

What Is Propitiation? (Part Two)

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From the moment of Adam's and Eve's first sins, mankind was separated from his divine Creator, and the friendly relationship that existed between them was destroyed. However, long before the creation took place—in anticipation of mankind's sinful ways—God had instituted a means to satisfy the righteous demands of His law and restore the favorable relationship, without which there could be no legal provision for their salvation from an inevitable and most-deserved judgment of death (Romans 6:23).

Continuing our study of propitiation, the focus turns to three closely related Greek terms that the New Testament authors used. They are alternately translated as “propitiation,” “mercy seat,” or “merciful.” Each points to the two foundational elements behind God's will to cover and forgive mankind's sins: His grace and mercy. Each term is only used twice in the New Testament. These three Greek terms are *hilasterion*, *hilasmos*, and *hilaskomai*.

Each of these terms is derived from a fourth Greek term, *hileos*, which *Strong's Greek Dictionary* defines as “cheerful . . . propitious; adverbially (by Hebraism) God be gracious!, i.e. (in averting some calamity) far be it:—be it far, merciful.” *Thayer's Greek Lexicon* simply describes *hileos* as “propitious, merciful.” These key Greek terms all have their basis in God's grace and mercy.

Studying how various New Testament authors used these terms provides valuable insight into the concept of propitiation—one of the most critical and essential elements of the process of our salvation.

1. Was the Mercy Seat the original place for our propitiation? Hebrews 9:5; Romans 3:25; Exodus 25:17; 30:6; Leviticus 16:13-15.

Comment: The author of Hebrews uses *hilasterion* (*Strong's* #2435) to refer to the lid of the Ark of the Covenant, the Mercy Seat of God. On the Day of Atonement, the high priest carried the blood of the sacrifice he offered for all the people into the Temple—behind the veil into the Holy of Holies—and sprinkled the Mercy Seat with it, which was the original, Old Testament manner of atonement or propitiation. In this usage, *hilasterion* is the Greek equivalent of the Hebrew term *kapporeth* (*Strong's* #3727), which means “covering” and is used exclusively in the Old Testament for “mercy seat” (Exodus 25:17; 30:6; Leviticus 16:13-15). In its only other biblical usage, the apostle Paul uses *hilasterion* in Romans 3:25 as “propitiation,” that is, Jesus Christ's atoning sacrifice and our reconciliation by His blood.

2. What term describes Christ's effectiveness in satisfying the legal requirements of the law? I John 2:2; 4:10.

Comment: The apostle John uses *hilasmos* (*Strong's* #2434) to describe Jesus Christ. In I John 2:2, John writes, “And He [Christ] is the propitiation [*hilasmos*] for our sins,”

which is to say that His sacrifice satisfied the legal requirements of God's law and holiness for the punishment of sin. Therefore, through the ultimate act of mercy and grace, Christ *became* our propitiation and our Advocate (I John 4:10)!

3. Considering Christ's sacrifice, does propitiation display God's willingness to alter His legal disposition? Psalm 86:15; 89:14; 145:8-9; Lamentations 3:22-23; Ephesians 2:4-5.

Comment: *Hilaskomai* (*Strong's* #2433) is a verb translated as "be merciful" in Luke 18:13 and "to make propitiation for" in Hebrews 2:17. A gracious and merciful judge must, by definition, be willing to be gracious or to be made gracious. From before the foundation of the world, God the Father and the Word [*Logos*], who would become Jesus Christ, painstakingly prepared and executed a perfect plan that allows for both the demands of the law and the Father's holiness to be satisfied. Jesus Christ's propitiatory sacrifice became the payment for all of mankind's sins. This perfect plan allows God the Father to display His grace (Psalm 86:15; 145:8-9) and to be mercifully reconciled (*hilaskomai*) to His repentant creation (Ephesians 2:4-5)—but only through the blood of His only begotten Son (John 3:16).