

The *SBJT* Forum: The Atonement under Fire

Editor's Note: Readers should be aware of the forum's format. D. A. Carson, Thomas R. Schreiner, Bruce A. Ware, and James Hamilton have been asked specific questions to which they have provided written responses. These writers are not responding to one another. The journal's goal for the Forum is to provide significant thinkers' views on topics of interest without requiring lengthy articles from these heavily-committed individuals. Their answers are presented in an order that hopefully makes the forum read as much like a unified presentation as possible.

SBJT: What are some of the reasons why the doctrine of penal substitution is again coming under attack?

D. A. Carson: A book could usefully be written on this subject. To keep things brief, I shall list a handful of developments that have contributed to this sad state of affairs.¹

(1) In recent years it has become popular to sketch the Bible's story-line something like this: Ever since the fall, God has been active to reverse the effects of sin. He takes action to limit sin's damage; he calls out a new nation, the Israelites, to mediate his teaching and his grace to others; he promises that one day he will come as the promised Davidic king to overthrow sin and death and all their wretched effects. This is what Jesus does: he conquers death, inaugurates the kingdom of righteousness, and calls his followers to live out that righteousness now in prospect of the consummation still to come.

Much of this description of the Bible's story-line, of course, is true. Yet it is so painfully reductionistic that it introduces a major distortion. It collapses human rebellion, God's wrath, and assorted disasters into one construct, namely, the degradation of human life, while depersonalizing the wrath of God. It thus fails

to wrestle with the fact that from the beginning, sin is an offense *against God*. God himself pronounces the sentence of death (Genesis 2-3). This is scarcely surprising, since God is the source of all life, so if his image-bearers spit in his face and insist on going their own way and becoming their own gods, they cut themselves off from their Maker, from the One who gives life. What is there, then, but death? Moreover, when we sin in any way, God himself is invariably the most offended party (Psalm 51). The God the Bible portrays as resolved to intervene and save is also the God portrayed as full of wrath because of our sustained idolatry. As much as he intervenes to save us, he stands over against us as Judge, an offended Judge with fearsome jealousy.

Nor is this a matter of Old Testament theology alone. When Jesus announced the imminence of the dawning of the kingdom, like John the Baptist he cried, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near" (Matt 4:17; cf. Mark 1:15). Repentance is necessary, because the coming of the King promises judgment as well as blessing. The sermon on the mount, which encourages Jesus' disciples to turn the other cheek, repeatedly warns them to flee the condemnation of the gehenna of fire.

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The sermon warns the hearers not to follow the broad road that leads to destruction, and pictures Jesus pronouncing final judgment with the words, "I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!" (7:23). The parables are replete with warnings of final judgment; a significant percentage of them demonstrate the essential divisiveness of the dawning of the kingdom. Images of hell—outer darkness, furnace of fire, weeping and gnashing of teeth, undying worms, eternal fire—are too ghastly to contemplate long. After Jesus' resurrection, when Peter preaches on the day of Pentecost, he aims to convince his hearers that Jesus is the promised Messiah, that his death and resurrection are the fulfillment of Scripture, and that God "has made this Jesus, whom you crucified [he tells them], both Lord and Christ" (Acts 2:36). That is every bit as much threat as promise: the hearers are "cut to the heart" and cry, "What shall we do?" (2:37). That is what elicits Peter's "Repent and believe" (3:38). When Peter preaches to Cornelius and his household, the climax of his moving address is that in fulfillment of Scripture God appointed Jesus "as judge of the living and the dead"—and thus not of Jews only. Those who believe in him receive "forgiveness of sins through his name": transparently, that is what is essential if we are to face the judge and emerge unscathed. When he preaches to the Athenian pagan intellectuals, Paul, as we all know, fills in some of the great truths that constitute the matrix in which alone Jesus makes sense: monotheism, creation, who human beings are, God's aseity and providential sovereignty, the wretchedness and danger of idolatry. Before he is interrupted, however, Paul gets to the place in his argument where he insists that God has

set a day "when he will judge the world with justice"—and his appointed judge is Jesus, whose authoritative status is established by his resurrection from the dead. When Felix invites the apostle to speak "about faith in Christ Jesus" (Acts 24:24), Paul, we are told, discourses "on righteousness, self-control and the judgment to come" (24:15): apparently such themes are an irreducible part of faithful gospel preaching. Small wonder, then, that Felix was terrified (24:25). The Letter to the Romans, which many rightly take to be, at very least, a core summary of the apostle's understanding of the gospel, finds Paul insisting that judgment takes place "on the day when God will judge men's secrets through Jesus Christ, *as my gospel declares*" (Rom 2:16). Writing to the Thessalonians, Paul reminds us that Jesus "rescues us from the coming wrath" (1 Thess 1:10). This Jesus will be "revealed from heaven in blazing fire with his powerful angels. He will punish those who do not know God and do not obey the *gospel* of our Lord Jesus. They will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the majesty of his power on the day he comes to be glorified in his holy people and to be marveled at among all those who have believed" (2 Thess 1:7-10). We await "a Savior from [heaven], the Lord Jesus Christ"—and what this Savior saves us from (the context of Phil 3:19-20 shows) is the destiny of destruction. "Like the rest, we were by nature objects of wrath" (Eph 2:3), for we gratified "the cravings of our sinful nature . . . following its desires and thoughts" (2:3)—but now we have been *saved* by grace through faith, created in Christ Jesus to do good works (Eph 2:8-10). This grace thus saves us both from sins and from their otherwise inevitable

result, the wrath to come. Jesus himself is our peace (Ephesians 2; Acts 10:36). “The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of human beings who suppress the truth by their wickedness” (Rom 1:18). But God presented Christ as a propitiation in his blood” (3:25), and now “we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand” (5:1-2).

Time and space fail to allow reflection on how the sacrifice of Christ in the Letter to the Hebrews is what alone enables us to escape the terror of those who fall into the hands of the living God, who is a consuming fire, or on how the Apocalypse presents the Lamb as the slaughtered sacrifice, even while warning of the danger of falling under the wrath of the Lamb.

This nexus of themes—God, sin, wrath, death, judgment—is what stands behind the simple words of, say, 1 Cor 15:3: as a matter of first importance, Paul tells us, “Christ died for our sins.” Parallel texts instantly leap to mind: “[Christ] was delivered over to death for our sins, and was raised to life for our justification” (Rom 4:25). “Christ died for the ungodly” (Rom 5:6). The Lord Jesus Christ “gave himself for our sins, to rescue us from the present evil age” (Gal 1:4). “Christ died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God” (1 Pet 3:18). Or, as Paul puts it in 1 Cor 15:2, “By this gospel you are *saved*.” To be saved from our sins is to be saved not only from their chaining power but from their consequences—and the consequences are profoundly bound up with God’s solemn sentence, with God’s holy wrath. Once you see this, you cannot fail to see that whatever else the cross does,

it must rightly set aside God’s sentence, it must rightly set aside God’s wrath, or it achieves nothing.

(2) Some popular slogans that have been deployed to belittle the doctrine of penal substitution betray painful misconceptions of what the Bible says about our Triune God. The best known of these appalling slogans, of course, is that penal substitution is a form of “cosmic child abuse.” This conjures up a wretched picture of a vengeful God taking it out on his Son, who had no choice in the matter. Instead of invoking the Triune God of the Bible, this image implicitly pictures interactions between two separable Gods, the Father and the Son. But this is a painful caricature of what the Bible actually says. In fact, I do not know of any serious treatment of the doctrine of penal substitution, undertaken by orthodox believers, that does not carefully avoid falling into such traps.

Consider Rom 5:8: “But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners Christ died for us.” This verse is coherent *only* if Christ himself is God. The cross is not Christ’s idea alone, conjured up to satisfy his bad-tempered Father. The Triune God, our Creator and our Judge, could have, in perfect justice, consigned us all to the pit. Instead, the Father so loved us as to send his Son, *himself God*, to bear our sins in his own body on the tree. Moreover, the Bible speaks of this mission not only in its bearing on us lost sinners, but also in its reflection of inner-Trinitarian commitments: by this mission the Father determines that all will honor the Son, even as they honor the Father (see John 5:16-30): where does this insistence fit into crass language about cosmic child abuse?

(3) In recent years there has been a

lot of chatter about various “models” of the atonement that have appeared in the history of the church: the penal substitution model, the *Christus Victor* model, the exemplary model, and so forth. The impression is frequently given that today’s Christians are free to pick and choose among these so-called “models.” But for any Christian committed to the final authority of Scripture, this approach is *methodologically* flawed. It allows historical theology to trump Scripture. Surely the right question to ask is this: Which, if any, of these so-called “models” is exegetically warranted by the Bible itself? For instance, are there passages in which biblical writers insist that Christ in his death triumphed over the powers of darkness? Are there passages in which Christ’s self-sacrifice becomes a moral model for his followers? Are there passages in which Christ’s death is said to be a propitiation for our sins, i.e., a sacrifice that turns away the wrath of God? If the answer is “Yes” to these three options—and there are still more options I have not mentioned here—then choosing only one of them is being unfaithful to Scripture, for it is too limiting. Christians are not at liberty to pick and choose which of the Bible’s teachings are to be treasured.

(4) There is another question that must be asked when people talk about “models” of the atonement. Assuming we can show that several of them are warranted by Scripture itself, the question to ask is this: How, then, do these “models” cohere? Are they merely discrete pearls on a string? Or is there logic and intelligibility to them, established by Scripture itself?

One recent work that loves to emphasize the *Christus Victor* “model”—Christ by his death is victor over sin and death—somewhat begrudgingly concedes that

penal substitution is found in a few texts, not least Rom 8:3. But this work expends no effort to show how these two views of the atonement should be integrated. In other words, the work in question denigrates penal substitution as a sort of minor voice, puffs the preferred “model” of *Christus Victor*, and attempts no integration. But I think it can be shown (though it would take a very long chapter to do it) that if one begins with the centrality of penal substitution, which is, as we have seen, grounded on a deep understanding of how sin is an offense against God, it is very easy to see how all the other so-called “models” of the atonement are related to it. The *way* Christ triumphs over sin and death is by becoming a curse for us, by satisfying the just demands of his heavenly Father, thereby silencing the accuser, and rising in triumph in resurrection splendor because sin has done its worst and been defeated by the One who bore its penalty. Moreover, in the light of such immeasurable love, there are inevitably exemplary moral commitments that Christ’s followers must undertake. In other words, it is easy to show how various biblical emphases regarding the atonement cohere if one *begins* with penal substitution. It is very difficult to establish the coherence if one begins anywhere else.

(5) At least some of the current work on the atonement that is proving so scathing of penal substitution reflects discouraging ignorance of earlier theological study and reflection. Few interact any more with standard works by J. I. Packer, John Stott, and others—let alone classic works produced by earlier generations. But a new generation is rising, forcing readers to take note that historic Christian confessionalism will not roll over and play dead. I heartily commend the recent book

by Steve Jeffery, Mike Ovey, and Andrew Sach, *Pierced for Our Transgressions: Rediscovering the Glory of Penal Substitution* (InterVarsity, 2007)

¹ This essay is also available in digital form at <http://www.thegospelcoalition.org>.

SBJT: How should we respond to some criticisms of the doctrine of penal substitution today?

Thomas R. Schreiner: The apostle Paul proclaimed the scandal of the cross, and nowhere is that scandal more evident than in the opposition we see to penal substitution today. Joel Green and Mark Baker say that penal substitution is part of the message of the cross, but they nowhere commend the doctrine in their book and instead they consistently criticize it.¹ Some allege that penal substitution cannot be biblical since a loving Jesus appeases an angry Father. But no credible or scholarly defender of penal substitution (PS henceforth) teaches such a theology. In popular circles and in some illustrations the doctrine is occasionally explained in such a way, and in such cases an important strand of the biblical evidence is left out. The scriptures do teach, after all, that God's wrath and judgment is directed against sin (Rom 1:18; 2:5), and that Christ took our sin upon himself and bore the Father's wrath (Rom 3:25-26). But the scriptures also teach that the Father himself sent the Son to die for sinners because of his great love for us (Rom 5:8).

We must beware of one dimensional and simplistic portrayals of God. It is all too easy to think that if God's wrath is appeased in Christ's death, then God's love cannot be part of what occurs. The scriptures, however, portray a more complex picture. God, out of his great love for

sinners, sent his Son to propitiate his anger against sin. In doing so is God guilty of divine child-abuse, so that he requires his Son to suffer? What human Father would do such a thing? Once again, however, we are in great danger of reductionism, and all too easily fall into the mistake of creating a God in our image. Further, we must recall that the Son is not forced or compelled by the Father to die for the sins of the world. He gladly does the will of the Father, as the Gospel of John teaches repeatedly. He gave his life on his own authority and by virtue of his own will (John 10:18). As Paul says, "Christ loved me and gave himself for me" (Gal 2:20). It scarcely does justice to the biblical evidence to suggest that he was forced by the Father to suffer! Moreover, it is certainly a strange and completely unbiblical Trinitarianism that would somehow suggest that the Father sadistically and gleefully sent his Son to suffer. Clearly, the point of the biblical witness is that the Father's love is so stupendous that he would even send his own Son to suffer for our sake and our salvation.

These distorted presentations of PS raise an important issue. If we read the scriptures suspiciously, we can distort its teaching and present it in a negative light. As believers, however, we are to read the scriptures humbly and with receptive hearts, so that we let the scriptures shape and form our worldview. We realize that we are prone to reductionism and partial explanations, and so we must pay heed to the entirety of the biblical witness. Some of those who disparage PS, however, seem to be prejudiced against it from the outset. I have seen the doctrine described as "grotesque" and "primitive" and "vengeful." Such responses indicate either a very inadequate grasp of scripture, or hearts

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that are resisting God's self-revelation.

Sometimes it is said that those of us who support PS ignore other dimensions of the atonement, for Christ is also presented as our example in his suffering, and the scriptures also teach that he defeated the devil and demonic powers. Those of us who support PS need to be reminded that the atonement is not exhausted by a single theme. Still, I have never read a single defender of PS who thinks that the atonement is only about PS. What we do argue, however, is that the PS is the heart of the atonement—that it is fundamental to what happened in our salvation. We can see this clearly when we think of Christ functioning as an example on the cross or his defeat over demonic powers.

First, let's think about Christ functioning as an example for us. Peter clearly teaches us that we are to follow Christ's example in 1 Pet 2:21-25. Still, it should be evident that imitating Christ cannot be the central theme when we think of the atonement. For we know from the scriptures that we have all failed to do God's will in many ways, that we have all sinned and fall short of the glory of God (Rom 3:23), and that no one can be right before God by doing what the law says (Rom 3:19-20). If we mainly look to Christ's example when we think of the cross, we will be miserable indeed, for we all fail to follow his example. Indeed, if we must follow his example to be right with God, then none of us will ever be right with God. To paraphrase the Apostle Paul, "If righteousness comes from following Christ's example, then Christ died for nothing" (Gal 2:21). Yes, we are to follow Christ's example, but we need someone to die in our place and pay the penalty that we owed, so that we can be right with God and receive forgiveness of sins. Salvation is not gained by

following Christ's moral life; it is a gift received on the basis of Christ's atoning death. Even in 1 Pet 2:21-25, where Christ is highlighted as an example, Peter highlights the uniqueness of Christ's sacrifice. "He himself bore our own sins in his body on the tree" (1 Pet 2:24).

Second, it is also gloriously true that Christ in his death triumphed over Satan and demons, and this truth has led more and more scholars to think that *Christus Victor* is the major theme of the atonement. But why is it that Satan and demons rule over human beings? Clearly, the scriptures teach that they reign over us because of our sin. We are not merely victims of demonic powers. We have given ourselves willingly and gladly to sin. The power of demons is broken when we receive forgiveness of sins, when Christ pays the penalty to the Father that we owed but could never pay. The book of Hebrews makes it clear that Christ destroyed the power of the devil (Heb 2:14) through his sacrifice on the cross as our great High Priest (Heb 7:1-10:18). Hence, the foundation of Christ's victory over spiritual powers is his death on our behalf. We are freed from Satan's dominion when we are forgiven of our sins by virtue of Christ suffering the penalty we deserved, once again demonstrating that at the heart of the atonement is penal substitution.

¹ Joel B. Green & Mark D. Baker, *Recovering the Scandal of the Cross: Atonement in New Testament & Contemporary Contexts* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2000).

SBJT: In light of the centrality given by N. T. Wright and others to the *Christus Victor* aspect of the atonement, why do you think that the penal substitutionary aspect is itself central and that it is foundational to *Christus Victor*?

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Bruce A. Ware: Arguably, the three most explicit texts in the New Testament expressing the truth that Christ has conquered Satan and all of the powers of darkness are Col 2:15; Heb 2:14-15; and 1 John 3:8. These texts teach, respectively, that Christ has “disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them,” that Christ took on our human flesh that “through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil,” and that “the reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the devil” (all Scripture quotations from the ESV). These passages, along with a host of others—including importantly the gospels themselves that portray Christ in conflict with the devil from his temptation in the wilderness to the Satan-inspired conspiracy of Judas and the Pharisees to put Jesus to death—all underscore the important theme that Christ, by his death and resurrection, conquered the very one who had the power of death, bringing this victory over Satan to Christ’s followers and, in a broader sense, to the whole of the cosmos.

The question before us, then, is not whether the Bible teaches the *Christus Victor* theme, i.e., that Christ has conquered Satan and the powers of darkness. Indeed Scripture teaches this clearly, and its truth, spanning from Gen 3:15 all the way through Rev 20:10, is a major part of the broader biblical teaching of the efficacy of Christ’s atoning death and victorious resurrection. Rather, the question before us is this: Is *Christus Victor* the central and most significant element among the aspects of the atonement, or should the penal substitutionary aspect of the atonement itself be seen as central, accounting for and giving rise, then, to *Christus Victor*? In consider-

ing this question, I suggest that each of the three passages mentioned above, each in its own context, indicates that penal substitution stands as the foundation for *Christus Victor* such that the victory of Christ over Satan comes through and not apart from Christ’s paying the penalty for the sin of others by which (alone) Satan’s hold on them is destroyed. In short, it seems clear from these texts that penal substitution grounds and accounts for *Christus Victor*. Consider briefly each of these texts.

The context of Col 2:15, where Christ is said to have disarmed the rulers and authorities, is one in which Christ’s payment for the penalty of sin is first established before moving next to Christ’s victory over Satan. In Col 2:13-14 we are told that in Christ we have been forgiven of all our trespasses in that by the very death of Christ on the cross, he cancelled the record of debt that stood against us and set it aside, nailing it to the cross. The thrust in vv. 13-14, then, is on expiation: the liability we owe before a holy God to suffer the penalty for trespassing his law is now removed (“forgiven” in 2:13; “cancelled” and “set aside” in 2:14) as Christ took upon himself our record of debt and nailed it to the cross. The substitutionary death Christ died, in which he cancelled out the debt of sinners, then, is the backdrop for the next glorious truth found in 2:15, where he disarmed the rulers and authorities, putting them to shame and triumphing over them. The death by which Satan is disarmed and put to shame, then, is a death that cancels our sin. These are not accidentally linked concepts but theologically and necessarily linked. The only way in which Satan could be defeated is as sin, which gave him the basis for his hold over sinners, was itself

paid for and forgiven. Christ's forgiveness through penal substitution, then, is the means by which Christ conquered Satan's power.

Hebrews 2 likewise links Christ's destruction of Satan who had the power of death (2:14) with Christ's faithful priestly role in which he offered a propitiatory sacrifice of the sins of the people (2:17). The common truth that links both effects is the incarnation: Christ shared in "flesh and blood" (2:14), or variously, he was "made like his brothers" (2:17) in order to accomplish these dual effects, to "destroy the one who has the power of death" (2:14) and to "become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people" (2:17). At the very least, it is clear that the *Christus Victor* theme does not stand alone; rather it is deliberately linked to the theme of penal and propitiatory sacrifice. And when one asks, next, whether one has priority over the other, it would seem that the whole of the Book of Hebrews suggests the answer. Clearly, the once for all sacrifice of Christ inaugurating the new covenant is presented in Hebrews as providing the payment for sin that was foreshadowed but never actually accomplished (10:4) through the animal sacrifices of the old covenant. Hebrews's stress on the sacrifice of Christ for the sins of the people clearly is the dominant note sounded in the book, and so it stands to reason that it (i.e., penal substitution) grounds the other important, yet dependent, truth that in this death for sin, he conquered the one who had the power of sin. Indeed, victory over Satan occurs only as the basis for his power (sin) is itself removed through penal and propitiatory sacrifice.

Finally, 1 John 3:4-10 shows that the Son

of God's appearing "to destroy the works of the devil" (3:8b) happens only as the very sins that are his "works" (3:8a) are themselves taken away through the sacrifice of Christ (3:5). Similarly to Hebrews 2, we have in 1 John 3:5 and 8 a dual purpose given for why Christ appeared: He appeared "to take away sins" (3:5) and he appeared "to destroy the works of the devil" (3:8). Both are true, but does one have priority over the other? Is one basic, so that as it occurs, the second reality follows? Indeed the argument of 1 John 3:4-10 would suggest that only as Christ appears "to take away sin" does he, in so doing, take away the very sinful works that mark the devil "from the beginning" (3:8a) and by which appearing, then, Christ destroys "the works of the devil" (3:8b). *Christus Victor*, then, occurs only as the very works that Satan carries out are themselves destroyed. What works are these? They are works of sin (3:8a). So, as Christ comes to take away sin (3:5), he destroys the sins that are the works of the devil (3:8b). Penal substitution, then, forms the basis by which *Christus Victor* is accomplished and secured.

Perhaps an analogy may assist in clarifying the point of Scripture's teaching here. Under a just system of laws of the state and judicial practice, a prisoner is locked in jail and his freedom curtailed precisely because he has been convicted of some crime whose penalty involves his incarceration. Notice, then, that his *guilt* forms the basis for his *bondage*. Only because he has been proven guilty of breaking the law does the state have the right to put him behind bars. Furthermore, if a prisoner can prove his actual innocence, such that the charge of guilt can be removed—e.g., if some forensic or DNA evidence was forthcoming after

his incarceration demonstrating his innocence—then the state would be obligated to free him from his bonds and release him from prison. Is it not clear, then, that the *power* of the state to withhold from people their freedom and put them in bondage comes from the *guilt* those very people have incurred and the accompanying just punishment directed at them as a result? Remove the *guilt* and you remove the just basis for *bondage*.

Similarly, Satan's power over sinners is tied specifically and exclusively to their guilt through sin. His hold on them is owing to their rebellion from God in sin and his subsequent jurisdiction over their lives as a result of that sin. But remove the guilt through Christ's payment for their sin and you remove the basis for Satan's hold on them! So it is through Christ's death, that as he took upon himself the sin of others and paid the full penalty for their sin, the rightful hold that Satan had upon them is necessarily broken as the basis for this bondage is removed. Remove the guilt and you remove the bondage; accomplish penal substitution and you accomplish *Christus Victor*. Therefore, as glorious as the truth of *Christus Victor* is—and indeed, it is magnificently glorious—the truth that makes possible and necessary Christ's conquering of Satan and his power is the more central and foundational truth that Christ paid the penalty for our sins through his penal and propitiatory sacrifice such that the basis for Satan's hold on sinners is thus removed. Penal substitution grounds *Christus Victor*. Praise be to our Savior for this gracious forgiveness of our sin and guilt that accomplishes also this glorious deliverance from Satan's dominion and bondage (Col 1:13-14).

SBJT: Many people today say they have a problem with viewing the cross in terms of penal substitution, but what do you think the real problem is?

James Hamilton: "Mercy and truth have met together. Righteousness and peace have kissed each other" (Ps 85:10). The problem with penal substitutionary atonement isn't the idea that God could be wrathful. Anyone who believes the Bible—and reads it—will see that. Nor is it that penal substitution is dependant upon an outdated, unbiblical cultural framework that has been imposed on the text of Scripture. God gave the sacrificial system. He spoke of atonement being made and his wrath being appeased. He revealed all this. Penal substitutionary atonement is in the Bible—seamlessly woven through. But if these things aren't the problem with penal substitution, what is?

The problem with penal substitution is that we have not sufficiently realized this doctrine. We have not yet considered the depths of our own sin. We have not yet considered the holiness and majesty of God. We have not seen the enormity of the fury of his righteous indignation. We have not yet considered what torments we deserve. We have not yet considered the worth of Christ. We have not sufficiently pondered the fact that for us and for our salvation the Pure One was defiled, the First Born forsaken, the One who knew no sin was made sin, the Righteous One was put forward as a sacrifice of propitiation, all so that we might be cleansed, that we might be adopted, that we might have his righteousness, that we might be forgiven. He was broken that we might be healed, slain that we might live. You may be reading this and thinking to yourself, "I have thought through all these things before." Yet there remain depths that cannot be

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sounded.

We think we know all this. We act as though we have it in our back pockets. We assume it. But go to most churches and the infinite wealth of these riches of the gospel of Jesus Christ will not be sung in the songs and preached in the sermons. It is not because there are no songs that sing these truths, nor is there a shortage of relevant passages from the Bible that could be preached. That is not where the problem lies. The problem lies with us. We are the problem with penal substitution.

Going to some of these churches can only lead to the conclusion that we think that other things are better to sing about in worship and that other things are more relevant for the sermon. Listening to some of these preachers certainly leads to the conclusion that what the Bible teaches doesn't matter very much. If it mattered, they would preach it. But it doesn't matter, and the fact that it comes in a book is problematic, since they have no time to read and they can't be bothered with things like genre, or context, or the progress of redemptive history, or the grand story the Bible tells, or, for that matter, the ineffable glory of God, the righteousness of his justice, his commitment to his name, and the awful unmixed wrath of the full fury of his holiness that is being stored up against those who do not honor him as God and give thanks to him.

All this is irrelevant. And since all this is irrelevant, it matters little that Jesus was and is fully God and fully man, that the Father granted him to have life in himself, that only one of infinite worth could satisfy the infinite, just wrath of the Father against our sin.

None of this counts for very much—at least, that's the impression you'll get by going to many churches. What they care

about is having more people in the pews, and if those people aren't interested in all that God stuff, and if they have no desire to study an old boring book like the Bible, they've come to the right place. What these churches seem to care about involves more campuses, more hype, more technology, more humor, more of all the stuff you might see on TV—minus the violence, nudity, and profanity. That's the problem with penal substitution.

In order to care about it you have to care about God. You have to believe in the authority of the Bible, so that if it tells you that God is wrathful against sin, you conclude that wrath is not beneath God. So that if it tells you that God put forward his Son to propitiate his own wrath, you marvel that this expression of the almighty wrath of God is simultaneously a display of mercy. Wonder of wonders. Salvation comes through judgment. God shows himself just, and he has devised a way to be justly merciful. A mercy so great it leaves us stammering about unsearchable ways, untraceable paths, depths of wisdom and knowledge, about all things being from him and through him. And in the end, we exclaim, "Glory to him, forever! Amen."

If you come to care about all this, it will be because you know that your biggest problem is that one day you have to stand before God and account for yourself. In fact, you will know that this is everyone's biggest problem. This, of course, will reorder your reckoning of relevance.

You might begin to think that the Bible has relevant things to say after all. You might begin to think that reading is important since God has been pleased to reveal himself in written texts. You might begin to think that since God has revealed himself in these texts, they're

actually worth preaching. You might begin to think that since God has revealed himself in the words and statements made in this old book, it's actually not boring, its genres are worth learning about, and understanding context and redemptive history really does matter.

And if you begin to think all this, don't be surprised if you start preaching and teaching quite a lot about penal substitutionary atonement. It's all through the Bible, and if you methodically work your way through the whole thing (all of it is, after all, inspired)—avoiding the temptation to skip from hobby horse to hobby horse—you will come up against it.

The set of concerns the Bible will give to you—concern for God's glory and holiness, concern for people's souls as they show boldness against God when they sin, concern for God's own faithfulness to what he has said he will do, concern for people to be duly astonished at the free mercy of God in the gospel—all this will make the phrase "penal substitutionary atonement" a set of precious words. Not for the words themselves, but because you love the gospel. And you will have ceased to be the problem with penal substitution.