

# Penal Substitution: The Testimony of Scripture

**By Malcolm H. Watts**

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The doctrine of penal substitution has been recently denounced as "cosmic child abuse - a vengeful Father punishing his Son for an offence he has not even committed". What does the Word of God teach about the sufferings of Christ?

1) The Lord Jesus Christ is called a "surety" (Hebrews 7:22): that is, someone who has undertaken to perform a service or pay a debt for another (Genesis 43:9; Philemon 18). Since the Fall, every sinner is under obligation, not only to render perfect obedience, but also to endure the penalty due to sin. 'But now', as David Clarkson says, 'the Lord, out of his infinite love to his elect, accepts of Christ, freely offering

himself to be their surety, and to pay that for them which they were never able to pay for themselves; and this he did by performing perfect obedience, which was the principal debt, and suffering death and the wrath of God, which was the penalty.' ('The Practical Works', vol. 1, page 274)

2) Christ is said to "bear" our sins (Isaiah 53:6; 1 Peter 2:24). Now to bear sins is not only to assume responsibility for them, but also to take the full consequences of them. Hence, the expression - 'he shall bear his iniquity' (Leviticus 20:17ff.). Francis Turretin, the great Reformed theologian, correctly observes that "to bear sin is the same thing as to bear the punishment of sins." ('Institutes of Elenctic Theology',

volume 2, page 429) The bearing of our sins, then, can only mean one thing: vicarious suffering.

413) Quoting these words, Dr Thomas Crawford asks, 'And what else does this amount to, but that He was our substitute, who bore in our stead the

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3) Our Lord was evidently delivered "for our offences" (Romans 4:25 - the preposition in the Greek is dia - "because of, on account of." This can only mean that these offences were the cause of His death. The same meaning is clearly intended in other scriptures, such as 1 Corinthians 15:3 - "died for our sins" - huper: "on behalf of", "for the sake of", and 1 Peter 3:18 - "suffered for sins" - peri: "concerning", "because of"). Dr. Leonard Woods remarks, 'When God inflicts evil upon men for their own sins, He shows His righteous displeasure against them as transgressors. He expresses His disapprobation of them, and of their sins, and deals with them as personally criminal and ill-deserving. When, therefore, we are told that "Christ died for our sins", or that "He suffered on account of sins, the just for the unjust", we are led to regard his sufferings as a manifestation of the holy displeasure of God, not against Him, but against us.' ('Lectures', volume 2, page

penal consequences of our sins?' ('The Doctrine of Holy Scripture respecting the Atonement', page 30).

4) Christ's death is described as a "sacrifice" (Ephesians 5:2; Hebrews 9:26, etc.) With respect to sacrifices, guilt was transmitted and, in consequence, life was taken as the penalty due (see: Leviticus 1:5). As Dr. Robert Dabney says concerning the Old Testament sacrifices, which prefigured Christ's sacrifice, "these bloody sacrifices were intended by God to symbolise the substitution of an innocent victim in place of the guilty offerer; the transfer of his guilt to the substitute; satisfaction for it by the vicarious death, and the consequent forgiveness of the sinner (Leviticus 1:4; 14:21; 17:11, et passim.)" ('Christ our Penal Substitute', page 88).

5) In Isaiah 53:7, it says "he was oppressed" - literally, "it was exacted": that is, He bore the penalty which the Law

demanded. Although some dispute this rendering, it is supported by Kimchi, Lowth, Boothroyd, and others. The comments of Benjamin Wills Newton are most helpful: "it must be very strongly stated that the commencing Hebrew word ('it was exacted') indicates that the suffering was the result of judicial infliction from the hand of God; because He who so suffered stood as one who had voluntarily undertaken to bear penalties which the Law of God 'exacted.' The word (nagas) indicated not merely oppression, but oppression that was the result of a demand. It means to have payment of a debt sternly executed, and is thus used in Deuteronomy 15:2,3, 'Every creditor that lendeth ought to his neighbour shall (on the seventh year) release it; he shall not EXACT it of his neighbour or his brother, because the Lord's release hath been proclaimed. Of a foreigner thou mayest EXACT it again, etc.'" ('Thoughts on the Whole Prophecy of Isaiah', pages 265,266).

6) It is said that Christ became "a curse for us" (Galatians 3:13). Since the curse of the Law was the penalty of sin (Deuteronomy 27:26; Galatians 3:10), this can only mean that He was charged with sin and was judged as if He was a sinner - although, of course, He Himself knew no sin (see: 2 Corinthians 5:21). Luther calls it "most sweet doctrine and full of comfort", that "Christ being made a curse for us (that is, a sinner subject to the wrath of God), did put upon him our

person, and laid our sins upon his shoulders...", and it is "because he had taken upon him our sins, not by constraint, but of his own good will, (that) it behoved him to bear the punishment and wrath of God." ('Commentary on Galatians', page 275).

7) The fact that His death was a "ransom" (Matthew 20:28; 1 Timothy 2:6; cf. Romans 3:24; Ephesians 1:7) shows that the sinner's freedom has been bought by the payment of a required price. Christ paid the price, an equivalent for the sins of men (1 Peter 1:18,19; Revelation 5:9). In his classic work, 'The Atonement and Intercession of Christ', William Symington concludes, "The passages, thus, without controversy, prove the fact that salvation is effected by the blood or death of the Lord Jesus Christ, which is offered to and accepted of by God, as a perfect satisfaction, a proper equivalent for the sins of such as are made partakers of redemption. They are not their own, but BOUGHT WITH A PRICE. Can anything more distinctly express the idea of satisfaction, which is just the idea of atonement?" (pages 185,186).

8) There is no doubt that God inflicted "chastisement" or "punishment" upon Christ (Isaiah 53:5,10; Zechariah 13:7). God "condemned sin in the flesh" (Romans 8:4). "The punishment which God meted out to Christ was the very punishment which was due to his people. (Arthur Pink, 'The Atonement',

page 93). Pink proceeds to quote Dr. John Brown: "To the enlightened eye, there is found on the cross another inscription, besides that which Pilate ordered to be written there: The Victim of Guilt. The Wages of sin" (ibid.)

9) Our salvation was brought about by "reconciliation". Satisfaction was rendered to God, the offended party, whose justice must be fully met; and as a result of this, His most righteous displeasure with us on account of sin has been removed (Romans 5:10; Colossians 1:20; Romans 3:25; 1 John 2:2; 4:10). After a most learned treatment on "propitiation" (the averting of the divine wrath), Dr. Leon Morris makes this telling point: "The Scripture is clear that the wrath of God is visited on sinners or else that the Son of God dies for them. Either sinners are punished for their misdoings or else there takes place what Hodgson calls 'that self-punishment which combines the activities of punishing and forgiving.' Either we die or He dies. 'But God commendeth his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us' (Romans 5:8)" ('The Apostolic Preaching of the Cross', page 213).

10) The nature of Christ's death can only really be understood in terms of penal substitution. His was no ordinary anguish and pain. His was no ordinary death. In the Gospels we are told that He 'began to be sore amazed (literally, 'to be in horror'), and to be very heavy ('extremely distressed'), and he said to his disciples,

'My soul is exceeding sorrowful ('environed with grief') unto death' (Mark 14:33-35). Again, we read, 'Being in an agony ('at strife' i.e. engaged in a terrible conflict) he prayed more earnestly: and his sweat was as it were great drops of blood falling to the ground' (the extreme anguish of His mind forcing the blood through the pores of His skin) (Luke 22:44). Then upon mount Calvary He uttered that truly awful and most pitiful cry, 'My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?' (Matthew 27:46) Turretin says, "Such things can have no other adequate cause except in vindicatory justice demanding from Christ a most full satisfaction for us" (op.cit, pages 434,435). A scripture comes to mind: "Is it nothing to you all ye that pass by? behold, and see if there be any sorrow like unto my sorrow, which is done unto me, wherewith the Lord hath afflicted me in the day of his fierce anger" (Lamentations 1:12).

Contrary to what Steve Chalke alleges, penal substitution is not a theory of the Atonement. It is the Atonement. And if a sinner rejects it, he rejects nothing more or less than the salvation of God.