**WORDS OF SALVATION (#5)**

***Propitiation***

I remember the storm that had hit Washington D.C. in the summer of 1989. It was not a weather-related storm, but, as usual, a political tornado that was causing havoc in the nation’s capital. At the center of the storm was Speaker of the House Jim Wright, a congressman from Ft. Worth, Texas. Ethics charges were being hurled at him from all sides due to supposed illegal money gained from his upcoming new book he had written. Since he had previously faced other ethical charges for other offenses he decided to resign as Speaker of the House. In his resignation he said that since there had been so much bad blood generated he had decided to resign, and I quote, “as a propitiation for this season of ill will.”

If I were a betting man I’d wager a dime to a donut that not one in a thousand people who heard him speak even knew what he meant. How was his resignation a “*propitiation*” for this season of ill will? Most folks had to scamper to their dictionary to learn what he had said. It is a rare word in our American culture, but is used at least six times when speaking about our salvation found in Christ’s death. Those who opened their dictionary discovered this definition: “to turn away wrath by the offering of a gift.” Merriam-Webster adds this: “the act of gaining or regaining the favor or goodwill of someone or something.” Bible dictionaries (i.e. lexicons) define the word *HILASTERION* – found in Romans 3:25 and Hebrews 9:5 – as “an appeasing or expiating; a placating.” The word *HILASMOS* – found in I John 2:2 and I John 4:10 – means “atonement; an appeasing.”

Jim Wright was saying his resignation as Speaker of the House was offered to calm the waters and appease the opposition in order to bring peace. The anger then brewing would be quieted and the rhetoric would be soothed. He was offering himself as the scapegoat, the propitiation, the atonement, in order to bring peace again. Justice would be satisfied. (Note: Ever since this action 31 years ago only love and good-will have been seen and heard in the Halls of Congress and all through our nation’s capital. Right? 😊)

This has never happened in my marriage but I’ve heard from other husbands that once in a blue moon they have actually upset their wife for some bone-headed blunder, like forgetting an anniversary or birthday, or possibly failing to get to that “Honey-Do” list because of other pressing matters, like hearing the fish calling from the lake or the ballgame downstairs on TV. Sometimes wives can just be so short-tempered or impatient. I’m glad I’ve never been there. It must be humbling to have to say I’m sorry.

That’s where a bouquet of flowers, a box of chocolates, a Hallmark card, and a new Lamborghini convertible come to the rescue. There’s nothing like the smell of roses, the taste of Ghirardelli, the poems of Hallmark, and the feel of that 500 horsepower V-12 under your feet that says, “I forgive you, dear.”

That’s propitiation.

A Biblical, yet very understandable, example of propitiation is the story in Genesis 32. Jacob was returning after 20 years away from home, knowing he must face the wrath of his brother Esau, who he had cheated of both his birthright and blessing. Esau had vowed to kill Jacob and he knew it. So Jacob steadily sent gifts ahead of his arrival. It wasn’t flowers or chocolates, but 200 female goats, 20 male goats, 200 ewes, 20 rams, 15 female camels, 40 cows, 10 bulls, 20 female donkeys and 10 male donkeys. Genesis 32:14, when translated into Greek, used the word *HILASKOMA* to have Jacob say, “*I will propitiate him with these gifts I am bringing*.” In other words, I will appease his wrath with these gifts. It worked too. Esau’s wrath was appeased. Love was restored.

Another example is in Leviticus 16 concerning the Day of Atonement. Once a year, on this special holy day, the high priest would take a goat and sacrifice it, take the blood into the Holy of Holies and pour it on the Ark of the Covenant. In particular, he would put the blood on the golden lid known as the Mercy Seat. God, on all other days, would look on this Seat and see only the Ten Commandments, reminding Him of how Israel had broken them, thus committing sin. But on this day He saw the blood, prompting mercy and forgiveness – yes, Atonement – upon His favored people. But, sadly, it had to be an annual ritual, for the blood of goats could not truly cover their sins. This leads us to the New Testament.

Hebrews 2:17 says of Christ’s High Priesthood, *“Therefore, in all things He had to be made like His brethren, that He might be a merciful and faithful High Priest in things pertaining to God, to make* ***propitiation*** *for the sins of the people.”* Instead of yearly going into God’s presence to appease God’s wrath against sin, Jesus continuously sits at God’s right hand, “*able to save to the uttermost those who come to God through Him, since He always lives to make intercession for them*” (Heb. 7:24-25).

John continues that thought when he says, *“if anyone sins, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous. And He Himself is the* ***propitiation*** *for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the whole world.”* (I Jn. 2:2). He is not only the High Priest who offers the atoning sacrifice, He also doubles as the actual atoning sacrifice itself. He pours His own blood on the Mercy Seat on our behalf. Amazing!

“*It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God*” (Heb. 10:31). If there’s ever an actual “understatement” in the Bible, that might be it. But running a close second might be this one, “*In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the* ***propitiation*** *for our sins*” (I Jn. 4:10). Combining those two verses we hear Habakkuk’s prayer to this God of wrath, yet God of love: “*O LORD, I have heard Your speech and was afraid; O LORD, revive Your work in the midst of the years! In the midst of the years make it known; In* ***wrath*** *remember* ***mercy***.” (Habakk. 3:2).

I could not appease God’s rightful anger against my rebellious disobedience to His word. I had become a rebel without a cause. Without excuse I now faced God’s wrath. But then I heard Jesus say, with outstretched, bleeding, arms – “Abba, Father, forgive him, for My sake.” God smiled. That’s propitiation.

Because of Calvary. – Rick