

IN MY PLACE: THE GOOD NEWS OF PENAL SUBSTITUTION

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There is no greater message in all the world than this: the Lord Jesus Christ died on the cross as an atoning sacrifice in place of sinners, bearing the wrath of God that we deserve to redeem us by his blood. This is the good news that has changed our lives forever. It's called the doctrine of penal substitution.

John Stott describes the importance of this doctrine when he writes, "The concept of substitution may be said, then, to lie at the heart of both sin and salvation. For the essence of sin is man substituting himself for God, while the essence of salvation is God substituting himself for man. Man asserts himself against God and puts himself where only God deserves to be; God sacrifices himself for man and puts himself where only man deserves to be. Man claims prerogatives that belong to God alone; God accepts penalties that belong to man alone."¹

Over the last century, many contemporary scholars have questioned the merits of penal substitution as a model for understanding the atoning work of Christ. Some argue that it is unbiblical; others protest that it's illogical, incoherent, or immoral.

1. JOHN R. W. STOTT, *THE CROSS OF CHRIST. 20TH ANNIVERSARY*, (DOWNERS GROVE, IL: INTERVARSITY PRESS, 2006), 159.

Our concern is not primarily scholarly; it is pastoral and practical. Doctrine exists for doxology and devotion. But for the doctrine of Christ's substitutionary death to function in our lives, we must understand the Scriptural basis of penal substitution.

The Satisfaction of God's Wrath

I've heard it said that it was God's love and not God's wrath that drove Jesus to the cross, but this is a false dichotomy. God's free and sovereign love is indeed the ultimate impetus behind the atonement: "for God so *loved* the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16). But continuing that thought, John writes, "Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever does not obey the

Son shall not see life, but the *wrath* of God remains on him" (John 3:36).

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Love answers the question of why God wills to save, but it does not answer the question of why God saves in this particular way. Once God "in love ... predestined us for adoption to himself as sons through Jesus Christ" (Eph. 1:4-5), the atonement became a consequent necessity by the wrath

of God toward sinners.

As God's enemies (Rom. 5:10), we were accursed objects of his righteous wrath (Eph. 2:3). Yet, it is in this very state of alienation that Christ, by his death, reconciles us to God. On the cross, he drank the cup of God's wrath (Luke 22:42) down to the dregs so that not a drop of it remains for those who have peace with God.

The mistake is sometimes made of viewing God the Son as the merciful one and God the Father as the wrathful one. But there is no internal conflict between the persons of the Trinity. The Father and Son are united in their wrath against sin and their love for sinners.

God in love sent Christ to willingly propitiate and satisfy the wrath of God. Christ is, therefore, the "propitiation for our sins" (1 John. 2:2; 4:10). Paul explains that "God put forward [Christ Jesus] as a propitiation by his blood,

to be received by faith. This was to show God's righteousness because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins" (Rom. 3:25). God had formerly passed over sins, calling into question his righteousness, but with the satisfaction of his wrath by Christ's propitiatory sacrifice, God's justice is now vindicated.

David Wells sums it up this way: "In Pauline thought, man is alienated from God by sin, and God is alienated from man by wrath. It is in the substitutionary death of Christ that sin is overcome and wrath averted so that God can look on man without displeasure and man can look on God without fear. Sin is expiated and God is propitiated."²

Sacrificed as Our Substitute

The entire sacrificial system of the Old Testament foreshadowed the ultimate sacrifice of Christ as our substitute. When God's "firstborn son" (Exod. 4:22; see also Ps. 89:27; Jer. 31:9), Israel, was enslaved and cruelly oppressed in Egypt, and when Pharaoh stubbornly refused to let them go, God struck down all the firstborn sons of Egypt, but passed over the Israelites who slaughtered a "lamb ... without blemish" (Exod. 12:5) and smeared its blood on the doorposts and the lintels of their houses.

The lamb was substituted to save Israel, God's firstborn Son. And every year thereafter, the Israelites commemorated that deliverance by eating a Passover lamb. They also sacrificed every firstborn male animal and redeemed every firstborn Son in remembrance of the Passover (Exod. 13; Num. 18:15-16).

Once a year, on the Day of Atonement, the high priest offered two male goats for a sin offering and one ram for a burnt offering on behalf of the Israelites (Lev. 16:5) to make atonement for the people (Lev. 16:24). He sacrificed one goat as a sin offering for the people (Lev. 16:15), and then, after laying both his hands on the head of the other live goat, and confessing over it "all the iniquities of the people of Israel, and all their transgressions, all their sins," he sent it away into the wilderness so that the goat might "bear all their iniquities on itself to a remote area" (Lev. 16:20-22).

The sacrificial animals were substituted for the sins of Israel since "without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins" (Heb. 9:22). "For the

2. DAVID F. WELLS, *THE SEARCH FOR SALVATION* (EUGENE, OR: WIPF AND STOCK PUBLISHERS, 2000, 29).

life of the flesh is in the blood, ... for it is the blood that makes atonement by the life” (Lev. 17:11). God’s justice demands that life be given to atone for sin. Every sinner needs a substitutionary sacrifice.

Although the sacrificial system functioned for the nation of Israel, it was never efficacious in itself but pointed to a greater reality to come. The centuries of sacrifices were merely “a shadow of the good things to come instead of the true form of these realities” (Heb. 10:1), for “it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins” (Heb. 10:4). It is only through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all that those who are being sanctified are perfected for all time (Heb. 10:10-14). “Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed” (1 Cor. 5:7).

Jesus, God’s only Son, has been sacrificed as our substitute to make atonement for sin. He is “the lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world” (Jn. 1:29). He is the promised Messiah upon whom “the LORD has laid ... the iniquity of us all” (Isa. 53:6). “One has died for all, therefore all have died” (2 Cor. 5:14).

Hallelujah, What a Savior

This is amazing love—the good news of penal substitution. Because Christ died the death we deserve, fear and shame are gone, and our future is secure. “There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” (Rom. 8:1). We live every day in the good of knowing we have peace with God through the finished work of Christ on the cross.

Our Statement of Faith explains this glorious truth:

In his substitutionary death on behalf of his people, Christ offered himself by the Spirit as a perfect sacrifice, which satisfied the demands of God’s law by paying the full penalty for their sins. On the cross, Christ bore our sins, took our punishment, propitiated God’s wrath against us, vindicated God’s righteousness, and purchased our redemption in order that we might be reconciled to God and live with him in blessed fellowship forever.

Penal substitution faithfully and gloriously expresses the meaning of Christ’s saving work. The questions that should concern us the most are not the questions and objections of the critic but the questions of sinners like us

who deserve only judgment. *Why should the innocent Son of God be condemned in the place of a sinner such as I? Why should the King suffer for this ungrateful subject who caused his pain? Why should Jesus pay for my debt? Why should he bear my punishment? Why should he die for a wretch like me?*

Why should I gain from His reward?

I cannot give an answer.

But this I know with all my heart:

His wounds have paid my ransom.³

3. TOWNEND, STUART. HOW DEEP THE FATHER'S LOVE. THANKYOU MUSIC, 1995.

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