not satisfied by the atoning death of Christ. You say, "Well, it was *potentially* satisfied." That just means it was not *actually* satisfied. To potentially do something is to *not* do something. Indulge me: Would every last one of you, right now, *potentially* stand up? Exactly. None of you stood up, because there is no such thing as a potential action. Christ did not potentially satisfy God's wrath; He *actually* satisfied God's wrath!

And so again, if there is a penalty left for the sinner to pay in hell, then that penalty was not paid by Christ on the cross. As Augustus Toplady wrote, "If Thou hast my discharge procured, / And freely in my [place] endured / The whole of wrath divine, / Payment God cannot twice

demand— / First at my bleeding Surety’s hand, / And then again at mine.” Scripture declares that our bleeding Surety efficaciously endured “the whole of wrath divine” in the place of those for whom He died. And yet, because there will be some who will have the wrath of God against their sins poured out on upon them in hell—indeed, some who were undergoing that wrath even at the moment that Jesus offered Himself as a propitiation—Christ cannot have propitiated for all without exception. The **nature** of the atonement as a propitiation conditions our understanding of the extent of that propitiation. An efficacious atonement is necessarily a particular atonement. And a universal atonement is necessarily an inefficacious atonement, which is to say: no atonement at all.

II. The Particularity of Propitiation

And that brings us to the **second** major point of our sermon. First we saw the nature of propitiation. Now we come, secondly, to the **particularity of propitiation**. And while it’s true, as we’ve just seen, that the particularity of Christ’s propitiation is an implication of its efficacy, that’s not the only evidence for it. Of those texts that speak of Christ’s atoning death as a propitiation, there is clear exegetical evidence that indicates that Christ’s propitiation was **particular**, and not universal.

In the first place, just briefly, since we’ve spent a bit of time there already, let’s consider the particularism in Romans 3:21–26. Paul says the righteousness of God is manifested in the propitiatory atonement of Christ. In verse 22, he says that righteousness of God is “for all those who believe; for there is no distinction.” Don’t miss the particularism in that verse. The righteousness of God manifested in the propitiation of Christ’s atonement is for all who believe—not for all without exception. All without distinction, yes; that’s what he says. But not all without exception. Only those who believe. And then, similarly, down in verse 26, Christ’s propitiation is said to demonstrate God’s righteousness “so that He would be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.” This whole passage concerns those who believe, not all without exception. And who are the ones who believe? Who has faith in Jesus? Only those to whom God grants the gift of faith, Ephesians 2:8. And who are they? They’re the ones He’s chosen before the foundation of the world, Ephesians 1:4: the elect. Christ’s death is a propitiation for those who believe, namely, the elect of God. It is a **particular** propitiation.

Second, turn to Hebrews chapter 2. The author mentions Christ’s death as a propitiation in verse 17. He writes, “Therefore, He had to be made like His brethren in all things, so that He might become a merciful and faithful high priest in things pertaining to God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people.” Don’t miss the imagery, here. The author is identifying Christ as the great fulfillment of the High Priest of the people of God. Just as the high priest offered sacrifice and made intercession to atone for the sins of Israel on the Day of Atonement, so also Christ, the

great fulfillment of the Day of Atonement, is our High Priest who makes propitiation—who satisfies the wrath of God in a full and final way—for the sins of His people.

Notice how the author speaks of the ones for whom Christ makes propitiation, there at the end of the verse: “for the sins of *the people*.” Not, “For the sins of *all* people;” “for the sins of *the* people.” Who are *the* people? They are the people of God (Heb 5:3; 7:5, 11, 27; 9:7, 19). The Old Testament high priest made atonement for the people of God alone. Aaron didn’t offer propitiatory sacrifices for the people of Moab or Egypt; he did it for Israel. For the Old Covenant people of God. So also now, the Great High Priest of the New Covenant makes propitiation for the New Covenant people of God, the church, and for them alone.

How else do I know that? Look at the beginning of verse 17: “Therefore, He had to be made like *His brethren* in all things, so that He might become a merciful and faithful high priest...to make propitiation.” “*The people*” are “*His brethren*.” And who are His brethren? Look back at verse 11: “For both He who sanctifies and those who are sanctified are all from one Father; for which reason He is not ashamed to call them brethren,” verse 12, “saying, ‘I will proclaim Your name to My brethren...’” The brethren of Christ are the children of the Father. “Those who are sanctified,” he calls them. And these children of the Father, the Father has *given* them to the Son. Look at the second quotation in verse 13: “Behold, I and the children whom God has given Me.” So, “*the people*” for whom Christ “makes propitiation,” are “His brethren,” “the children” whom the Father has “given” to the Son. These are all designations that refer to the elect of God, and not to all without exception.

In fact, in verse 16, the author of Hebrews explicitly denies that the atonement of Christ is universal. He says, “For assuredly He [Christ] does *not* give help to angels, but He gives help to the seed of Abraham.” Angels fell, too! They could have benefited from an atonement! But Christ does not give help to angels! So, first of all, at the very least, Christ’s atonement is limited to human beings; He does not die for angels. But secondly, it’s noteworthy that the writer does not say, “...but He gives help to *the sons of Adam*,” or some such phrase that would indicate every human being who ever lives. No, He says Christ gives help to the seed of Abraham. That is a **particularizing** designation. All people without exception may be rightly called the sons of Adam. But who are the seed of Abraham? Only those who believe. Galatians 3:7: “Therefore, be sure that it is those who are of faith who are sons of Abraham.” Galatians 3:29: “If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s seed, heirs according to promise.” It is not to all without exception that Christ gives His saving help as a merciful and faithful high priest who makes propitiation, but only to the new humanity, the seed of Abraham, those who believe in Him. And who are those believe? Again, they are the elect whom the Father has chosen before the foundation of the world, the children whom He has given to the Son. They are “the *many* sons,” Hebrews 2:10, whom the Father will bring to glory through the atoning work of the Son, and not all without exception including those whom the Father will not bring to glory.

Now turn with me to 1 John chapter 2. One of the most hotly debated passages of Scripture as it concerns the extent of the atonement is 1 John 2:1–2, where the Apostle John writes to the churches of Asia Minor, “My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. And if anyone sins, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous; and He Himself is the propitiation for our sins; and not for ours only, but also for those of the whole world.” And people who believe in a universal atonement say, “How can you possibly be a particularist while this verse is in the Bible? It’s right there! He’s the propitiation not for our sins only, but also for the sins of the whole world! All without exception!”

But that interpretation immediately presents us with a problem. We’ve just seen that “propitiation” means “the efficacious satisfaction of divine wrath.” There is no place in Scripture where the term means anything else—where propitiation is said to have been made, and wrath still abides upon those for whom propitiation was made. Not one place. If Christ efficaciously satisfies divine wrath for the sins of all people without exception, what’s that mean? Hell’s empty. Everyone’s going to heaven. But that’s not an option. We do know that “the gate is wide and the way is broad that leads to destruction, and there are many who enter through it,” Matthew 7:13. And those who reject particular redemption agree. They are not genuine universalists. But that means Jesus cannot be the propitiation for the sins of all without exception.

And it’s at this point that the interpreter of Scripture has two options. First, you could do what the universal-redemptionist does, and you can modify the meaning of “propitiation.” One professor claims we ought to understand the term propitiation here to speak of a “universal potentiality” (Lake, 39). Christ has *potentially* propitiated for all. But we’ve already said what we make of that. Potentially stand up, again. Another theologian claims that Christ’s propitiation makes sins “forgivable” (Shultz, 116–17). But if Christ’s death only makes sins forgivable, what then *actually* forgives sins? Our faith? Is faith our Savior? Was faith crucified for you? No, Christ is our Savior. He saves through faith, yes, but He’s the Savior. Ephesians 1:7 says that forgiveness is found in the Savior’s blood, not the sinner’s faith: “In Him we have redemption *through His blood*, the *forgiveness* of our trespasses.” Redemption is synonymous with the forgiveness of sins, and that redemption is accomplished through His blood, not through our faith. Still another commentator says this verse means that the death of Christ is “sufficient to deal with the sins of the whole world, but...his sacrifice does not become effective until people believe” (Kruse, 75). So, Christ’s atonement is *ineffective* apart from the faith of those sinners He’s trying to save. The problem with all these proposals is that not a single occurrence of the terms for “propitiation” indicates that the atonement ought to be understood as a potential, provisional, or possible atonement. There is absolutely no exegetical basis for interpreting “propitiation” to be anything other than the perfectly efficacious satisfaction of divine wrath.

The second option—rather than re-interpreting the term “propitiation” in a way never suggested anywhere else in Scripture—is to insist that “propitiation” means what it always means, but that the phrase “the whole world” must not refer to everyone who has ever lived or will live in the world. And particularists interpret “the whole world” to mean “the elect of God scattered *throughout* the whole world”—all without distinction, rather than all without exception. So John is not saying: Christ potentially satisfies God’s wrath for the sins of both the elect and the non-elect. He’s saying: Christ efficaciously satisfied the wrath of God against the sins of both (a) the believers to whom he’s presently writing, and (b) the believers in other areas of the world who were alive at that time, as well as (c) the elect who would *become* believers as time progressed.

You say, “Are there any exegetical **reasons** for that interpretation?” Yes, there are. At least **four** of them. The first is a **contextual** reason. In 1 John, John was writing to believers who were being harassed by false teachers who were teaching such heresies like: “Jesus didn’t really come in the flesh,” chapter 4 verse 2; and “Believers can reach an exalted state of sinless perfectionism,” chapter 1 verse 8. These were the teachings of a heretical sect called Gnostics, and, though Gnosticism wasn’t full-blown until the second century, the seeds of their heretical doctrines were apparently already present in the first-century church. Well, another tenet of Gnosticism was the teaching that the key to true spirituality lay in a secret knowledge possessed only by the elite. These false teachers in Asia Minor were assaulting the church by claiming that they alone had this elite knowledge, and that the believers there were somehow second-class Christians because they didn’t have it. (This is why John says in chapter 2 verse 27 that the believers have no need for anyone to teach them, since they have the Holy Spirit abiding in them; it’s because these heretics claimed that they had the true knowledge and the regular believers needed to listen to them.)

And so, as John encourages these believers who are tempted to despair because they find themselves not to be sinless as the false teachers claim to be, when he writes concerning the extent of Christ’s atoning work, he repudiates all vestiges of exclusivism and speaks of the Savior’s accomplishment in the most universalistic of terms. Jesus is not the propitiation for our sins only—whether the sins of the proto-Gnostic elites rather than the sins of common Christians like them; whether the sins of the churches in Asia Minor rather than the sins of believers scattered throughout the whole world; or whether the sins of the believers alive in that day rather than the sins of those who would eventually come to faith in Christ. No, Jesus is the propitiation for the sins of God’s elect people scattered throughout the whole world, in all times and in all places. So the reason for the universalistic language isn’t to teach that Christ died for all without exception, but rather that He died for all without distinction—all kinds and classes of people throughout the whole world, contrary to what these false teachers were claiming.

A second reason is **lexical**. There are several instances throughout Scripture where the phrase “the whole world” must be interpreted as something less than “all without exception.” For

example, in Romans 1:8, Paul says that the faith of the Roman Christians is being proclaimed, literally, “in the whole world.” But of course, not every individual alive on the earth when Paul wrote Romans had heard of the Romans’ faith! In fact, several translations—including the New American Standard, the King James, and the Legacy Standard Bible—translate the phrase, your faith is being proclaimed “*throughout* the whole world,” because it’s unmistakable that that’s the sense of the words.

Perhaps even more conclusive is the occurrence of the phrase in 1 John 5:19, especially because it’s in the very same letter as the verse in question. There, John says, “*the whole world* lies in the power of the evil one.” Well, wait a second. If “the whole world” must always refer to “all people without exception,” does that mean that the Apostle John himself and the believers he was writing to lay in the power of Satan? No, he couldn’t mean that, because he just said in the immediately preceding verse, 1 John 5:18, that “the evil one does not touch” the one who has been born of God. This means that the expression itself—“the whole world”—ought not to be automatically interpreted as “all without exception.” There are cases in which it simply cannot mean that. And therefore, it’s not out of accord with sound principles of exegesis to seek another interpretation for the phrase in 1 John 2:2, where it would conflict with the biblical definition of propitiation.

A third reason to interpret “the whole world” as something less than “all without exception” is **syntactical**. Interestingly, there is at least one other text in the writings of the Apostle John that fits this very same syntactical formula: John 11, verses 49 to 52. John reports Caiaphas’s prophecy about Christ’s death, namely, that one man would die for the people, and the whole nation not perish (11:50). Then he says something in verses 51 and 52 that is almost syntactically *identical* to 1 John 2:2. Note five elements here: “Now he did not say this on his own initiative, but being high priest that year, he prophesied that [1] Jesus was going to *die* [2] *for* [3] the *nation*, [4] and not for the nation only, but in order that He might also gather together into one [5] the children of God who are scattered abroad” (11:51–52). That is, (1) a comment concerning Christ’s atonement; (2) the word *for*; (3) a particular group, call it X; (4) the phrase, “and not for X only, but...also”; and (5) a larger group.

We see the exact same syntax in 1 John 2:2. I’ll try to read them side by side: (1) A comment concerning Christ’s atonement: “Jesus was going to die,” versus, “And He Himself is the propitiation.” (2) The word *for*—it’s the next word in both verses. (3) A particular group: “...for the *nation*”; versus, “...for *our* sins.” (4) The phrase, “And not for X only, but...also”: “...*and not for* the nation *only, but* in order that He might *also*”; versus, “*and not for* ours *only, but also*.” And (5) A larger group: “...the children of God who are scattered abroad,” versus, “for those of the whole world.”

Now again, the first four elements of this syntactical formula are virtually identical in both passages. The one difference occurs in that fifth element: “the children of God who are scattered abroad” and “the whole world.” But despite the formal variation, the syntactical parallel from the same author—writing at about the same time and about the same topic—gives us good reason to see the fifth element in both verses as referring to the same concept, especially when to conclude otherwise would undo the definition of a biblical term that, as we’ve established is consistently defined throughout Scripture. “The whole world” in 1 John 2:2 refers to the same group of people as “the children of God who are scattered abroad” in John 11:52—that is to say, the elect of God throughout the whole world, and not all without exception.

One more: what we might call a **principlal** reason. And by that I mean: the point that John is making. Interpreting “whole world” as “all without exception” makes absolute nonsense out of John’s point in this passage. It overturns the entire flow of his argument. What do I mean? Well, John is writing to comfort sinning believers who are tempted to be discouraged by their own sinfulness in the face of false teaching which says: “We don’t sin anymore, and you’re not the elite until you stop sinning!” Verse 1: “My little children,” even if these false teachers tell you that sinless perfectionism is possible, I’m telling you that even if you do sin, “we have an Advocate with the Father! And He is the propitiation for our sins! Your failings may be many, but Jesus Christ the righteous has fully extinguished the wrath of God against your sins by His propitiatory death! And now He presently pleads, as our Advocate—on the basis of that perfectly efficacious propitiation—He pleads the merits of that sufficient sacrifice in the throne room of heaven! There is no more wrath for you, believer! Even though you still sin! Because Christ is your propitiation!” Glorious!

But if what he means by the next phrase is that Christ is the propitiation for the sins of all without exception—for the reprobate as well as the elect—why wouldn’t these believers reply, “So what if He’s my propitiation, then, John? If He’s the propitiation for the sins of those who eventually go to hell, what comfort is that to me? That means I can go to hell, too!” It makes absolutely no sense to console sinning believers, assuring them of their pardon and sure hope of heaven, on the ground of a propitiation that Christ has also made for those who will suffer the wrath of God for eternity. John Owen asks, “Will that be any refreshment unto me which is common unto me with them that perish eternally? Is not this rather a *pumice-stone* than a breast of consolation?” (10:333). It totally undoes the entire point of John’s argument.

And so, if “whole world” in 1 John 2:2 means “all without exception,” (1) the term “propitiation” has to be given a meaning it is never given anywhere else in Scripture; and (2) John’s argument has to be reduced to nonsense. We have good contextual, lexical, syntactical, and principlal reasons to read “whole world” as “all without distinction”—the elect throughout the whole world—rather than “all without exception.”

Conclusion

How can we sum up? For Scripture to identify the atonement of Christ as a propitiation means that His atoning death efficaciously satisfied the righteous wrath of God against the sins of those for whom He offered Himself. Everyone for whom Christ died as a propitiation, God's wrath against them extinguished forever. For that wrath ever to be roused again would mean that the propitiation Christ made was insufficient to satisfy the demands of God's justice. But that is blasphemy! The Father was perfectly pleased by the sacrifice of the Son! "It is finished," was the cry of triumph from the cross. "Death and the curse *were* in our cup," but He hath "drained the last dark drop. 'Tis *empty* now for me!" Jesus Christ, our Great High Priest—our Great Champion and Captain of salvation—He has drunk the miseries of damnation into His very soul, so that death is swallowed up in victory (1 Cor 15:54). There is no wrath left for God to execute upon those for whom Christ has died as a propitiation!

And yet, because there will be some who will have the wrath of God against their sins poured on upon them in hell—indeed, some who were undergoing that wrath even as Jesus offered Himself as a propitiation—we cannot say that Christ has died for all without exception. We would destroy the ground of all our hope if we did that! because we would turn our atonement from a victorious accomplishment into an abject failure.

The weight of your sin, Christian, would have sunk you to hell. But if you trust in Christ who bore that weight on the cross, there will be no load for you to bear. The bitter cup of divine wrath was yours to drink. But if you trust Christ who drained it to its very dregs, you may drink from the stream of overflowing blessings. The rod of God's anger was for your back. The sword of His fury was to pierce your heart. But it pierced the heart of the innocent Son of God, and now that sword sleeps for you.

Believer, rest in the perfect accomplishment of Christ on your behalf! Even if we sin, we have an Advocate, who pleads on the basis of such a full and perfect propitiation as that! "Father, in their case, let Your wrath be satisfied. Remember the nail piercings. Remember the wounded side. Remember the cry of dereliction. Remember the fury of Your abandonment of Me, as I hung there, and be propitious to them." He will receive you! All you must do is go to Him in confession and repentance and plead that sufficient blood, and say, "Lord, here I am again, in need of forgiveness again. And yet I don't come to you offering gifts to purchase forgiveness! I come believing in the gift that You gave to me that purchased forgiveness! And so long, Lord, as Jesus is still righteous—so long as that satisfaction still satisfies your righteous wrath—be merciful to me, the sinner." And your God welcomes you. And He receives you again. And He picks you back up. And He says as Jesus said to the leper, "I am willing; be cleansed."

And if you're an unbeliever, that very same glorious Gospel remains open to you as well. Today, with the door of mercy flung wide open to you—with breath still in your lungs, with time to repent and lay hold of this salvation—what could stop you? What could be causing you to delay another minute? You who sit and hear the Gospel week after week, why would you cling to death, and grasp hold of hell and punishment and misery? What fleeting and false pleasure of sin is worth drinking the full fury of God's wrath forever? "O, eternity! I must be miserable forever!" No! Christ has drunk eternal misery into His very soul, so that you may go free into the cloudless peace of divine blessing, if you turn from your sins and trust in Him alone.

And when you do, you sing with us: "Worthy are You [O Christ], . . . for You were slain, and purchased for God with Your blood men from every tribe and tongue and people and nation! . . . Worthy is the Lamb that was slain to receive power and riches and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing," precisely because the redemption He accomplished was a *perfect* redemption.