
Expiation and Propitiation

This past week, in preparation for a Bible Study, I found myself having to look up the definitions of expiation and propitiation once again. For some reason, I cannot keep the definition of these two words in my head. It's probably because we never use these words in our daily language, and, in addition, they do not appear in more modern translations of the Bible. I suspect that translators of the Bible today avoid these words because most people have difficulty understanding them.

At the Bible Study we were looking at Romans 3:21-31 with a special emphasis on verse 25. There we read in the NIV that "God provided Jesus as a sacrifice of atonement through the shedding of his blood – to be received by faith." The King James Version has this: "God hath set forth [Jesus Christ] to be a propitiation through faith in his blood." Reading that older version confuses me because I can never remember the definition of propitiation. I also discovered that the translator's choice of the word, propitiation, is an interpretation based on a particular theological emphasis.

The best way to resolve the problem, for me, is to look at the Greek. Of course, when I look at the Greek, I also need to have a Greek-English dictionary handy. The dictionaries I have indicated that the Greek word has an interesting history, particularly in how it was used in the Greek translation of the Old Testament (originally written in Hebrew). Discovering this also helped me understand the difference between expiation and propitiation and how we can understand Romans 3:25.

If we go back to the book of Exodus, while the Israelites are at Mount Sinai, we read about the building of the tabernacle and among the instructions for how it is to be built are the instructions for the building of the Ark of the Covenant. The ark was a wooden box, important in itself, but on top of the box is a cover which is translated as "atonement cover" in the NIV and "mercy seat" in the KJV (Exodus 25:17). The same word that is used in the Greek translation of the OT is the word that Paul uses in Romans 3:25 which we have in the English as "sacrifice of atonement." Jesus plays the same role as the cover of the Ark of the Covenant.

That cover was understood to be the place where God made his throne here on this earth. It was hidden from the sight of the people by a thick curtain, and no one entered the room behind the curtain except for once a year on the Day of Atonement. On that day, the high priest would pass through the curtain, and he would sprinkle the blood of a sacrificed goat on the cover of the Ark. It was that act that provided atonement for the sins of the people.

The question that theologians ask is this: was this atonement accomplished through expiation or propitiation? And here is where the definitions of the words becomes important.

Expiation has to do with eliminating sins. We sin against God, and as guilty people, we must bear the punishment for those sins. Expiation means that the blood of the sacrifice eliminates those sins, that they become hidden, are covered over. I think of expiation in this way: expiation x's out our sins so that we are no longer held accountable for them. Some would say that the blood of the sacrifice is expiation, when

our sins are x'd out, and we don't have to bear the punishment for them any longer. To put it another way, our criminal records are wiped clean.

Propitiation is a little different. God, rightly so, is very angry with our sin. Who wouldn't be angry with people who ignore him (even though he made us), who do their best to ruin the world through greed and selfishness and who turn against each other instead of caring for each other? God has every right to be angry with us because of our sin. If the cover of the ark is God's throne, God has the right to direct his anger at us outward from his throne room and so destroy those who dare stand against him. Propitiation is this: the blood of the sacrifice appeases God's anger so that it is turned away, and we are no longer in danger of his wrath.

As we can see from the KJV's wording, the translators thought that the emphasis of Jesus' work on the cross was to turn away God's wrath that was directed toward us. And they are right, but their choice of one word eliminates the possibility of the other.

The NIV translators, recognizing the problem, decided to use the phrase, "sacrifice of atonement," recognizing that the word "atonement" refers to making amends so that a relationship is restored. Their translation choice does not say exactly how that happens but leaves us to contemplate what did happen through Jesus when he died on the cross.

It seems that the best understanding of what did happen needs to include both expiation and propitiation. Jesus, when he died on the cross, x'd out our sins, not by eliminating them but by taking them upon himself. The record of our sins is wiped clean, deleted, and eliminated from the trash can icon on the computer screens of our lives. At the same time, even as Jesus does that, he turns away God's anger/wrath against us by turning it on himself. We no longer need to be fearful of God's anger, for it is no longer turned against us. All who believe in Jesus receive both benefits: our records are wiped clean and God's anger is turned away.

The words, expiation and propitiation, describe what happened at the cross. Unfortunately, I will probably forget what they mean the next time I have to use them, so I will have to look them up again. But I don't think I will forget what Jesus has done: he has cleared my record by taking its contents on himself, and I will never have to fear God's anger because Jesus has asked his Father to redirect it to himself. Expiation and propitiation. Hard words to remember, but beautiful truths to appreciate and enjoy.

Pastor Gary