

What is Atonement: Expiation and Propitiation

Jesus' crucifixion and death was in atonement for the sins of mankind. Atonement, what Jesus did to reconcile human beings with God has many aspects to it, and this lesson introduces you to one facet of the extent and depth of His work on the cross.

As Bible translations grappled with the concept of atonement, some Greek terms were challenging to translate. So some Bible translations used similar but different terms which can be seen here. The terms "expiation" and "propitiation" find their basis in the Old Testament sacrificial system.

Romans 3:25

"whom God put forward as an **expiation** by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God's righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins." (RSV)

"whom God displayed publicly as a **propitiation** of His blood through faith. This was to demonstrate His righteousness, because in the forbearance of God He passed over the sins previously committed. (NASB)

1 John 2:2

"and his is the **expiation** for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world." (RSV)

"And He Himself is the **propitiation** for our sins; and not for ours only, but also for those of the whole world." (NASB)

1. Use a Bible dictionary and look up "expiation" and "propitiation." What do the two words mean and how do they differ?

2. Examine this example and identify which instance is expiation or propitiation. You just stole a piece of candy and you've been caught by the furious store owner.

- a) Because Jesus intercedes and offers to pay for the candy or go to jail for the crime, justice has prevailed.
- b) Because Jesus is paying fully for your crime, the offended store owner is no longer angry.

3. What if the store owner was the Father of Jesus? What are the implications if atonement was just simply expiation? What are the implications if atonement was just simply propitiation? What do you conclude about atonement?

What is Atonement: Expiation and Propitiation Teacher Notes

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1. Use a Bible dictionary and look up "expiation" and "propitiation." What do the two words mean and how do they differ?

Help the student use a Bible dictionary as a resource. If a hard copy is not available, then use an online Bible dictionary resource! Encourage a discussion about the definition and subtle differences between expiation and propitiation.

Search in browser: "study light Holman dictionary" and from search results, select "StudyLight.org Holman Dictionary"

Choose and select letter: E

Select page 4 to find "expiation" on the list, and select: "Expiation / Propitiation"

Expiation and propitiation are words related to reconciling a broken relationship with God.

Expiation is the act of making a payment / amends and emphasizes the removal of guilt through a payment of the penalty.

Propitiation is the act of making favorable and emphasizes the appeasement or averting of God's wrath and justice.

2. Examine this example and identify which instance is expiation or propitiation. You just stole a piece of candy and you've been caught by the furious store owner.

This exercise is to help the student visualize and gain a sense of what Jesus Christ did for each Believer personally in the process of redemption.

Challenge the student's thoughts to explore the concepts of expiation and propitiation.

a) Because Jesus intercedes and offers to pay for the candy or go to jail for your crime, justice has prevailed.

This is an example of expiation, because a price has been paid for your guilt.

b) Because Jesus is paying fully for your crime, the offended store owner is no longer angry.

This is an example of propitiation, because the wrath of the of the store owner has been appeased.

3. What if the store owner was the Father of Jesus? What are the implications if atonement was just simply expiation? What are the implications if atonement was just simply propitiation? What do you conclude about atonement?

Help the student experience and feel the guilt of the candy theft. What does the student experience when he understands that the store owner provided His Only Son to pay the price of the student's crime? How would the student feel if he were the store owner?

Ask the student: what if the store owner was only concerned with expiation (payment / making amends)? What does this say about the store owner who provided the payment?

If Jesus Christ's atonement was only an expiation of sin, then it means that God acted just to cover the sins of human beings so that He could forgive it.

Too much emphasis on expiation risks making God as only concerned with the legal aspects of sin; Jesus merely paid the price of sin.

Ask the student: what if the store owner was only concerned with propitiation (appeasing his wrath)? What does this say about the store owner?

If Christ's atonement was only a propitiation, then it meant that God was the object receiving the sin offering that satisfied His holy anger towards sin.

Too much emphasis on propitiation risks making God as tyrannical and only concerned with appeasement, which is contrary to His character of righteousness and justice; Jesus merely satisfied God' holy anger.

Help the student see that the sacrifice of Jesus Christ was more than simply an "expiation" and more than simply a "propitiation". It was an act that accomplished both functions and provides a logical basis of atonement within a legal framework.

Because both expiation and propitiation are directed towards God, these acts are viewed as illustrating the **objective** aspects of atonement. Yet by themselves, they do not portray a complete picture of Christ's work of atonement. Just as important as it is to understand God's legal and judicial viewpoint, we must understand God's intent of atonement was directed towards human beings as well.