

**The Cross in Crisis:
What is Penal Substitutionary Atonement
and
Why is it being Attacked?**

“[I]f God did not punish his Son in my place, I am not saved from my greatest peril, the wrath of God.” We have only one hope and it is “that the infinite wisdom of God might make a way for the love of God to satisfy the wrath of God so that I might become a son of God” (Piper, Foreword to *Pierced for our Transgressions*, 14).

What is the doctrine of penal substitutionary atonement? “The doctrine of penal substitution states that God gave himself in the person of his Son to suffer instead of us the death, punishment and curse due to fallen humanity as the penalty for sin” (*Pierced*, 21). There simply can be no Christian gospel apart from the truth that Jesus Christ has endured and suffered in himself, on the cross, the wrath of God due to sinners, thereby propitiating or satisfying said wrath on behalf of those for whom he died.

Standard objections to Penal Substitutionary Atonement (PSA)

(1) PSA was not understood or taught in the church until Anselm in the 11th century a.d.

In response to this charge, I point to Justin Martyr (c. 100-165), Eusebius of Caesarea (c. 275-339), Hilary of Poitiers (c. 300-368), Athanasius (c. 300-373), Gregory of Nazianzus (c. 330-390), Ambrose of Milan (339-397), John Chrysostom (c. 350-407), Augustine (354-430), Cyril of Alexandria (375-444), and Gregory the Great (c. 540-604), all of whom advocated PSA in one form or another. Other significant figures who understood the atonement in this way include Thomas Aquinas (cf. 1225-74), John Calvin (1509-64), Francis Turretin (1623-87), John Bunyan (1628-88), John Owen (1616-83), George Whitefield (1714-70), Charles Spurgeon (1834-92), D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones (1899-1981), as well as John Stott and J. I. Packer. These are only representative thinkers and represents a small fraction of those who have embraced the truth of PSA.

(2) PSA is not the only model of atonement (of course, no one ever said it was).

It is vitally important to remember that **all of the many theories or models of the atonement are true**. Yes, the death of Jesus exerts a “moral influence” on us insofar as it provides an “example” for how we are to respond to unjustified suffering (cf. 1 Peter 2:21ff.). Yes, God is the supreme “moral governor” of the created realm whose commitment to the interests of public law and order was vindicated and displayed in the death of Jesus (cf. Romans 3:25-26). Yes, the death of Jesus conquered evil and was designed to undo the works of Satan (cf. 1 John 3:8) and liberate those held captive by him. Yes, the death of Jesus was designed to restore in mankind the *imago Dei* (image of God) so horribly defaced (but not destroyed) by the fall into sin. Yes, we see in the death of Jesus his voluntary submission to weakness and identification with the outcast and marginalized of society. But all of these things are true only because his death was preeminently a dying in the place of sinners, enduring in himself (body and soul) and thereby propitiating (1 John 2:1-2; Romans 3:25) the wrath of a righteous God.

Satan was defeated and the *imago Dei* restored and the effects of Adam’s fall were reversed and God’s righteous rule was vindicated and an inspirational example of love and self-sacrifice was provided **BECAUSE** Jesus, as an expression of the incomparable love of God for sinners (Romans 5:8), voluntarily suffered the penal consequences of the law of God, the just for the unjust, dying our death, bearing “our sins in his body on the tree” (1 Peter 2:24). So long as the penal substitutionary sacrifice of Jesus is retained as foundational and fundamental to what happened on Calvary, we should joyfully celebrate and give thanks for all else that it accomplished.

(3) PSA diminishes the significance of Jesus' life and resurrection (yet the great majority of those who advocate PSA have always insisted that Christ's entire life on earth was part of his atoning work).

(4) PSA is not important enough to be a source of division (whereas this is certainly true of some doctrines, it is not the case with PSA, which I contend lies at the heart of the gospel).

(5) PSA is a product of human culture, not biblical exegesis. Certainly it is the case that our cultures affect how we read the biblical text, but "the key question . . . is not whether ideas found in penal substitution are also present within contemporary culture, but whether they are found in Scripture" (220). In other words, "the correspondence or lack of it between a given doctrine and human cultural ideas is entirely irrelevant to the question of whether that doctrine is biblical. What counts is whether it is taught in Scripture" (221).

(6) PSA is unable to address the real needs of human culture and the desires of the human heart. In other words, they argue that PSA will not gain acceptance in large parts of the modern world because it fails to address our perceived needs or cannot be understood by those in different cultural settings. It is true, of course, that PSA may be less readily grasped in certain cultures where its foundational ideas are absent. "However, this does not make it 'unintelligible'; it just means that the task of explanation may be more difficult" (222). Or again, "the lack of common ground with other people does not require that we abandon distinctive ideas; only that we work harder to explain them" (223).

The authors of *Pierced* point out that "there is a deeper problem here. The Bible offers a disturbing explanation for why people of every culture find it hard to understand aspects of the gospel, or may even find it repulsive. While they know in their hearts that there is a God and that they should acknowledge him, they 'suppress the truth' with the result that 'their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened' (Rom. 1:18,21; cf. Eph. 4:17-18)" (223).

(7) PSA endorses *violence* and lends credence to the charge that it is tantamount to "cosmic child abuse". This sort of inflammatory (if not blasphemous) rhetoric needs to be defused. PSA differs in at least two fundamental ways from child abuse. First, according to PSA, Jesus *voluntarily* and *willingly* went to his death knowing full well what was entailed by it. Child abuse, on the other hand, involves inflicting pain upon an unwilling victim, or exploiting a person who is unable to understand fully what is happening. Second, according to PSA, Jesus died to glorify both himself and the Father as well as to save his people from their sins. Child abuse is carried out solely for the perverse gratification of the abuser.

Much more can be said in response to this scurrilous accusation, such as the explicit testimony of Isaiah 53:10 that "it was the Lord's will to crush him and cause him to suffer." One should also consider the role of the Father in the Son's death as stated in Acts 2:23; 3:18; and 4:27-28.

(8) Related to this is the objection that the notion of "redemptive violence" is a myth. In other words, violence doesn't work. It only compounds the problem. But Jesus was fully aware that a violent death awaited him in Jerusalem and set himself to pursue that course (Mark 10:33-34). If the critics of PSA are right, then Jesus made a colossal mistake. Let's also not forget that the entire OT sacrificial system was violent, yet had profound redemptive benefits. Finally, the violence entailed in Jesus' death differs greatly from how we see it manifest in other settings. Jesus died voluntarily (John 10:17), as a selfless act motivated by love for the glory of his Father and the salvation of those for whom he suffered. And Jesus' death, unlike other expressions of violence, was in fulfillment of justice, not a violation of it.

(9) Another oft-heard objection to PSA is that it is inconsistent with principles of justice, for how can an innocent man be punished for the guilt of others. Guilt, say the critics, cannot be transferred. Needless to say, the biblical authors disagree! We must remember that PSA "does not propose a transfer of guilt between unrelated persons. It asserts that guilt is transferred to Christ from those who are united to him" (243). In other words, "union with Christ explains how the innocent could be justly punished – he is judged for others' sins, which, by virtue of their union with him, become his. Conversely, it explains also how the guilty can be justly acquitted – believers are one with the innocent Lord Jesus Christ, and so his life of perfect righteousness is rightly imputed to us" (244).

(10) A related objection is that PSA implicitly denies that God forgives sin, for if Christ suffers for our transgressions there is nothing left for God to forgive. But this fails to see that the reason why PSA does not deny that God forgives sin is precisely “because it is *God himself*, in the person of his Son, who pays the debt we owe” (264). It is true that in the relationship between human beings “receiving payment and offering forgiveness are mutually exclusive” (264). But the same does not obtain in God’s relationship with his creatures. God did “what no human creditor could do, even in principle: he received payment by giving himself in the person of his Son to take our human nature and suffer the punishment we deserve. In this way he himself repaid the debt of all who are in Christ, paving the way for us to receive his forgiveness” (265).

(11) It is occasionally objected that PSA doesn’t work because Christ didn’t suffer the *equivalent* that was due us (i.e., how could an infinite punishment be borne in a finite time?), “the answer is that just as the heinousness of a sin is determined in part by the dignity of the person sinned against, so also the severity of a punishment is determined in part by the dignity of the one punished” (267). And “thus Christ’s suffering, though it lasted only a finite time, was infinite in value because he is infinitely worthy” (267).

(12) A frequently heard protest against PSA is that it is in danger of severing the Godhead, pitting one member of the Trinity against another. But there is nothing wrong in principle with saying that one person of the Trinity does something ‘to’ another. The Father “sends” the Son, “loves” the Son, “glorifies” the Son, etc. Why is it so difficult to envision a scenario in which by voluntary agreement the Father “punishes” the Son in the place of those for whom he dies?

(13) Some critics insist that PSA fails to address issues of political and social sin as well as cosmic evil. I suspect that this objection may be driven by the failure of many within the fundamentalist movement to engage with the important social and political issues of our day. But the fact that some fundamentalists (or even evangelicals) are negligent in this regard is not the result of their embracing PSA!

(14) Others suggest that PSA fails to address so-called “structural” or “systemic” evil (whether it be political, economic, ethnic). But we must recognize that “blame for all sin rests ultimately with sinful *people*, and not with the impersonal ‘structures’ of which they are a part” (310). In other words, the only reason there is such a thing as structural or systemic evil is because evil, sinful people have corrupted institutions and infused systems of government and education and the like with immorality, injustice, selfish ambition, and a thirst for power. PSA is, in fact, the only theory of the atonement that adequately addresses the problem of human sin which is the source and culprit for all forms of evil.

Of course, “complex social structures may sometimes behave as if they had a life of their own, even to the extent that we may be unable to distinguish the contributions of individual members. But ultimately no social or ethnic group, no company, no government has an existence apart from the people who comprise it” (311).

(15) Another objection is that PSA allegedly fails to address the ecological concerns of a decaying cosmos. But let’s not forget that the apostle Paul clearly relates the release of creation from its corruption to the final redemption from sin in the experience of God’s people (read carefully Romans 8:19ff.). PSA thus deals with so-called “structural sin” inasmuch as “the roots of this lie in human hearts. . . . Penal substitution also holds the key to the redemption of the whole created order, for as God’s people are liberated from his curse, so the curse on creation will ultimately be lifted” (313).

(16) One more objection relating to the Christian life is the bizarre suggestion that PSA causes people to live in constant fear of God. Of course, on the one hand, the body of Christ could do with a little (a lot?) healthy reverential fear of God. And, as the authors of *Pierced* so perceptibly point out, “a lingering fear of God may actually arise from a *neglect* of penal substitution” (320). When people read Scripture and repeatedly encounter the reality of divine wrath, only then to find PSA ignored in our pulpits, “is it any wonder they are left with a troubled conscience? For if God’s holy wrath was not endured by Christ in our place, it remains upon us” (320), and that, dear friend, is certainly good grounds for fear.

[There are other underlying reasons why PSA is being attacked in our day. One could point to: (1) the changing view of God, one that **denies wrath as a personal attribute** (wrath is not what God feels but simply the impersonal moral consequence that invariably follows upon evil choices); (2) dislike of the emphasis on **individual salvation in which Christianity is viewed as primarily about me getting my sins forgiven so I can go to heaven when I die**; this is tied up with a disdain for an escapist mentality that ignores earthly problems for a pie in the sky, bye and bye religion such that social justice is ignored; (3) the reaction against anything associated with or looking like the older **fundamentalism**; and finally (4) the growing emphasis on **passivism** as a broad approach to life, together with a reaction against anything remotely connected with violence.]

A Survey of the Biblical Evidence in support of PSA

- (1) Exodus 12 and the Passover Lamb
- (2) Leviticus 16, the Day of Atonement, and the Scapegoat (where the Hebrew word *kipper* appears 16x and often refers to the propitiation of God's wrath through the offering of a substitutionary animal sacrifice, cleansing the people from their sin)
- (3) Isaiah 53
- (4) Mark 10:45; 15:33-34 (cf. Mt. 20:28)
- (5) John 3:14-18; 3:36; 10:11,15; 11:47-52
- (6) Romans 3:21-26 (the noun *hilasterion* in Romans 3:25-26, and the verbal form *hilaskomai* mean, respectively, "propitiation" and "to propitiate"; the focus of this action is God himself and the manifestation of his wrath against sin); 5:8-10; 8:1-3
- (7) 2 Corinthians 5:18-21
- (8) Galatians 3:10-13
- (9) Colossians 2:13-15
- (10) 1 Peter 1:18-19 (language that recalls the Passover); 2:21-25; 3:18
- (11) Hebrews 2:17; 9:11-14
- (12) 1 John 2:2; 4:10
- (13) The many, many biblical texts (both Old and New Testaments) that describe the wrath of God (consider the book of Revelation alone)

A Pastoral Application: How the Cross Affects How You Lead

Humanistic
(God is Loving)

Grace-Based
(God is Holy and Loving)

Legalistic
(God is Holy)