

“Rethinking the Cross; Understanding Satisfaction and Penal Substitutionary Atonement Theories.”
First Presbyterian Church; Jamie White
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Hear the Word of the Lord from... first from the prophet Isaiah 53:4-6 (NIV): **“Surely, he took up our pain and bore our suffering, yet we considered him punished by God, stricken by him, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed. We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to our own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.”**

1 Peter 2:24 (NIV) **“Jesus himself bore our sins in his body on the cross, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed.”**

Romans 3:23-26 (NRSV): **“Since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a sacrifice of atonement by his blood, effective through faith. He did this to show his righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over the sins previously committed; it was to prove at the present time that he himself is righteous and that he justifies the one who has faith in Jesus.”**

1 John 2:2; **“Jesus is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world.”** This is the Word of the Lord, thanks be to God.

This morning we’re going to make our fourth turn of the gem, and look at two theories of atonement which, though are slightly different, have so much in common that I thought it best to discuss them together. The first is what is called **Satisfaction Theory**, which originated in the 11th century during the feudal period, with Anselm of Canterbury and his book, *Cur Deus Homo*, or “Why God Became Man?” Now, in order to really understand what Anselm was getting at in Satisfaction theory, you’ll need to remember that this period in history, kings ruled and served as stewards of the kingdom. There was a clear hierarchy of authority; the people were loyal to their king and the king took care of his people. The people of the kingdom were to honor their king. So, Anselm, in trying to help the catholic church understand what it meant that Jesus saves us on the cross, used his own context to help make sense of Jesus’ death.

In Satisfaction theory, Anselm argued that God is the one, true, and righteous King, but instead of being loyal to this good King, humanity was sinful, ultimately failing to honor

the King and incurring a debt because of their sin. To make this right or atone for this disloyalty, proper satisfaction by means of restitution to the king (or paying off that debt) would be required. But the only one capable of satisfying this debt of sin was the blameless, sinless Christ, who freely and lovingly chose self-sacrifice on the cross to satisfy humanity's debt and return to God the ultimate honor due him.

If you were here last week when we discussed Ransom Theory, you'll notice that this is a *very* similar atonement theology, but with one glaring and massive difference. In Ransom Theory the payment for sin is made to the fallen powers of Satan/Evil/Death to free humanity from their slavery to sin... but in Satisfaction Theory the payment for sin is instead made to God, to satisfy God's justice and righteousness, and ultimately return God's honor.

Now, five hundred years after Anselm, the Protestant reformers like Luther and Calvin picked up Satisfaction Theory but began to take it a different direction metaphorically; namely, to the courtroom. John Calvin, who you may remember is the father of the Presbyterian Church, had first been trained as a lawyer before he became a famous theologian. As the Protestant Reformation began and early modernity was taking root in wider culture, it was no longer relevant to use feudal images to understand the cross. So, Calvin took Anselm's idea but changed the imagery to criminal law.

In this metaphor, humanity stands guilty of sin in this cosmic courtroom, before the bench of God, who sits as righteous judge. The tape rolls, exposing all our sins and then the verdict is read; the just punishment for our crimes is separation from God and ultimately death. But then right as we're to be escorted away in handcuffs to face these charges, God arrives in the person of Jesus to stand in for humanity and to himself bear the immeasurable weight of God's wrath and condemnation. We, in turn, get our handcuffs unlocked and are allowed to go home scot-free, safe to return to right relationship with God.

Calvin writes, **"Christ was made a substitute and a surety in the place of transgressors and even submitted as a criminal, to sustain and suffer all the punishment which would have been inflicted on them."** -John Calvin This legal image of the cross is what we now call Penal Substitutionary Atonement.

Penal Substitutionary Atonement declares that Christ, voluntarily submitting to God the Father's plan of salvation, was punished (penalized) in the place of sinful

humanity (substitution), thus satisfying the demands of justice and appeasing God's wrath, so that God can now justly forgive us, making us one with God (atonement).

Penal Substitutionary Atonement (what I'm going to refer to moving forward at PSA) is by and large the most prominent and widely accepted atonement theology in our own time and western culture. If you grew up in the American church—in most any tradition—this is likely what you were taught the cross means. In fact, there are many people who now find it impossible to think about the cross any other way, many who would even say this is the crux of the gospel. It's like the western church simply got stuck looking through only one turn of the gem and PSA is all they've been able to see for 500 years.

Now, if you were to ask around, "what does the gospel mean?" you would most assuredly get some version of PSA. Something like, "God is holy and just, so is therefore rightly outraged by our sin and unable to be in relationship with us. Our sinfulness has earned us God's wrath and the eternal punishment of death and hell. God's perfect justice demands full punishment, a punishment we can never pay. The only way out is for God's wrath to be satisfied by the sinless substitutionary sacrifice of Christ." Now I know that in this room there are some of you internally nodding your head in agreement thinking, "yep that's it." And then I know that there are others of you that are having a visceral reaction and starting to squirm in your pews. Everybody, just hang in there for a few more minutes!

Let's begin by talking a bit about God's wrath here, because I think folks tend to hear words like wrath and judgment and instinctively shirk away in fear. But Calvin and I would remind you that God's wrath, as described in scripture, is ALWAYS about God's pursuit of justice. Following God's law, the ten commandments, all these moral statutes (throughout the Old Testament especially and then later in Jesus' sermon on the mount), were given to the people, not to burden them, but to help them live well in community. But when communal life breaks down, when people choose not to follow those laws and began to take advantage of one another, God intervenes to reestablish justice—most often by simply allowing the natural and painful consequences of our sins to play out in the form of exile. Through these experiences of exile, God helps us return to justice once again. As J.I. Packer rightly summarizes: **"God's wrath in the Bible is never the capricious, self-indulgent, irritable, morally ignoble thing that human anger so often is. It is, instead, a right and necessary reaction to objective moral evil."** God's wrath is his love—his tough love—in action against evil... and when we really stop to think about it, we're deeply

thankful for it. It's precisely the same reason we discipline our kids for running out into the street or stealing from the store. Good discipline is always rooted in restorative love.

We try and do the very same thing in our own society, albeit very poorly much of the time. We create laws that are intended to protect us and to make society safe. We aren't allowed to murder, because, well, society breaks down pretty quickly when we do. We have laws to protect people's privacy so that identity theft crimes are prevented. We have driving statutes to help us all stay safe on the road. But if we break those laws, we might get a ticket, or taken to jail, or brought before a judge to determine what sort of penalty will be given in order to bring the appropriate correction to our behavior. And this is intended not to be cruel, but fair.

In fact, when you're the one who's experienced an injustice, you're banking on the fact that someone's going to intervene and make it right. None of us really want a God that ignores injustice. This is the reason that when Jeffrey Epstein, arrested for the rampant sexual abuse and the trafficking of underage girls, was found dead in his jail cell just days after he was finally arrested, people were outraged. No one really knows what happened, but his suspicious death meant he would never have to face his victims in court, own up to his crimes, or live out his sentence behind bars. It left his victims feeling like justice would never be served for the terrible suffering they had endured.

But let's take this analogy a step further, what would our reaction be to a scenario where, rather than Epstein dying, a perfectly innocent man went to the judge and volunteered to take Epstein's place in jail and take all his penalties, so that Epstein was allowed to simply go free? How do you react to that? Because that is precisely what Penal Substitutionary Atonement suggests. An innocent person takes the punishment for the guilty. Now, let's be honest, when we're talking about someone with crimes as atrocious as Jeffrey Epstein's, this probably makes us very uncomfortable and maybe even furious. But when we're thinking of our own sinfulness, I'm not sure we always have such a strong reaction to PSA. The idea that Jesus would take our punishment to appease God's wrath, might sound to us personally, like very good news.

But it's right here that PSA gets pushback from the critics, is this good news? Just like we've done in the previous weeks, let's look at some of the main critiques of PSA.

First and foremost, critics will point out that **PSA makes God into a divine bully** or abuser. It makes God out to be angry, vengeful, and bloodthirsty... God's holiness ties his

hands... in PSA, he CAN'T forgive us until he punishes his own innocent Son in our stead, balancing the scales of justice. But scholars keep asking, why does killing Jesus help? How can this be true justice? What kind of God needs to punish the innocent in order to forgive the guilty? Killing an innocent person in place of the guilty is the definition of injustice! Even more, if Jesus takes upon himself the substitutionary punishment for the total sin of all humanity, then how exactly does Jesus' 3.5 hours on the cross pay for all those sins? The math just doesn't math.

Second, scholars would point out that **PSA is not consistent with the larger character of God** but rather hyper-focuses on God's holiness over and against God's other attributes. Yes, God is holy and just... but God is also grace, love, and forgiveness... so which attributes of God take the lead? Many will point out that the emphasis on penalty and vengeance in PSA relies heavily—if not entirely—on God as described in the Old Testament, and then applies these attributes onto Christ. But in Christian theology, that methodology is backwards. We are to always, always, always begin with Christ—the God revealed to us—and then work our way backward to make sense of the old covenant through the lens of Christ. So then, do we see love OR justice take the lead in Jesus' life and ministry? When we look at Christ, is this a God that requires vengeance? Or who's overly concerned with his honor being disgraced?

Third, scholars are very concerned that **PSA does violence to the trinity**, pitting God the Father against God the Son. Paul tells us in Colossians 1:15 that “**Jesus is the exact likeness of the invisible God**” and Jesus himself said, “**If you have seen me, you have seen the Father**” but this theory tears them apart and turns them into some kind of good cop – bad cop routine. God the Father becomes the one who we need to be saved from, the angry vengeful one who's holiness prevents him from fully embracing humanity. And then Jesus is the merciful and compassionate one who must sacrifice himself so that the angry Father will change his mind. PSA suggests that there is something in God that must be reconciled back to humanity, which is frankly not once suggested in the New Testament. It is us that needs to be reconciled back to our triune God.

Fourth, **PSA confuses practical discipleship**; how are we to follow this in our own lives of faith? In PSA God is vengeful and NOT forgiving?! But in Christ we're called to be forgiving and NOT vengeful!? Jesus tells us to forgive others as we would be forgiven, he asks us to renounce the desire for retribution, to give up on an-eye-for-an-eye, and to love our enemies. Jesus himself says again and again, “**I desire mercy, not sacrifice.**” So where

does this idea come from that God is bound by a compulsory standard of retributive justice, but then turns and asks us to violate that and instead love and forgive freely? This is the ultimate hypocrisy... like when a parent says to their child, “do what I say, but not what I do.”

So those are some of the main critiques for Penal Substitutionary Atonement (and Satisfaction Theory). I find PSA to be problematic, especially when taken too literally or as a stand-alone atonement theology. We ought not leave the gem here too long. It just too easy turns God into someone we can no longer recognize in Christ. I am also suspicious of a theology that isn't solidly reflected by the teachings of the early church. The gospel writers and earliest Christian disciples simply did not typically conceive of the cross as a punishment needed to appease God's wrath. Rather, they mostly understood the cross to be the place where the violence of humanity and of the powers of evil conflated to kill Jesus. It wasn't until well over 1500 years later (and then ONLY in the West) that folks started to heavily emphasize punishment and then tried to call it the gospel.

I mentioned earlier that because Penal Substitutionary Atonement theory so permeates our modern, Western Christian landscape, many, many people have come to think, far too narrowly, that this is all the gospel boils down to. But like N.T. Wright reminds us, **this is not just a trivial mistake, but a great danger that will in the end, lead us to rewriting one of the most famous verses in the Bible that tells us what the good news of the gospel really is: ‘God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son.’ (Jn 3:16) Look at the two verbs: God so *loved* the world that he *gave* his son. The trouble is that it can easily be heard as saying, instead, that God so *hated* the world, that he *killed* his only son. And that doesn't sound like good news at all.”**

Now, that being said, I think the most helpful part of these theories is the substitutionary component. You may have noticed, if you've been paying close attention over these weeks, that Jesus' death on the cross is always—no matter the theory—described as “for us” in some way. Jesus died for us, for our benefit, for our good, for our salvation. In today's theories, that “for us” becomes “instead of us.” PSA gets right the reality that our sinfulness separates us from God, makes us captive to sin... and sin, as Paul reminds us, will always lead to death. The great gift of Jesus' death and resurrection, is that God has conquered both sin and death, for us. Even more, scripture again and again declares that because of God's gift of grace through faith, we are made one with Christ. We are mysteriously crucified AND risen WITH Christ. Kruger C. Baxter puts it this way,

“the Gospel is the good news of what became of the Son of God and of what became of us, in Him.” Friends, as we continue studying atonement theories this Lent, may we approach the cross with curiosity and humility, allowing the Spirit to challenge our previously held notions, to build up our faith, and to create in us the room we each need to know and love God even more than we already do. Amen.