

Can We Crucify Penal Substitutionary Atonement?

A sermon on 1 John 4:7-21 by Nathan Nettleton, 2 May 2021

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Message

If we want to understand how Jesus saves us and what Jesus saves us from, we are going to have to abandon the most widely taught explanation.

Sermon

I'm intending to slaughter a sacred cow tonight. There is a particular belief which has become so widespread in the church, especially among us evangelicals, that many people now find it impossible to think any other way. At the same time, it has become a real problem, a stumbling block for many people. In our guts we know that it feels all wrong, and yet we have often been taught that you either believe it, or you're on the fast track to hell.

I want to tackle it head on tonight, and to assure you that if you are one of those who feels queasy about it, you are probably right to do so. Not only is it not the only permissible way to think about God and our relationship with God, but it probably isn't a helpful way to think at all. Perhaps it is an ugly heresy.

The reason I want to tackle it tonight is that I'm betting that some of you are sure you heard it in at least one of tonight's readings. It has become so dominant, that we keep thinking we are hearing it in our Bibles even though it's not there. In our reading from the first letter of John, we heard the Apostle say, "In this is love, not that we loved God but that God loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins."

"God sent his Son, Jesus, to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins."

That probably doesn't mean what you have been taught to think it means, but it is very likely that you have been taught that you are not allowed to question it. You are, and you should, because the dominant understanding of it is sick, and its consequences have mostly been sick. Surveys have shown that support for the use of torture and the death penalty is higher among evangelical Christians than it is among the general population, and I think that that can almost certainly be traced to our dominant understanding of what it means to say that God sent Jesus to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins.

The dominant teaching is so dominant that to many people, it simply *is* the gospel. Ask them what the gospel is, and they'll give you some version of this. It goes something like this. God is outraged and disgusted by human sin. God is so angry over our sin that unless there is some way to make it up to God, God will cast us all into hell to be punished and tortured for all eternity. The only way out is for God's anger to be placated or appeased by the offering of a suitable sacrifice. It is commonly said that God can't just forgive, because justice must be served, and justice demands that the full price must be paid.

We know that feeling of wanting to see justice served by a price being paid. The other day, when the Porsche driver who taunted and filmed the police officers dying on the side of the freeway was sentenced, and the judge didn't lock him up and throw away the key, many people were angry and upset that he wasn't being made to pay like they thought he should.

But anyway, if it is a cast iron rule of the universe that there can be no forgiveness without an adequate price being paid, what could possibly be the price for the forgiveness of all the sins of the entire human race? God's justice and anger, so it is said, demand full price, and the only possible full price, other than torturing us all in hell for eternity, is the sacrificial death of one absolutely perfect human being in place of everyone else. Someone perfect and innocent who can step in as a substitute for us and be punished in our place. So Jesus comes as the one and only perfect human being, and is tortured to death on a cross so that the price will be paid and God's anger will be appeased, and God will be free to forgive us.

That's how the story goes, but it is probably crap. At the very least, it is just one speculative way of explaining how Jesus saves us, and there are many others, many of which are probably a lot more helpful.

Now before any of you panic that I have gone right off the rails, let me point out three obvious things. Firstly, that understanding of the way the sacrifice of Jesus works has absolutely no basis in anything Jesus ever taught. In fact Jesus explicitly said that God wants mercy, not sacrifice. So if Jesus says that God does not want sacrifice, how the hell did we get to teaching that God not only wants it, but demands it, and cannot forgive without it?

Secondly, that understanding of the way the sacrifice of Jesus works is not explicitly taught anywhere else in the Bible either. There certainly are verses that can be used to support it, but they are pretty much all circular arguments – you only see it there if you already believe it. Our verse from John's letter is a case in point. "God sent his Son, Jesus, to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins." If you've been raised believing that story of Jesus appeasing God's anger, that verse seems to capture it perfectly. But the verse doesn't actually say anything about who offers the sacrifice, who demands the sacrifice, or how the sacrifice works to atone for our sins. All that gets read into the verse. It is not found in it.

Thirdly, unlike much of the modern church, the early church did not regard it as important to believe a particular version of how Jesus saves us. We know that because not only did the early church fathers and mothers teach a multitude of explanations, but when the creeds were put together as summaries of the basic belief system that they regarded as important, they didn't include this or any other explanation of how Jesus saves us. The Nicene creed, which is a bit more expansive than the Apostles creed that we will sing shortly simply says:

For us and for our salvation
he came down from heaven,
was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary
and became truly human.
For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate;
he suffered death and was buried.
On the third day he rose again.

So it says that it was "for our salvation" that Jesus became human (that's his birth, not his death), and "for our sake" that he was crucified and died. But neither of the creeds demand belief in any particular theory of how that works. It is therefore, in the eyes of the early Christian leaders, something that you are officially free to explain in a multitude of ways, as they did.

So don't panic. You are allowed to question this stuff. And you should. So let's look firstly at what's wrong with this dominant understanding, and then we'll look for a more helpful and biblical understanding of what Jesus has done and is doing for us.

Let's give it a name before we go anywhere else. This dominant theory goes by the name of "penal substitutionary atonement". Penal, in that it is about a system of punishments for wrongdoing. Substitutionary, in that Jesus steps in as a substitute to take the punishment in place of those who actually deserved it. And atonement, in that Jesus doing this is said to atone for our sins by placating God's anger and winning God's favour. There are more problems with this theory of penal substitutionary atonement than I'm going to be able to cover in one short sermon, but I'll try to give you the most important points.

Firstly, there is a little linguistic problem right here with this word "atonement", and it comes up in our reading from John's letter. John describes Jesus as an "atoning sacrifice". What does "atoning" or "atonement" mean? It is one of those words whose meaning has changed, and it has changed precisely because this theory of penal substitutionary atonement has been read into back it. The word originally meant what it sounds like if you break it down at-one-ment. A process of making us "at one". So really, it means exactly the same thing as reconciliation. But now, because of the dominance of this questionable theory, we hear atonement as meaning paying a price, probably in blood, to appease someone. The shift of meaning has prejudiced how we hear these passages of scripture.

The most obvious problem with this theory of penal substitutionary atonement is that it literally does horrendous violence to our understanding of God.

It starts by insisting that God cannot forgive unless justice is first satisfied, but then it asks us to believe that God's justice can be satisfied in a way that we instinctively know is not the least bit just. Let's go back to that Porsche driver in court the other day. So a lot of people feel that justice was not served, because he was not made to pay sufficiently. So let's imagine that the judge, on hearing that people weren't happy with his verdict, was to say, "OK, so I got it wrong, and really a bigger price should be paid. So I'll tell you what, folks. I've got a daughter who is really lovely. She studies hard at school, volunteers for community service on the weekends, and never says a bad word about anyone. So how about I hand her over to you all, and you can take out your anger at the Porsche driver on her. Punish my daughter the way you would have liked to see him punished. That way justice will be served and all of you will be fully satisfied and all will be right with the world."

How do you think that would go? What sort of conclusions do you think we would draw about the psychological and emotional health of a judge who would seriously propose that? Do you think we'd all be on our knees thanking the wise judge for such a wonderful demonstration of love and justice? Or do you think we might actually feel insulted and offended that anyone might think we were the kind of people who would regard that as justice and be appeased by the suffering of the innocent daughter?

But that is what this theory asks us to believe about God. It makes God out to be an angry, vengeful, bloodthirsty monster who cannot and will not forgive unless he gets his pound of flesh, literally, and who doesn't care who he gets it from; in fact the more innocent they are, the better he likes it. That's so wrong it is surely heresy. No wonder it makes you feel a bit queasy. Jesus taught us to be perfect as our Father in heaven is perfect. But as soon as we try

to translate this penal substitutionary stuff into our own penal systems, we can see that we are disgusted at the mere thought of it.

And think about what it does to our understanding of the relationship between Jesus and God the Father. The Apostle Paul told us that Jesus is the exact likeness of the invisible God (Colossians 1:15), 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 would be quite willing to torture you in hell for eternity. Jesus is the merciful and compassionate one who has to try to come up with something to make the angry Father change his mind. "If I get rejected and despised, will that satisfy you? No, you want me to be killed too? A quick clean death maybe? No, you want a slow death by crucifixion? Is that all? No, you want scourging with whips and a barbed wire crown as well? Is that it? Maybe a spear in the side and being insulted and mocked by everyone around? Maybe a Porsche driver standing there, pissing at the foot of the cross and posting his footage of my dying breathes on social media? OK, whatever you need Father."

Are you starting to see why support for torture and capital punishment might be higher among those who think that this is the picture of the kind of God they are supposed to follow?

The basic fatal flaw in the theory of penal substitutionary atonement is actually a lot simpler, but less dramatic than these things. It is that the whole theory depends on the assertion that God cannot just forgive sin, because justice demands that the price must be paid. Says who? Who set this standard of justice that allegedly binds God's hands? Is there someone higher still making rules and imposing them on God? If Jesus is the definitive revelation of who God is, then this is a God who calls us to forgive others as we would wish to be forgiven, and who asks us to renounce the desire for retribution, to give up on an-eye-for-an-eye, and to love our enemies. So where does this idea come from that God is bound by a compulsory standard of retributive justice, but asks us to violate it and forgive freely?

It is actually the same kind of mistake that our reading from John's letter was warning us against. When John said, "In this is love, not that we loved God but that God loved us and sent his Son," it is saying that we shouldn't imagine that we know what love is and then impose our definition on God. It is God's actions that define love. Similarly, any theory that comes up with some human definition of justice, and then claims that God's hands are tied by our theory, is barking up the wrong tree.

So if penal substitutionary atonement is not the gospel, what is the good news? What does it mean to say that Jesus came to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins? Well, as I've already suggested, in the Bible and in the teachings of the early church, there are numerous ways of answering those questions. The gospel, the good news, is the story of Jesus coming among us for us and for our salvation. It's the story, not a theory about how it works. But I'm not trying to dodge the question, because it is good question, so let's return to our reading from John's letter.

If you were to ask from this reading what John thinks the gospel is, the answer would surely be love. In the fifteen verses we heard tonight, John uses the words for love 27 times. Love is from God. God is love. God loved us and sent his Son. If we love one another, God lives in us

and God's love is perfected in us. Perfect love casts out fear. We love because God first loved us. Love. Love. Love.

Sure, say the advocates of penal substitutionary atonement, but God is both love and anger. Offend against God's justice, and you'll see another side of God. Bullshit, says the Apostle John. There is no "other side" of God. God is not two-faced. Back in the opening section of this letter, John spelled it out perfectly clearly: "This is the message we have heard from Jesus and proclaim to you, that God is light and in him there is no darkness at all." (1 John 1:5) So there is John's summary of the gospel. Nothing to do with anyone needing to be punished. "God is light and in God there is no darkness at all. It's all love, love, love." And in case it is not clear, in tonight's extract we heard him say, (v.18) "There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love." There you have it clear as day: the gospel has got nothing to do with fear of punishment. Fear of punishment, which is so central to the penal substitutionary atonement theory, is a consequence of not grasping the gospel which is all about love.

But, I hear you ask, what then does it mean to say that Jesus saves us and is an atoning sacrifice for our sins? I'm glad you asked. Again there is no one correct answer, but multiple ways of thinking about it, most of them far more helpful than this abhorrent theory that seems to have suppressed all the others.

But the first difficulty we have in answering the question any other way is having to cut ourselves free of the baggage that this abhorrent theory leaves us with. So when we ask how Jesus saves us, our first question should be "what is he saving us from?" But that horrible theory has been so dominant that we forget to ask the question and just assume the theory's answer: that Jesus comes to save us from an angry God who will otherwise torture us for eternity. Jesus never said that, and the creeds don't say that.

So why don't we imagine the more obvious possibility, the possibility that is much more consistent with what Jesus said and did, and that is that Jesus comes to save us, not from something that might happen after we die, but from the mess the world is in right now. If God is love, love and more love, then surely what God would badly want to save us from is our current, immediate predicament. God wants to save us from our current death-spiral into self-destruction.

So in what way is Jesus an atoning sacrifice for our sins, and how does that have anything to do with saving us from a world that is killing itself? Once again we have trouble extracting the concept of sacrifice from that ugly theory. You see, the understanding of sacrifice in that theory does not come from Jesus at all. It comes from pagan religions like the Aztecs who practiced human sacrifice.

If things were going badly wrong in their world, some of these old pagan societies would decide that the anger of the volcano god needed to be appeased, and so they would select a suitable virgin and take her up and throw her into the mouth of the volcano as a sacrifice to bring peace. I've even heard Christian preachers explicitly use that as an illustration of how the death of Jesus works. Talk about pagan theology! But you can hardly blame them when this ugly theory has been so dominant. We hear the word sacrifice in a religious context, and we immediately picture humans killing someone to make an angry god happy.

But put it in another context, and we hear other things. When people were talking about sacrifice on Anzac Day last week, no one thought it meant casting virgins into the volcano. And no one thought it had anything to do with appeasing angry gods. Instead, we had images of self-sacrifice, of people putting their own lives on the line in a struggle for freedom and peace. So what would happen if we heard that kind of image of sacrifice when we talked about Jesus?

Then Jesus becomes like the one who walks willingly into the midst of the hatred and hostility and throws himself between us and the shooters who are intent on killing as many as they can. You want a theory of substitutionary sacrifice? There it is. Jesus takes the bullet that otherwise had your name on it. But the bullet wasn't being fired by God. The violent anger that Jesus is walking into is entirely human. It is our raging sin. Jesus is a sacrifice for our sin because he walks straight in and takes the full force of our sin in his own body in his quest to open our eyes to the unconditional love of God and to set us free from the sin that is consuming us right here, right now.

So how does that save us? Again we have to cut ourselves free of the baggage. Salvation is not a transaction, a pay-off. If a firefighter rushes into a burning building to rescue you, she doesn't come and offer a good deal on life insurance for the future. She comes to lead you to safety right now.

Jesus saves us by coming among us and calling us to follow him to safety; to follow him on the road to life in all its fullness, a life free of retribution and vengeance and hatred. Jesus never told anyone that they had to believe that he died on the cross to buy them forgiveness from God's anger. Instead he called people who wanted to be saved to simply follow him. And when human sin did what it always does and turned on the one who steps into the middle of the fight, and killed him, he got right back up, a dead man who was more alive than anyone, and kept on walking and kept on calling us to follow him away from our addictions to eye-for-an-eye punitive justice systems, and away from our addictions to angry honour and retaliatory vengeance, and away from our self-destructive greed and selfishness, away from it all and on into the saving embrace of the God in whom there is no darkness at all, the God who is love, love, and more love. The fierce and tender love that casts out all fear and sets us free for life in all its fullness.