

1 John 2:2 and the Doctrine of Limited Atonement

¹ My little children, I am writing these things to you that you may not sin. And if anyone sins, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous; ² and He Himself is the propitiation for our sins; and not for ours only, but also for those of the whole world.

1 John 2:1-2 NASB

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He Himself is the propitiation for our sins

The word *propitiation* comes from the Greek word *Hilasmos*. It means *to satisfy*. In Biblical theology *propitiation* pertains to the satisfaction of God's wrath or specifically the appeasement of the wrath of God for sins.

In 1 John 2:2 and 4:10 the word appears in the noun form and identifies Jesus Christ specifically as the propitiation. As the propitiation Jesus Christ has appeased the wrath of God for our sins.

Not a potential

Being the propitiation or appeasement of God's wrath is not merely a potential for Jesus. Instead, He is described as being the propitiation. The text does not present Christ as what or Who He might become but rather the verse very explicitly presents Christ as Who He is—the propitiation.

Not a title

Furthermore, being the propitiation is not merely a title. By His death Christ has been shown to be the propitiatory sacrifice as clearly communicated by Romans 3:25,

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

Therefore, it must be concluded that the effect of the propitiation has already been achieved. This is to say that by the death of Christ the wrath of God has been averted. It would be preposterous to think that Christ is the propitiation without having propitiated or in other words that by His sacrificial death He did not achieve that for which He died—the appeasement of the wrath of God.

Sound Conclusion

Jesus either is the propitiation for sins or He is not. If He is then He has sufficiently appeased the wrath of God through His sacrificial death on the cross so as to render those for whom He died, who were due God’s wrath, free from His wrath’s just punishment. If He is not the propitiation for sins then He has not achieved by His death what He sought to accomplish leaving absolutely all to experience the inevitable wrath of Almighty God.

In that Jesus is the propitiation, as clearly stated by 1 John 2:2 there is only one sound biblical conclusion that can be drawn. The wrath of God has been sufficiently satisfied by the person of Jesus through His death on the cross so as to secure deliverance from God’s just punishment for those for whom He died. Propitiation not merely a potential but accomplished!

An accomplished propitiation as conveyed by 1 John 2:2 and 4:10 expresses 3 fundamental truths:

1. Christ is the propitiation.
2. Christ’s propitiatory sacrifice is effective.
3. The effect will not be overruled or thwarted.

In various places the Bible portrays the death of Christ as most definitely accomplishing that which God set out to achieve as opposed to merely being an attempt to achieve God’s purpose. Notice the verb tense in each of the following references renders the subject addressed as having been accomplished.

- **Inaugurated a new covenant (Matthew 26:28; Mark 14:24; Romans 11:26-27; Hebrews 7:22; 8-9; 13:20)**

Christ's blood, that is to say His death, inaugurated the unilateral covenant between God and those whose sins God specifically purposed to remove.

- **Condemned sin in the flesh (Romans 8:3)**

Romans 8:3 speaks not only to the accomplished task of Christ's death but also to the powerful sufficiency of His death. While verse 2 explains *why* there is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ of verse 1, verse 3 explains *how* the facts of verses 1 and 2 came to be. Verse 4 conveys the result. Those of verse 4 in whom the righteousness of the law is fulfilled, those set free in verse 2 and those in Christ of verse 1 are all the same and those in Christ of verse 1 can be none other than those chosen in Christ from before the foundation of the world (Ephesians 1:4.) For these God condemned sin by the sacrifice of His Son (Rm. 8:3). The power of His death thoroughly conquered sin.

- **Reconciled Jews and Gentiles into one (Ephesians 2:13-16)**

Christ's death actually accomplished reconciliation between Jews and Gentiles. Not universally but only for those Jews and Gentiles chosen in Him before the foundation of the world.

- **Obtained eternal redemption (Hebrews 9:12-15)**

Christ obtained eternal redemption so that the effectually called of verse 15 may receive the promise of the eternal inheritance.

- **Put away sin (Isaiah 53; Hebrews 9:26-28)**

Isaiah 53 speaks specifically to the fact that Jesus bore the sins not of the entire world but of many. See verses 1-6, 8, 11-12. Hebrews 9:26-28 explains that Christ Jesus, by a single sacrifice, His own self, bearing the sins of many, put away sin. He did not put away all the sin of all the people for

some have already died in their sin and others will. This (dying in sin) is impossible if Christ had truly put away all the sin of the entire world. Instead, Christ put away all the sin of some people having borne the sin of many.

- **Reconciled enemies to God (Romans 5:10)**

From God's perspective the death of Christ is the basis upon which He reconciled His enemies to Himself. Not that when Christ died God's enemies became saved but in Christ's death the basis of reconciliation was accomplished so that in time the enemies reconciled in Christ's death could be saved. Once again it is apparent from Revelation 20:7-15 not all of God's enemies were reconciled in Christ's death.

- **Redeemed fallen men from the curse of the Law (Galatians 3:13)**

Again the Bible conveys redemption as being a completed act through the death of Christ. And once again we are left with the realization that it is not possible that God would condemn those for whom redemption had been accomplished. Otherwise, Christ's death was not really effectual but this verse and many others show it truly was.

Since the wrath of God has been appeased by Christ Who is the propitiation it would be absolutely outrageous to conclude that God would ever pour out His wrath on anyone for whom Christ had already turned aside His wrath. Such a condition would render the death of Christ pointless and the purpose of God in Christ's death thwarted. Not to mention the inconceivable violence done to the triune God if Christ's propitious sacrifice were for any reason overturned or overruled by a member of the Godhead.

Notice in the next part of the verse (1 Jn. 2:2) John states ***“for our sins; and not for ours only, but also for those of the whole***

world.” The phrase “**but also for those of the whole world**” is a contrast to the preceding phrase “**and not for ours only.**”

Through this contrast the apostle John conveyed that the Gospel breeched a familiar historical barrier. As a Jew he and other Jews knew the exclusivity of God’s favor toward the Jews (Deut. 7:6-8; 10:14-15) and that atonement in the light of the Old Testament Levitical sacrificial system was restricted to the Israelites (consider Leviticus 16:15-17). Not only were the Jews of John’s day aware of this exclusivity but the Gentiles also were aware of God’s dealings primarily with the Jews, a truth evident in Acts 13:46-48. Over the years misunderstandings developed among Jews and Gentiles related to God’s exclusive dealings with the Jews. For this reason much in the New Testament is aimed at removing those misunderstandings and revealing Christ as the propitiation for sins. Not only for the sins of the Jews but Gentiles also. Thereby teaching that Christ is the propitiation for the sins of the whole world (John 1:29; 3:16; 6:33, 51; Acts 10-11:18; 13:46-48; Rm. 1:16; 2:9-16; 3:29-30; 8-11; Gal. 2:11-21; 3:28-29; 6:12-16; Eph. 2-3; Rev. 5:9-10).

Knowing the Gospel of Christ is one Gospel for the Jew as well as the Gentile, John furthers the effort of removing misunderstandings by stating that the propitiatory work of Christ is not limited to the Jew (*for our sins; and not for ours only*) but it extends to the Gentile as well (*but also for those of the whole world*).

Confronting Unsound Conclusions

Does the contrast in the text mean merely to communicate that Jesus is the propitiation for the sins of all believers both of his day and all believers in the future? While Christ truly is the propitiation for the sins of all believers of all time, drawing only that conclusion from this text is not warranted. For such a conclusion ignores the explicit contrast in the text. For instance, if

all John meant to say was that Christ is the propitiation for the sins of all who believe it seems there would be no reason for the contrast at all and the text could simply read, “He is the propitiation for the sins of the whole world” meaning specifically all believers in the entire world.

Since the contrast is not meant to merely communicate that Jesus is the propitiation for the sins of all believers, does it mean to convey that Christ is the effective propitiation for every sin of every individual in all the world, that His propitiatory sacrifice turned the wrath of God away from every human in the world and it is now up to each person to appropriate God’s provision for himself/herself? For instance, if an individual does believe in Jesus and thereby appropriates the propitiation then he will not suffer the wrath of God and if he does not believe in Jesus then he will suffer God’s wrath. There are multiple fundamental problems with this position which attempts to affirm the effective nature of Christ’s propitiation but actually ends up denying what it set out to affirm.

1. At its core what this position communicates in practice is not that Christ is the propitiation but that a person’s belief in Christ propitiates God’s wrath. Such thinking makes the believer the effective propitiation instead of Christ. This is a common and easy mistake that entirely misses the truth clearly communicated in 1 John 2:2 regarding Christ being the propitiation.
2. In reality, it presents the propitiation as merely being a potential. However, the verse clearly presents Christ as the propitiation. As such, Jesus did satisfy God’s wrath. His sacrifice was not potentiality propitiatory. As the propitiation, Christ, by His death did appease the wrath of God. His death was effective.

3. Maintaining that Christ is the effective propitiation (satisfied God's wrath) for every sin of every individual in the entire world forms the basis for universalism. Universalism is a clear contradiction of every verse in the Bible which speaks of the certainty of the future judgment of God on those who perish (Consider specifically Revelation 20:11-15). Since some will experience God's wrath, Christ's propitiatory sacrifice could not have been intended for all. Otherwise, God's intention in the propitiatory sacrifice of Christ failed. This is not a possibility for nothing is too difficult for God. He can do all things and no purpose of His can be thwarted (Gen. 18:14; Jer. 32:17, 27; Job 42:2).
4. Such a position depicts God pouring out His wrath on some for whom Christ by His propitiatory sacrifice had already turned God's wrath away. It would be absolutely outrageous to conclude that God would ever pour out His wrath on anyone for whom Christ had already turned aside His wrath. As previously stated, such a condition would render the death of Christ pointless and the intended purpose of God in Christ's death thwarted. Not to mention the inconceivable violence done to the unity of the triune God if Christ's propitious sacrifice was for any reason overturned or overruled by a member of the Godhead. For in John 6:38-39 and their context Jesus made it explicitly clear that His will was to do the will of the Father and that His death would be effectual in accomplishing the Father's will securing the salvation of all those given to Him by the Father.

It is certainly true that those who believe are forgiven and will not experience the wrath of God but it must be remembered that their belief is intimately bound to and the result of God's gracious choice and God satisfying His own wrath through Christ on their behalf. He chose them in Christ before the foundation of the world (Eph. 1:4); predestined them through Jesus Christ (Eph. 1:5); He intended to and did satisfy His wrath on their behalf

through Jesus' propitiatory sacrifice (Eph. 1:7); He effectually calls them which results in the gift of faith (Rm. 8:28-30) by which they appropriate the finished work God intended and performed in Christ for them only.

Consequently, 1 John 2:2 does not undermine the doctrine of the limited atonement. Instead it teaches that Christ's death was efficacious in satisfying the wrath of God on behalf of those for whom He died, inclusive of both Jews and Gentiles but limited only to those chosen in Him from before the foundation of the world.

The best way then to understand the contrast John presents would be in the light of John being a Jew and the familiarity of the people of that day with the historical fact of God's exclusive favor toward the nation of Israel as mentioned earlier. Therefore, knowing that the Gospel of Christ is one Gospel for the Jew as well as the Gentile, John states that the propitiatory work of Christ is not limited to the Jew (*for our sins; and not for ours only*) but extends to the Gentile as well (*but also for those of the whole world*). Similarly, John is conveying the truth Paul taught in Ephesians 2:13-16, that Christ, as the propitiation, reconciled both Jews and Gentiles.

In conclusion, the last phrase of 1 John 2:2 adds a fourth truth to the three fundamental truths previously established:

1. Christ is the propitiation.
2. Christ's propitiatory sacrifice is effective.
3. The effect will not be overruled or thwarted.
4. The effect of Christ's propitiatory sacrifice extends to both Jews and Gentiles.

In the light of these four truths and the Scriptural fact that some will die in their sin and be judged for their sin, it stands to reason Christ did not atone for all the sins of all the people of the entire world. Therefore, the atonement is limited.