

## HALLELUJAH! WHAT A SAVIOUR:

# An explanation of Penal Substitutionary Atonement



### 1. INTRODUCTION

There is no doubt that the cross of Christ is foundational to Christianity. One of the first verses that many of us memorized was John 3:16 – “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life” (ESV). We sing hymns like, “When I survey the wondrous cross”, “We sing the praise of Him who died”, “There is a fountain filled with blood”, “Beneath the cross of Jesus”. And through the ages, the symbol of the cross itself has come to be identified with Christianity. One thing is clear: if we want to understand our faith we must grasp the meaning of the cross and of the atoning work of Christ.

This demand has become all the more urgent in recent years as self-confessed evangelicals have expressed strong and often emotive opposition to that understanding

of Christ’s atoning work which the Bible-believing, gospel-proclaiming church has confessed for many hundreds of years. Probably the most publicized of these attacks has come from Steve Chalke and Alan Mann in their book, *The lost message of Jesus*, in which the traditional doctrine of the cross was characterized as “cosmic child abuse – a vengeful father, punishing his son for an offence he has not even committed”.

Christians are rightly shocked by statements like this, and it is important for us to respond appropriately to them. We must be careful of becoming unduly defensive (and thereby being forced to answer our critics on their own terms), or aggressive (forgetting that the message of the cross is a gracious message). We aim not to fashion a stick to beat our opponents, nor to don the badge of orthodoxy so that we may receive the approval of our like-minded brothers and sisters. We seek to listen afresh to the

Spirit of God, speaking in Holy Scripture, so that we may stand in humble worship and adoration before our crucified and risen Saviour, and may find wisdom and power to proclaim his gospel more clearly to a lost and dying world.

Let us begin then, by listening to the Spirit in the text.

### 2. THE BIBLE’S TEACHING REGARDING THE CROSS

There is no space for a comprehensive study, so I will attempt to get straight to the point by looking at some of Jesus’ own statements about his death in Matthew’s gospel. In Matthew 20:28 Jesus states that “the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”<sup>1</sup> Now this statement was made to teach the disciples about humility in leadership, but it refers to the very purpose of Jesus’ coming to earth and giving up his life. In this connection, there are two points which our Lord teaches: 1) that his death is

<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise stated, all Scripture quotations are from the English Standard Version.

a “ransom” (i.e. it is a price paid to purchase freedom); and 2) that Christ gave up his life “for many”, or “in place of many”. In other words, Jesus taught that he would give up his life in place of the “many” to purchase their freedom.

This message is expanded upon in Matthew 26:26-30, where we read the words by which Jesus instituted the Lord’s Supper. Before listening to Jesus’ actual words, let us note that that Last Supper was a Passover meal. The lamb that the disciples were about to eat had been slaughtered by the priests in the temple, and its blood had been poured out at the altar; the participants were deeply conscious that they were celebrating God’s redemptive acts on behalf of his people Israel. While everybody was gathered for the solemn occasion, Jesus took the bread and said, “Take, eat; this is my body.” His meaning was clear: this broken bread would forever remind believers that Jesus’ broken body was the cause of their deliverance. Then the cup of which the Saviour said, “...this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.” Just as in Matthew 20:28, Jesus teaches here that his death provides deliverance for “the many”.

At this point, we need to ask, Why should deliverance and forgiveness of sins have come through Jesus’ death? We can answer that question by looking backwards to the Old Testament and forwards to Matthew’s narrative of the crucifixion. We begin with the backward look. It is very likely that, in both Matthew 20:28 and 26:28, Jesus was alluding to that great “Servant Song” in Isaiah 52:13-53:12. In that passage we read about the Lord’s Servant being made an offering for guilt (Is 53:10), pouring out his soul to death, and bearing the sin of many (Is 53:12). Recognizing that Jesus is the Suffering Servant whom Isaiah foretold, we may read further in that passage and learn that “he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his stripes we are healed. . . the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all” (Is 53:5-6). It is clear that there was punishment due to us, which Christ bore in our place. Hence, “it was the will of the Lord to crush him” (Is 53:10).

Looking forward now, we see that Matthew

has understood the punishment-bearing role of the Messiah and highlights it in his account of the crucifixion. When we go to the Garden of Gethsemane we find that Jesus is “very sorrowful, even to the point of death” (Matt 26:38). It is not just the prospect of death which torments him (many men have faced death with confidence, knowing that they were dying for a worthy cause). Rather, it is “the cup” which so disturbs the Father’s beloved Son. The cup which represents the wine of God’s wrath in Isaiah 63:1-6. And so we progress from Gethsemane to Calvary. Whereas John represents the cross as the glorification of the Lord Jesus (cf. John 17:1) and Luke emphasizes the saving power of the Lord, seeking and saving the lost even on the cross (Luke alone records the salvation of the thief), Matthew and Mark alone record Jesus’ cry of dereliction, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Matt 27:46). The whole scene, from the scoffing, to the darkness, to the cry emphasizes the reality of judgment. Jesus on the cross was drinking the cup of God’s wrath. Thus Matthew shows how Jesus fulfilled the role of Isaiah’s Suffering Servant, bearing in his person the “chastisement that brought us peace”.

It is important to reflect a little on this teaching regarding the cross-work of the Lord Jesus Christ. What we have found is that Jesus, in his death on the cross, 1) suffered the wrath of God; 2) paid a ransom to purchase freedom for “the many”; 3) brought about the forgiveness of sins for many by the shedding of his blood; 4) acted as a substitute for “the many” (Matt 20:28; Is 53:5-6). How do these ideas fit together? The Bible bears witness that God, who is perfectly holy, cannot look upon evil (Hab 1:13). His nature demands that sin and evil be punished: his justice and holiness must be satisfied. It is not as though God is subject to some principle outside himself – be it law, the moral order, honour, etc. – it is rather his own nature that demands satisfaction for sin. Hence we read about God being provoked to anger (e.g. Jer 32:30-32; Ezek 8:17), about the Lord’s anger burning against those who provoke him (e.g. Josh 7:1; Hos 8:5) and actually consuming them in judgment (e.g. Deut. 4:24; Num 11:1; Deut 6:15). However, we also read about God being satisfied when the sentence of judgment has run its course: “So will I sat-

isfy my wrath on you, and my jealousy shall depart from you. I will be calm and will no more be angry” (Ezek 16:42). When we relate this to the cross, thinking about Matthew’s presentation and the insight of Isaiah 53, we can only conclude that Jesus, as the representative substitute of the “many”, bore God’s wrath in their place until God was “satisfied” – of which the resurrection was proof.

This understanding of Christ’s atoning work is what has come to be known as “penal substitution” – it is “penal” because it involves the payment of a penalty, and it is a “substitution” because Christ acted as a substitute and bore the penalty in the place of the “many”. There are most certainly other dimensions to the cross-work of Christ – for instance, the cross provides an example for our own behaviour (1 Pet 2:21-25) and, it achieved a magnificent victory over Satan, (Col 2:15) – but bearing God’s wrath in our place is at the heart of what our Saviour did for us. What we need to say, then, is that mankind’s most significant problem is the wrath of God (cf. Rom 1:18-32), and the primary achievement of the cross was to render God favourable towards those who are united to Christ through faith. Before I need an example for my own behaviour, and before I need deliverance from the power of Satan, I need to be restored to a relationship in which God is favourable towards me. This aspect of the work of Christ is reflected in the use of the word “propitiation” by Paul (Rom 3:25) and John (1 John 2:2; 4:10): Christ’s death is the means by which God is “propitiated” or made favourable towards believers.

### 3. OBJECTIONS TO PENAL SUBSTITUTION

There have always been people who find the doctrine of penal substitution objectionable; this has traditionally been one of the key differences between liberals and evangelicals. However, in recent years dissenting voices have been making themselves heard within the evangelical camp. Steve Chalke and Alan Mann were quoted above. One finds other inflammatory and irresponsible statements like this: “When Jesus was crucified it wasn’t an angry, vindictive deity hitting out, punishing him for offences that he hadn’t committed simply because someone, somewhere had to pay.”

<sup>2</sup> But one also finds less emotive statements,

<sup>2</sup> See <http://www.christianbookshops.org.uk/reviews/lostmessageofjesus.htm>.

such as this rejection of the concept of propitiation in the New Testament: "Propitiation is essentially a process by which one does a favor to a person in order to make him or her favorably disposed, but in the NT God is never the object of propitiation since he is already on the side of people."<sup>3</sup>

The crux of the matter here is that those who object want to do away with any idea of punishment or the wrath of God. It is sometimes said that God expects us to forgive freely, without demanding payment for offences committed against us (e.g. Matt 18:21-35), and therefore God's forgiveness is also given freely without the need for any penalty. However, this view tries to impose human logic on the clear revelation of Scripture and refuses to accept what God has said about himself: for the sake of his own name he must punish evil. Ultimately, what lies behind this objection is a refusal to accept that we have a debt to God which we can never repay. The gospel becomes a message that we are really not so bad after all (and therefore don't really need to be saved), rather than a message that God has intervened in human history to deliver us with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. As one writer has put it, we must proclaim "grace that emerges not from our belief in God but his belief in us, his reaching out to us in mercy rather than in wrath."<sup>4</sup> Well, if the source of grace is God's belief

in me, and if mercy is the doing away with all need for justice, then the Christian faith – and along with it all human communication – has lost its meaning entirely.

The other main objection to penal substitution that is popular at the moment is the idea that it would be unjust for God to punish his Son (or any other third party) for our sins. Ezekiel 18 is quoted: "the soul that sins shall die". Sometimes the claim is further made that this doctrine, with its inherent support for injustice, lends support to evils like slavery and anti-Semitism. Our first response is, once again, to insist that the clear revelation of Scripture must outrank any rationalistic attempt to extrapolate a Biblical principle beyond its intended sphere of application. God has said: "upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace... the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all" (Is 53:5-6). Is this unjust? It would be if the Father and the Son were not united in the being of the Triune God. But since God is a Trinity, and since the Father and Son are one, Paul can say, "God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself" (2 Cor 5:19, NASB). As a result, God the Father did not punish any third party on the cross; rather, God in Christ bore the penalty of our sin himself.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

We conclude by asking how this doctrine

leads us to worship. I will make just two observations.

In the first place, it tells us that if we have put our faith in Christ we have been delivered from the wrath of God. God's wrath towards us has been spent, his jealousy has departed, he is no more angry. This is not a matter of mercy without justice for justice has been fully satisfied; the holiness of God has been fully satisfied. When I cry out with Paul, "we have peace with God", I am depending both on the mercy of God and on the righteousness of his character, for Christ has fully discharged my debt and I am assured that nothing can separate me from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord. Let us worship and thank God for the absolute security that we have in Christ.

In the second place, this doctrine tells us of the love which is in the being of God: "In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins" (1 John 4:10). For Christ to leave the glory of heaven, the perfect bliss of fellowship with the Father, to become man and to endure the wrath of his own Father; for the Father to give up his own Son for the sake of sinners who had no love towards him; here indeed is love. Let us bow down and worship.

– **Bruce Button**

<sup>3</sup> Louw, J. P., & Nida, E. A. 1996. *Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament: Based on semantic domains (electronic ed. of the 2nd edition.)* United Bible societies: New York. Vol. 1, p.503.

<sup>4</sup> See <http://oneblogonelord.blogspot.com/2006/08/open-letter-to-evangelical-alliance.html>.