

1 John 4:10

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

Herein is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us,
and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins.

Analysis

Herein is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us, and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins. This verse defines authentic love by contrasting its source and demonstrating its nature. "Herein is love" (ἐν τούτῳ ἐστὶν ἡ ἀγάπη) points to love's true definition and demonstration—not in abstract concept but in concrete historical action. John immediately establishes that love's initiative lies with God, not humanity: "not that we loved God, but that he loved us."

This demolishes any notion that our love for God is the foundation of relationship. We didn't seek God; He sought us (Romans 5:8, "while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us"). Our love is responsive, not initiatory. This eliminates human boasting and grounds salvation entirely in God's grace. Sinners dead in trespasses don't naturally love God—they're hostile to Him (Romans 8:7). Only God's prevenient love makes our love possible.

The demonstration of God's love follows: "and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins." "Sent" (ἀπεστείλεν) echoes the incarnation's purposefulness—the Father sent the Son on a saving mission (cf. John 3:16). "Propitiation" (ἱλάσμον) is crucial: Christ's death satisfied God's wrath against sin, turning aside deserved judgment. This isn't pagan appeasement of angry deity by frightened humans, but God Himself providing the sacrifice that satisfies His own justice. Love and justice meet at the cross—God's love provided what His justice required. This propitiatory

sacrifice "for our sins" (peri tōn hamartiōn hēmōn) dealt definitively with sin's penalty, providing complete redemption.

Historical Context

The concept of propitiation was familiar in the ancient world through pagan sacrifices intended to appease angry gods. However, biblical propitiation is fundamentally different: God Himself provides the sacrifice. In pagan systems, humans offer sacrifices to placate divine anger. In Christianity, God sends His own Son as the sacrifice that satisfies His holy justice. This demonstrates both God's righteousness (He doesn't simply overlook sin) and His love (He provides the payment Himself).

Old Testament sacrifices foreshadowed this—the Day of Atonement's kapporeth (mercy seat) where blood was sprinkled to atone for sin (Leviticus 16). Romans 3:25 identifies Christ as the ultimate hilastērion (propitiation/mercy seat). Hebrews develops this extensively: Christ's once-for-all sacrifice supersedes the repeated, insufficient animal sacrifices.

Liberal theology often rejects propitiation, viewing it as divine child abuse or portraying God as vindictive. But Scripture insists God's wrath against sin is real and must be satisfied—not arbitrarily dismissed. The Father sending the Son wasn't abuse; it was the Trinity's unified plan of redemption. The Son willingly offered Himself (John 10:18). God's love is demonstrated precisely in providing propitiation Himself rather than demanding it from helpless sinners.

Related Passages

1 Corinthians 13:4 — Characteristics of love

John 15:13 — Greatest form of love

Study Questions

1. How does recognizing God's initiative in love (not ours) transform our understanding of salvation?
2. Why was propitiation (satisfying God's wrath) necessary? Couldn't God simply forgive without payment?
3. How does the cross demonstrate both God's love and His justice simultaneously?

Interlinear Text

ἐν τούτῳ ἐστὶν ἡ ἀγάπη οὐχ ὅτι ἡμεῖς ἠγάπησεν
Herein G5129 **is** G3588 **love** G26 **that** G3756 **not** G3754 **we** G2249 **he loved** G25
G1722

τὸν Θεόν, ἀλλ' ὅτι αὐτὸς ἠγάπησεν ἡμᾶς καὶ
G3588 **God** G2316 **but** G235 **not** G3754 G846 **he loved** G25 **us** G2248 **and** G2532

ἀπέστειλεν τὸν υἱὸν αὐτοῦ ἰλασμὸν περὶ τῶν
sent G649 G3588 **Son** G5207 G846 **to be the propitiation** G2434 **for** G4012 G3588

ἁμαρτιῶν ἡμῶν
sins G266 **our** G2257

Additional Cross-References

1 John 2:2 (Sin): And he is the propitiation for our sins: and not for our's only, but also for the sins of the whole world.

1 John 4:19 (Love): We love him, because he first loved us.

John 15:16 (Parallel theme): Ye have not chosen me, but I have chosen you, and ordained you, that ye should go and bring forth fruit, and that your fruit should remain: that whatsoever ye shall ask of the Father in my name, he may give it you.

John 3:16 (Love): For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.

1 John 3:1 (Love): Behold, what manner of love the Father hath bestowed upon us, that we should be called the sons of God: therefore the world knoweth us not, because it knew him not.

1 Peter 3:18 (Sin): For Christ also hath once suffered for sins, the just for the unjust, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh, but quickened by the Spirit:

1 Peter 2:24 (Sin): Who his own self bare our sins in his own body on the tree, that we, being dead to sins, should live unto righteousness: by whose stripes ye were healed.

Daniel 9:24 (Sin): Seventy weeks are determined upon thy people and upon thy holy city, to finish the transgression, and to make an end of sins, and to make reconciliation for iniquity, and to bring in everlasting righteousness, and to seal up the vision and prophecy, and to anoint the most Holy.