

STUDY PACK 24

PROPITIATION AND THE HOLY OF HOLIES

This article was written by Dr. Zane Hodges. The discussion of word order in the New King James Version (NKJV), New International Version (NIV), and New American Standard Version (NASV) is perhaps misleading (the King James Bible had it correct all along) but the rest of the article is an outstanding commentary on Romans 3:25.

Jesus Is the Propitiation for all, But only the Mercy Seat for Believers
Romans 3:25 and 1 John 2:2.

~~ Dr. Zane Hodges ~~

“By His sacrifice on the cross the Lord Jesus Christ has become *in His own Person* the propitiation (= satisfaction) for the sins of all humanity. Thus in His role as our Mediator in the presence of God, His Father sees Him as the One who has perfectly met _____
_____. (1 John 2:2).

The concept of our risen Lord standing before God as the propitiation for human sins reminds us of the OT Holy of Holies. In that most sacred area (both in the tabernacle and in the Temple) there stood the Ark of the Covenant over which was placed a golden slab known to us from our Bibles as the Mercy Seat (see Exod. 25:17-22; 37:6-9).

On the Day of Atonement the High Priest brought sacrificial blood into the Holy of Holies and sprinkled the blood on the mercy seat (see Lev. 16:1-17). But it is also important to observe the divine declaration that follows the command to construct the mercy seat. For God says, of the mercy seat, “You shall put the mercy seat on top of the ark, and in the ark you shall put the Testimony that I will give you. _____, and I will speak with you from above the mercy seat, from between the two cherubim which are on the ark of the Testimony, about everything which I will give you in commandment to the children of Israel” (Exod. 5:21-22; italics added).

The blood-sprinkled mercy seat was therefore a point of meeting between God and man. In Exod. 25:22 Moses is in view, but Lev. 16:2 seems to imply that this could happen to Aaron or even to his high-priestly descendants.

This understanding of the ritual background of the mercy seat helps us to gain insight into a famous statement by the apostle Paul. In Rom. 3:21-26 Paul is discussing the imputed *righteousness of God* which is offered *to all* but is actually bestowed only _____
_____ (v. 22). This is the truth of justification by faith. Paul then goes on to declare that men are “justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, *whom God set forth as propitiation by His blood, through faith...*” (vv. 24-25). The words given here in italics have caused much discussion in the literature of Romans.

The word translated *propitiation* in Rom. 3:25 is related to, but not the same as, the word *hilasmos*, translated *propitiation* in 1 John 2:2. In Rom. 3:25 the apostle uses the word *hilasterion*.

This particular Greek word is primarily used in the Greek OT to render the Hebrew word for Mercy Seat (*kapporet*). It also means Mercy Seat in its only other NT use in Heb. 9:5) Thus it is very likely that in Rom. 3:25 we have this same meaning.

Christ in His own Person is the propitiation for _____.
Now, in the light of our understanding of Rom. 3:25, we can add a further observation. As a result of His becoming the living embodiment before God of a perfect and universal propitiation for all sin (1 John 2:2), in His own Person _____.
That is to say, He has also become an infinitely sufficient “meeting place” between a Holy God and a sinful man, but only for believers. As Paul indicates here, “God has set [Him] forth” as a mercy seat _____!

Thus when “faith in Jesus” (Rom. 3:26) occurs, God and man encounter one another and the human recipient in this encounter _____, receiving _____
_____ that Paul is talking about. This is akin to Jesus’ saying, “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me” (John 14:6). Man meets God only by faith in Jesus. God and sinful man can encounter one another in peace only in the Person of His Son (see also 1 Tim. 2:5).

This brings us to an important phrase in Rom. 3:25, the words *through faith*. The positioning of the words *through faith* in the NKJV does not strictly correspond to their position in the original Greek. In the Greek of Romans the order is as follows: *as a propitiation through faith in (by) His blood*. The Greek word represented in the NKJV as *in* can also mean *by*.

This has led some to think that Paul is speaking about “faith in His [Jesus’] blood.” In fact this is the sense adopted by the NIV.

However, there is major commentary support for the meaning reflected in the NKJV and in the NASV (= *a propitiation in His blood*). In particular it is pointed out that Paul never elsewhere makes the blood of Christ the object of faith.

Instead we should connect the phrase with the word *propitiation* (= mercy seat) and translate it this way: *a mercy seat...by means of His blood*. The NKJV has simply altered the word order for the sake of clarity, as has the NASV.

Without at all criticizing the choice of word order by NKJV and NASV, it nevertheless remains true that the Greek word order is significant. Paul is basically connecting the words *through faith* with the word for mercy seat (*hilasterion*). That is to say, Jesus Christ _____
_____ *through faith*.

The point we are about to make is obscured by the English translations which render both *hilasterion* here (Rom. 3:25) and also *hilasmos* in 1 John 2:2 as *propitiation*. First John 2:2,

however, is an unqualified assertion that the Son of God *is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the whole world*. There is no qualification that He is this only if and when there is faith. _____

But that is not true in regard to our Lord's role as the fulfillment of the Mercy Seat. On the contrary, this mediatorial function is realized only when men come to God through faith in Jesus. Thus the saving encounter between man and God through the one and only Mediator is always, and only, an encounter that faith makes possible. The Lord Jesus Christ becomes a Mercy Seat _____.

In Greek the words that immediately follow the phrase *through faith* are the words *by His blood*. These words therefore give the basis on which our Lord Jesus Christ can be a Mercy Seat *through faith*. He can do *so by virtue of* _____. In other words *He can become the hilasterion through faith as a result of the fact that He is the hilasmos for the sins of all humanity*.

Jesus Introduces Believing Sinners to God

Let us pinpoint what we are saying. To be sure, our Lord is, and always will be, the one Mediator between man and God (1 Tim. 2:5). So *hilasterion* in Rom. 3:25 does not so much describe a position as it does a function. But we may also say this: whenever an unsaved sinner comes to God _____, Jesus fulfills the function of the Old Covenant Mercy Seat by becoming the genuine meeting place between God and the believing sinner.

In other words, _____ when saving faith occurs. Unlike the inanimate Mercy Seat of Moses' day the risen and living Jesus Christ "introduces" the sinner to God. And He does so by bestowing eternal life - God's life - on the one who believes, so that the believer knows God (see John 17:3). God on His part bestows His perfect righteousness on the believer.

One final point should be noted. Frequently, eternal life is presented as the bestowal of our Lord Jesus Christ Himself (see John 1:12; 4:10, 14; 6:27, 33; 10:38; 17:2). By contrast, the Son is never said to be the One who grants justification. Instead _____ (Rom. 8:33). Although the Persons in the Godhead are equal in essence and glory, _____ must always be noted.

Perhaps we might illustrate the saving transaction as follows (although so sublime an experience is really beyond our capacity to describe since it is experientially instantaneous). The believing sinner comes to God through faith in Jesus. Jesus in His role as Mediator bestows eternal life on the believer thus introducing Him to God. God in response accepts the believing sinner and pronounces him justified.

What has happened to the believer? He has met God in the Person of God's living Mercy Seat, our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

And, what has God done? He has behaved righteously and graciously in response to His Son. Thus He has been “just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus” (Rom. 3:26).

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