

“ONE WHO SPEAKS IN OUR DEFENSE”

The passage that we studied last week began with John summing up the apostolic message with these words: “God is light, and in him is no darkness at all.” And in the remainder of that passage, John showed us two ways in which this truth is to be put into practice. First, he said that real Christians practice the truth by walking in the light, not in the darkness. Real Christians strive to live godly lives. Second, he said that real Christians practice the truth by owning up to the fact that they do not measure up to God's holy standards. Real Christians regularly confess and repent of their sins. As John spoke of these two ways of practicing the truth, he assured us that if we do these things, if we strive to please God with our lives and at the same time confess that there are still many ways in which we fail to please God, then we can know that we have been cleansed of our sins. Putting all of this together, we can see that John had three purposes in that passage: to summon us to live holy lives; to call us to deal honestly with our sin; and to assure us of God's grace. And as we turn to our study of this text today, we see the same three purposes. This passage tells us that *the gospel is proclaimed to us that we might turn away from sin, yet it also provides assurance by telling us that we have a heavenly advocate who speaks in our defense when we do sin.*

The passage begins with John making a straightforward statement about the purpose of this letter: “I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin.” This statement serves as a corrective to one of the most common distortions of the gospel, a distortion to which we are all prone. It is the distortion that takes place whenever we allow ourselves

to act as if God's grace permits us to be casual about sin. John wants us to know that this is simply not true. While the gospel does indeed hold forth the glorious promise of free forgiveness through faith in Christ, it certainly does not condone or encourage sin.

Now it is true, as we saw in the previous chapter, that John does not want us to downplay or deny our sin. We have to be honest about the fact that we continue to sin. To deny our sin is to demonstrate that we are not walking in the light of God's truth. However, this does not mean that we should resign ourselves to sinning. We should not say, 'Well, I know that I cannot live a sinless life no matter how hard I try, so why should I knock myself out trying to be holy?' The person who adopts such a mindset has grossly distorted the gospel. As the 19th century missionary-scholar John Duncan once said,

“Christ came to save the contrasts of himself; but not to leave them as such.

There's nobody perfect: that's the believer's bed of thorns: that's the hypocrite's couch of ease.” [*The Life of John Duncan*, 166]

Duncan is saying that a true Christian wants to live a holy life, not because he is trying to earn God's forgiveness and favor, but because his heart has been transformed by grace. He sees the ugliness of sin and the beauty of holiness. He hungers and thirsts for righteousness. True Christians do not use faith as a cloak for sin. Yes, sin still resides within us, but we are no longer under the dominion of sin. Through faith in Christ's blood, we have been set free from the condemning power of the law that we may now

serve the Lord in freedom. Christ's perfect righteousness has been credited to us, and for this reason we can be sure that our service, though far from perfect, is acceptable in God's sight.

When we read this first sentence in verse 1, we might begin to despair. John tells us that the gospel is preached to us in order that we might not sin. But as we all know all too well, we do sin. So where does this leave us? John seems to be aware that we might be unsettled by what he has said, so in the remainder of our passage he writes some of the most comforting words in all of Scripture.

The first thing he says is that when we sin, "we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous." This word "advocate" is the same term that is used by Jesus to refer to the Holy Spirit in John's Gospel, where the ESV translates it as "Helper." It describes a person who speaks on someone else's behalf or in someone else's defense. By saying that Jesus is our advocate with the Father, John is telling us that Jesus pleads our case as he sits at God's right hand in heaven. Right now, he is speaking in our defense. This is what makes Christ's ascension such an important part of our redemption. The ascension "marks the present heavenly work of Jesus Christ on behalf of his church." [Horton in *The Law Is Not of Faith*, 322] Listen to how this is expressed in the Heidelberg Catechism:

“What do you mean by saying, ‘He ascended into heaven? That Christ, while his disciples watched, was lifted from the earth to heaven and will be there for our good until he comes again to judge the living and the dead.” [Q. 46]

The risen Christ is presently in heaven “for our good.” Because of the ascension, Jesus stands in the presence of God on our behalf and intercedes for us. This is closely related to what we sang earlier in our hymn based upon Psalm 24 (“Who Shall Ascend the Mountain of the Lord”). Christ is the King of glory. He has passed the ethical test that is set forth in Psalm 24. He has clean hands and a pure heart. And he has gone before us, commanding that the ancient doors of heavenly Zion be opened up that he might lead his people in a victory procession to the house of God.

As our advocate, Jesus does not plead for us on the basis of our innocence, but on the basis of his righteousness, the righteousness that he secured by perfectly fulfilling the law in his life and by bearing the curse of the law in his death. This is what John means by referring to Jesus as “the righteous.” And this is what assures us that Jesus can intercede effectively for us. He is the perfect advocate. His voice will surely be heard. The Father will grant whatever he asks. This shows us that Christ's present work for us in heaven is every bit as important as his past work for us in his life, death and resurrection. As Calvin puts it, “Christ's intercession is the continual application of his death to our salvation.” And we stand in continual need of this intercession, because we continue to sin.

The next thing that John says in our passage is that Jesus is “the propitiation for our sins.” The word “propitiation” is one that has generated considerable debate among biblical scholars. A propitiation is an offering that appeases the wrath of God and turns his anger away from guilty people. What is debated is whether “propitiation” is the right English word to use in translating the Greek term that John uses here. Some scholars have argued that the term should not be translated as “propitiation” because they believe it is unbiblical to talk about appeasing the wrath of God. They contend that this is a concept that belongs to pagan religion, not the religion of the Old and New Testaments. Instead, they argue that the term should be translated as “expiation,” which has to do only with the removal of sin, not the removal of God’s wrath. Expiation has to do with cleansing, whereas propitiation has to do with the appeasement of anger.

Now, the issue here is not whether expiation is a biblical concept. It certainly is. As John said in chapter 1, “the blood of Jesus...cleanses us from all sin.” The issue is whether this is what John is talking about in 2:2. Is John primarily talking about cleansing from sin or the removal of wrath in this passage? The way to go about answering a question of this nature is to look carefully at how this Greek word is used in other ancient literature. Is it primarily used to describe cleansing or the removal of wrath? Well, when we look at the use of this word in the Greek translation of the Old Testament (the Septuagint), in the classical Greek literature, in the first century Jewish writers Josephus and Philo, and in the early Christian literature, we find that propitiation, or the appeasement of anger, is indeed at the heart of this word’s meaning. There are

other shades of meaning to the word, but there is simply no disputing that propitiation is the central idea. In the words of biblical scholar Leon Morris, who has written extensively on this matter,

“[although it] is a complex word, the averting of anger seems to represent a stubborn substratum of meaning from which all the uses can be naturally explained.” [cited in Stott, *The Cross of Christ*, 172]

So we see that the evidence from other literature strongly favors translating this word as “propitiation,” not “expiation.” And this is further supported by the immediate context here in 1 John. The fact that John would say that we need an advocate with the Father when we sin indicates that God is displeased with us because of our sin. God’s anger against us needs to be appeased.

Now it is true that this concept has been greatly distorted in pagan religions, which often give the impression that people are able to appease divine wrath by offering what amounts to a bribe. But this is not at all what the biblical concept of propitiation is about. First of all, the wrath that God has against us is holy wrath. It is not as though God is subject to petty or uncontrolled fits of anger. John Stott describes the wrath of God as “his settled, controlled, holy antagonism to all evil.” [*Letters of John*, 88] And John Murray says that “The wrath of God is the inevitable reaction of the divine holiness

against sin.” [*Redemption Accomplished and Applied*, 32] God’s wrath is against us because of our sin, and this wrath needs to be averted if we are to have peace with God.

Second, the biblical concept of propitiation says that God, not man, takes the initiative in propitiating the divine wrath. This was even true in the Old Testament sacrificial system, where God made it clear that the sacrifices were his provision for the forgiveness of sin. It was not as though the Israelites were somehow paying God off by bringing their sacrifices to the temple. This is seen in Leviticus 17:11, where the Lord explained why the Israelites were not allowed to eat meat that still had blood in it by saying, “For the life of the flesh is in the blood, and I have given it for you on the altar to make atonement for your souls.” Even though the people brought the sacrifices, they were the Lord’s provision for their atonement. We see the same thing in Romans 3:24-25, where Paul says that “[we] are justified by [God’s] grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith.” Again, God himself provides the propitiation. It is not a bribe that man brings to pay God off.

Third, the biblical concept of propitiation says that God appeases his wrath by offering himself in the person of his only Son. God does not demand the death of some innocent victim outside of himself. It is not as though Jesus was an unwilling victim when he offered himself up on the cross. The Father, Son and Holy Spirit were working in perfect concert with one another in the propitiatory work of Christ. God provided for

the appeasement of his just and holy anger by allowing the full force of that anger to come down upon himself.

The last thing that John says in this passage is that Jesus is not only the propitiation for our sins, “but also for the sins of the whole world.” This is another statement that has led to a considerable amount of debate. And the debate has to do with the extent of Christ's atoning work. For whom did Christ die? For whom did he propitiate the wrath of God? Was his death for everyone, or was it only for those whom God has elected unto eternal life? This has to do with the Reformed doctrine that is sometimes referred to as limited, or definite, atonement. Limited atonement is the ‘L’ in the acronym T.U.L.I.P., which is used to summarize what are known as “the five points of Calvinism.” The doctrine of limited (or definite) atonement says that in his death on the cross Jesus atoned only for the sins of the elect, not for the sins of everybody. Limited atonement says that Christ's death actually secured redemption for the particular individuals whom God appointed to eternal life before the foundation of the world.

The question for us today is how this doctrine squares with what John says at the end of verse 2. Does this verse refute the doctrine of limited atonement? At first glance, it might seem like it does. It might seem like John is saying that Jesus is a propitiation for the sins of everyone in the world. But when we take the time to carefully think this through, we find that John could not possibly be saying that.

Let's assume for a moment that this verse does refute limited atonement. Let's assume that it teaches that Jesus died for everyone's sins. If this is true, then we are only

left with two options when it comes to how we understand the nature of Christ's sacrificial death. The first option is to say that, because Jesus propitiated God's wrath for every single person in the world, then God has no basis for condemning anyone to hell. In Christ, God's wrath has been averted from everyone, so there is no condemnation for anyone. In other words, this first option makes us into universalists. It forces us to say that everyone will be saved, because Jesus died for everyone.

Now it is obvious that this is a view that Bible-believing Christians simply cannot accept. The Scriptures make it very clear that only those who place their faith in Christ will be saved and that those who are apart from Christ will suffer eternal torment in hell. Universalism is utterly inconsistent with the Christian gospel.

The only other option for those who want to see this verse as a refutation of limited atonement is to say that Jesus is not an actual propitiation for anyone. As we have said, propitiation refers to the appeasing of divine wrath. If Jesus has provided propitiation for a person's sin, then there is no longer any basis upon which God can condemn that person. God's wrath has been averted. That is what propitiation is all about. But if we deny limited atonement (and do not want to fall into the universalist error), we have to say that Jesus' death did not actually secure propitiation for anyone's sins. Jesus' death did not involve the actual payment of our debt. It did not actually secure forgiveness for us. Rather, it only made forgiveness possible for those who will respond to the gospel in faith.

Now it is certainly true that faith in Christ is necessary for salvation. But the problem with this way of interpreting this verse is that it makes faith into a work. It requires that we see faith as something that we contribute to our salvation, rather than as a gift that we receive from God. In other words, this interpretation says that there is one sin for which Christ's death cannot atone: the sin of unbelief. Unbelief is a sin that we have to overcome in our own strength. The problem is that if this is the case, then believers have something to boast about. We can take some amount of credit for the fact that we are saved, because we have responded to the gospel in faith while so many others have rejected it. In short, this view of the atonement denies that salvation is by grace alone.

Note also how this interpretation conflicts so sharply with what John is trying to accomplish in this passage. John is writing to provide comfort to believers when we sin. But what comfort is there in being told that Jesus died for the sins of innumerable people who will be damned? What kind of consolation is that? What good is it for us to hear that Jesus is an advocate for us when he is also an advocate for so many other people who will not be saved? What good is a Savior who does not actually save?

No, this passage cannot be saying that Jesus died for everyone. Jesus is an actual propitiation for the sins of believers. He has turned God's wrath away from us so that there is no longer any condemnation for those who place their trust in him. The reason why John adds the phrase "the whole world" here is simply because he wants to convey that Christ's sacrifice was sufficient for all throughout the world who will place their faith

in him. Jesus' death is effective for the whole church as it is scattered across space and time.

What comfort we have in these two verses! While John will not allow us to think that the gospel permits us to have a casual attitude towards sin, he also tells us that we can have certainty about our standing with God. And the basis of this certainty is not anything within us. Our certainty is grounded entirely upon the work that Christ continues to do for us on the basis of his finished work on the cross. This is why John speaks in the present tense in verse 2: Jesus "is the propitiation for our sins." His once and for all sacrifice is still effective today. Its benefits are being applied to us moment by moment, as our righteous heavenly advocate speaks in our defense whenever we sin.