“How can a perfectly just God pardon guilty sinners?” This question seeks to understand the relationship of atonement and justice, that is, the means by which God wipes away our sin in a way that is consistent with his perfect justice. My central argument is that the Biblical relationship of atonement and justice is primarily based on the principle of Restitution for the innocent, and not Retribution for the guilty. Accordingly, it is not that God satisfies His retributive justice in Jesus’ crucifixion by punishing Jesus in place of sinful humanity, but rather that God satisfies His restorative justice through Jesus’ resurrection as the reversal and restitution of Jesus’ unjust suffering and death on the cross. I will defend this Restitution based model against the Retribution based model (Penal Substitution) because I believe they are mutually exclusive, and we must make a decision as to which model we will subscribe.

Adopting a Restitution-based atonement requires us to reject the popular theory of Penal Substitution (PS), which is a good thing. First of all, the Restitution model is more faithful to the Bible. Furthermore, I do not think that PS has a good defense against the charges that it depicts Cosmic Child Abuse or Displaced Aggression, nor does it escape the depiction of God as a God who punishes simply for punishment’s sake (I affirm that God actively punishes sinners, my disagreement with PS is over the *purpose* of God’s active punishments). Penal Substitution is also insufficient to solve the problem of sin, for even if Jesus’ death eliminates the penalty for sin, the problem with sin is much greater than the penalty it incurs, for even if God never lifted a finger to actively punish sin, sin itself would still destroy sinners. The Restitution model avoids these issues, and emphasizes important things PS overlooks, such as the self-destructive nature of sin, the death of Jesus at the hands of humans, the fulfillment of God’s covenantal promises in Jesus’ resurrection, and the necessity of our participation in Jesus’ death and resurrection by undergoing a death and resurrection ourselves. In terms of Church history, nothing in the Restitution model is new, weird, or even outside the Reformed tradition; in many ways I am simply re-articulating the *Christus Victor* model in legal/covenantal terms. So here we go:

Biblical justice has two priorities: Restitution for the innocent (Num 5:6), and Retribution for the guilty (Lev 24:17-22, the “lex talionis”). Restitution is the reparation of damages suffered by offended parties, often with compensation greater than the damages done (when I say Restitution I do not mean “payment” so much as restoration as a priority of Justice). Retribution is the return of the sinner’s own sin upon the sinner’s own head. As Paul summarizes in 2 Thess 1:6, “it is just (Justice) for God to repay with affliction those who afflict you (Retribution) and to give relief to you who are afflicted (Restitution).”

Reformed theology has emphatically built its sequence of atonement logic on the principle of Retribution: Humanity has sinned against God, a being of infinite worth, so justice demands Retribution upon Humanity commensurate with this offense i.e. infinite punishment in hell. God desires to save sinners from this fate, but He cannot compromise His justice, so the question is: how can a just God save Humanity from the punishment they deserve? Answer: God becomes a human in the person of Jesus and goes to the cross to suffer God’s Retribution in place of Humanity. Due to His perfect righteousness and divinity, Jesus is a being of infinite worth, so He can satisfy the Retributive demands of Humanity’s offense to God, thus freeing Humanity from having to suffer infinite punishment in hell. Salvation is from the wrath of God, accomplished because Jesus has satisfied His wrath on the cross, in our place, as our substitute. God satisfies His own wrath by providing Himself with a substitute sacrifice in Jesus Christ. Penal substitution.

But let us compare the priorities of Restitution and Retribution. If an offended party were given a choice between Restitution and Retribution, which would they choose? Say Bill gouges out your eye. Would you rather have (a) Retribution without Restitution, that Bill lose an eye but you still see the world in 2-D for the rest of your life, or (b) Restitution without Retribution, that you get your eye back good as new, but Bill does not lose an eye? I have asked this question to many people, PS advocates included, and everyone has chosen (b): Restitution without Retribution. It seems that Restitution is more desirable than Retribution. Certain verses indicate that Restitution is even the preference of God Himself, for He asks rhetorically in Ezekiel 18:23, “Do I have any pleasure in the death of the wicked, rather than that he should turn from his ways and live?” and answers in verse 32, “I have no pleasure in the death of anyone who dies, therefore, repent and live.” God would rather have the Restitution of the broken sinner than his ultimate Retribution.

Quick side note: many PS advocates would suggest that Humanity’s sin damages God’s honor, and His Retribution on Humanity somehow *does* accomplish the Restitution of His damaged honor. I’ll consider this objection later, but in a nutshell: sin does not damage God’s honor (until the cross).

If Restitution is the first priority of justice, then it follows that we should build our sequence of atonement logic on the principle of Restitution rather than Retribution. Doing so gives us a summary like this:

Due to God’s gracious covenant, justice requires Restitution for destruction suffered by innocent parties. Humans have totally and severely destroyed themselves by their own sin (God is not damaged by our sin. In the case of sin against God, sin is an offense that is to the destruction of the offender). God desires to enact Restitution for this destruction, but Humans are not innocent, they are guilty. There is none righteous, not one. So the question is: How can a just God, a covenant God, enact Restitution for guilty Humanity’s self-destruction? Answer: God becomes a Human in the person of Jesus Christ, lives completely innocently (or righteously) and therefore merits the covenantal blessings by which Humanity’s destruction will be restored. Jesus then voluntarily endures all of Humanity’s sinful destruction against himself by suffering crucifixion at the hands of all Humans on the cross. Jesus therefore merits Restitution for all of Humanity’s sinful destruction, for he alone has suffered sin’s destruction as an innocent party. This Restitution manifests in His resurrection, when “God raised our Great Shepherd up from the dead through the blood of the eternal covenant (Heb 13:20).” So the correct response to the question “Why did Jesus die?” is: in order for all suffering and death to be repaired by God, all suffering and death had to be endured by a perfectly innocent and righteous person (for only innocent persons have the right of restitution for wrongs suffered) and only Jesus qualifies as that perfectly righteous person.

Divine Justice is therefore satisfied in the Resurrection as the reversal and reparation of all the sin that Jesus unjustly suffered on the cross. Jesus dies under the unjust judgment of Humans, and is raised by the just judgment of God. **Jesus’ reward, or inheritance, of the covenantal blessings applies to the rest of Humanity if by the power of the Holy Spirit we participate in His death (through remorse) and participate in His resurrection (through repentance)** (?). So the gospel is not that “God substituted Himself to satisfy His own wrath,” which is not Biblical terminology. The gospel is exactly what Paul says it is: “the good news that God has fulfilled His promises to our children in that He raised Jesus up from the dead (Acts 13:30).” The gospel is that God’s covenantal promises to *restore the world* from Adam’s curse (the subject of the Old Testament) are fulfilled in Jesus’ resurrection (the subject of the New Testament).

But how exactly do the merits of Jesus’ death and resurrection apply to us? **We participate in Jesus’ death through remorse for our sin. An offender feels remorse when he puts himself in his victim’s shoes and in an internal sense (mental/emotional) suffers his own offense against himself as his victim suffered it. It is through this act of remorse that an offender apologizes to his victim**. (?) Notice also that this remorse is actually a type of retribution, that is, a suffering of one’s own sin against oneself, but in the internal sense rather than merely the external sense of enduring punishment. Remorse is what the cross should cause in us. When we look to the cross, we the offenders should put ourselves in the shoes of our victim, Jesus, and suffer (in an internal sense) our crucifixion of him as crucifixion of our sinful selves. We are then “crucified with Christ (Gal 2:20)” and have “died with Christ (Rom 6:8)” and our sin is “condemned in the flesh (Rom 8:3). When we participate in Jesus’ death in this way, Jesus is then able to cover our death with His. His unjust death, which merits restitution in His resurrection, covers our guilty death, which was our just retribution for our sin. We therefore participate in His resurrection, which is the just restoration of the sinful destruction we have wrought upon Jesus and ourselves.

I will defend this Restitution-based-view in 5 steps:

1. Table of distinctions between the Penalty Substitution view and the Restitution view
2. Biblical arguments against a vicarious punishment interpretation of the sacrificial system
3. Historical arguments in support of the Resurrection as the satisfaction of divine justice
4. 5 Philosophical arguments that “satisfaction of wrath” is not a requirement of Biblical justice
5. Brief refutations of 5 verses often cited in support of Penal Substitution

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| PENAL SUBSTITUTION | RESTITUTION |
| Sin damages God’s honor. This injury to His honor is why God hates sin. | Sin damages sinners. When we disobey God, we injure ourselves. God hates sin because it destroys His creatures and His creation, which He loves. In the case of human sin against God, the offense is damaging to the offender. |
| Sin is a problem for Humanity because it warrants a destructive response from God. | Sin is a problem for Humanity because sin itself is destructive to self, to others, and to creation. |
| God’s wrath is the primary obstacle between Humanity and God, and the primary reason why Jesus had to go to the cross. | Human sin is the primary obstacle between Humanity and God, and the primary reason why Jesus went to the cross. |
| God achieves restitution (repairs) His damaged honor by exercising punishment, or exhausting His wrath, on sinners. | God achieves restitution for His damaged creation by recreating the world through the power of Jesus’ resurrection. |
| The first priority of Justice is retribution on the guilty for breaking the law. | The first priority of Justice is restitution for damages done to the innocent. |
| Justice is an obstacle to salvation because we have violated God’s law and are deserving of God’s Retributive destruction | Justice is an obstacle to salvation because we are destroying ourselves in sin and we are *undeserving* of God’s Restitution for our destruction |
| Jesus’ death on the cross was payment of man’s debt of *punishment* for sin. | There is no such thing as a “debt of punishment.” Jesus’ death on the cross was payment of man’s debt of *love* for sin, for sin creates a debt of love. |
| Jesus’ crucifixion was punishment by God for our retribution. | Jesus’ crucifixion was payment to God for our restitution. Payment and punishment are not the same. Jesus paid the cost necessary to repair our brokenness in sin. |
| God punished and killed Jesus on the cross. Jesus suffered and died under the wrath of God. | We sinners tortured and killed Jesus on the cross. Jesus suffered and died under all of Humanity’s sin. |
| Jesus’ suffering on the cross was just, because He became a guilty sinner when all of our sin was imputed to him. | Jesus’ suffering on the cross was unjust, because He was innocent and righteous. |
| God’s justice was satisfied in the crucifixion. | God’s justice was violated in the crucifixion, and satisfied in the resurrection. |
| Jesus died so we won’t have to die. Jesus was crucified so we wont be crucified. | Jesus died so we can die in Him (and resurrect in Him). Jesus was crucified so that we can be crucified with Him, so that it is no longer we who live, but He who lives in us. |
| Jesus suffered and died in order to exhaust the retribution that our sin’s deserved. | Jesus suffered and died to win the right of restitution for sin and death through the power of His resurrection. |
| Propitiation means wrath *exhaustion*, and it is achieved by providing the offended party with someone other than the guilty party on which to exercise retribution for the offense. | Propitiation means wrath *aversion* (wrath not exercised), and is achieved by providing the offended party with the means of restitution for the offense. |
| Wrath, or punishment, atones for sin. | Love atones for sin. Proverbs 16:6 “By lovingkindness and truth iniquity is atoned for.” |
| The good news of the gospel is that Jesus has suffered God’s wrath for sin in our place, so that we are free from having to face the wrath of God. | The good news of the gospel is that God’s covenantal promises to restore and renew His destroyed creation have been secured by Jesus’ righteousness and fulfilled by His resurrection, and offered to us through the Holy Spirit. |
| The content of salvation is avoiding death and the wrath of God. | The content of salvation is not avoiding death. We die. The content of salvation is resurrection from death. |
| Salvation is essentially by forensic imputation, when our sin is transferred to Jesus in exchange for His righteousness | Salvation is essentially by *participation* in the death and resurrection of Jesus. |
| The Scriptural “dualism” is between God’s grace and God’s wrath. God’s grace saves, and His wrath damns. The glory of God is in the contrast between the two. | The Scriptural “dualism” is between God’s grace (which includes His wrath) and Humanity’s sin. *God’s grace and His wrath are both salvific*, and damnation is the result of Humanity’s sinful resistance of God’s saving will. (?) |
| The glory of God is in the contrast between His attributes of mercy and wrath. | The glory of God is in the love for Himself that exists within the Trinity. (?) |

**II – Biblical arguments against the vicarious punishment interpretation of the sacrificial system**

My argument here is that the Biblical sacrificial system does not depict a vicarious punishment transaction. In other words, I believe it is very hard to defend that the sacrificial victim is provided to be the guilty party’s alternate vessel to bear punishment from the offended party. *The main reason for this is that the Bible consistently depicts a sacrificial system in which the sinner/offender himself is the one that slays his sacrifice*; it is not the offended party or a representative of the offended party that slays the sacrifice. It is more likely that the sinner’s act of slaying the animal demonstrates that the animal dies under the sinner’s sin itself, not under the punishment for the sinner’s sin. I will reference the Passover, Ritual Sacrifices, the Cross, and the Apostolic preaching of the cross in Acts to support this view.

**The Israelites slay the Passover Lamb:** In the Passover, it is not God that kills the sacrificial lamb, it is the Israelites themselves that slaughter the lamb. On a vicarious punishment system, we should expect the Israelites to tie the lamb outside the house for the night in expectation that God (or His “destroyer”) would come by and kill the lamb instead of the firstborn of the household. But this is not what happens. Instead, the Israelites themselves, the sinners in need of redemption, slay the Passover lamb. The blood of the lamb then averts the wrath of God when He comes by, but the function of the lamb is *not* to bear or exhaust the wrath of God in place of the Israelites. I affirm that the death of the animal is necessary to avert (turn away) the wrath of God, but it is obviously not the wrath of God that actually causes the death of the animal. Nor is there a one-to-one correspondence between the slain lamb of the Israelites and the slain firstborn of the unrepentant Egyptians. Those unrepentant Egyptian families who lose their firstborn under the wrath of God do not then get to participate in the Exodus. So those Egyptian families which *do* provide God with a vessel upon which to exercise His wrath do not have redemption, whereas those Israelite families which *do not* provide God with a vessel on which to exercise wrath do have redemption. Providing God with a vessel upon which to exercise wrath does not secure redemption. These are important pieces of data in articulating a Biblical definition of “propitiation.” Modern Penal Substitution advocates define propitiation as “wrath satisfying” or “wrath exhausting,” but the Biblical data indicates that propitiation simply means “wrath averting” without any exercise or outpouring of this wrath.

We can state the argument formally in this way:

1. The Passover lamb is a propitiatory sacrifice
2. God’s wrath is averted by the blood of the Passover lamb
3. God does not exercise or exhaust wrath on the Passover lamb
4. In the Bible, propitiation means “wrath averting,” but does not mean "wrath exhausting”

In many ways, the Passover and the Exodus were the gospel story of the Old Testament, the story of God’s mighty act of redemption to save His people. But the Old Testament Jews never would have included as part of this story, “God punished (or satisfied His wrath) on the Passover lamb instead of us.” If Old Testament Jews would not have thought this, then New Testament Christians should not believe that God punished or exhausted wrath upon “Christ our Passover (1 Cor 5:7).” More on propitiation footnoted.[[1]](#footnote-1)

**Sinner’s Slay the Ritual Sacrifices:** The ritual sacrifices in Leviticus also fail to communicate vicarious punishment, for a similar reason: the sinner himself, and not a representative of the offended party, slays a ritual sacrifice. If a ritual sacrifice was supposed to communicate vicarious punishment, we might expect that the priest would be the one to slay the sacrifice, as a demonstration of God’s wrath punishing the animal instead of the sinner. But this is not what happens. It is always the sinner himself that slays the sacrifice, before the anointed priest sprinkles the blood. See the following ten examples from those sacrifices that deal with sin: In a Burnt Offering (Lev 1:5, 1:11) the sinner slays the sacrifice. In a Peace Offering (Lev 3:2, 3:4, 3:13) the sinner slays the sacrifice. In a Sin Offering (Lev 4:4, 4:14, 4:24, 4:29, 4:33) the sinner slays the sacrifice. The priest slays the animal if it is a corporate sacrifice, on behalf of the congregation (of which he is a member), and he does this after slaying a sacrifice for his own sins. When the priest slays a sacrifice on behalf of the congregation, he does so as a representative of Israel, a community of sinners. Recall that he is wearing the mantle with the emblems of the twelve tribes on it. The priest slays the animal as a representative of sinners in need of redemption, not as a representative of the one offended by sin.

So I think it is hard to defend that it is an act of punishment that kills a ritual sacrifice to satisfy the wrath of the offended party. Rather, I think the act of slaying the animal is an act of remorse. The sinner must experience the costly reality of sin, that sin destroys God’s unblemished creation. The ultimate example of this costly reality is the cross, in which human sin goes so far as to destroy the incarnate Son of God.

**Crucifixion:** In the event of the crucifixion we see that it is not God raining down fire and brimstone on Jesus, it is very clearly sinful men that are torturing and killing him. *Jesus suffers and dies directly under the sins of sinners.* In the sacrifice that gives all the other sacrifices in the Bible their meaning, sinners slay the sacrifice. The wrath of God does not slay the sacrifice. The literal wrath of God is at Jesus’ disposal, as he can call down legions of angels on his torturers in order to save Himself, and he does not do it. He *averts* the wrath of God when he says, “Father forgive them, for they know not what they do (Luke 23:34),” which gives us the ultimate referent for the Biblical definition of propitiation.

**Apostolic Preaching of the Cross:** This theme of sinners slaying sacrifices continues in the book of Acts. When the Apostles preach the cross and resurrection, they always attribute the death of Jesus to the hands of sinners, and attribute the resurrection to the hand of God. The logic is, “Sinners killed him, but God raised him.” The Apostles never say, “God punished Jesus.” See the following nine verses:

Acts 2:23, Peter says, “this Man (Jesus), delivered over by the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God, you nailed to a cross by the hands of lawless men and put Him to death, but God raised Him up again*,* putting an end to the birth pains of death, since it was impossible for Him to be held in its power.” The logic is: you lawless men nailed Jesus to a cross, but God raised him from the dead. The fact that Jesus was delivered over by the predetermined plan of God is not sufficient reason to think, “God punished Jesus.” Suffering that happens according to the plan and foreknowledge of God need not be penal suffering.

2:36, Peter says again, “Therefore let all the house of Israel know for certain that God has made Him both Lord and Messiah—this Jesus whom you crucified.” You (sinners) crucified Jesus, but God raised him from the dead and made him Lord and Messiah.

3:14-15, Peter says, “But you disowned the Holy And Righteous One and asked for a murderer to be granted to you, but put to death the Prince of life, whom God raised from the dead, a fact to which we are all witnesses.” Again: you (sinners) disowned and put to death the Holy and Righteous Prince of Life, but God raised him from the dead.

4:10, Peter says, “let it be known to all of you and to all the people of Israel, that by the name of Jesus Christ the Nazarene, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead—by this name this man stands here before you in good health.” You sinners crucified Jesus, but God raised him from the dead.

4:26 Peter and John say, “’*The Kings of the earth took their stand, and the rulers were gathered together Against the Lord and against His Christ”* (Ps 2:2) For truly in this city were gathered together against Your holy Son Jesus, whom You anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the people of Israel, to do whatever Your hand and Your purpose predestined to occur. And now, Lord, take note of their threats. And grant that Your bond-servants may speak Your word with all confidence, while You extend Your hand to heal, and signs and wonders to take place through the name of Your holy servant Jesus.” Kings, rulers, Herod, Pilate, Gentiles, and Israelites put the holy Son, Jesus, to death. But God extends His hand to heal sinners through Jesus.

5:30, Peter and the Apostles say, “The God of our fathers raised up Jesus, whom you had put to death by hanging Him on a cross.” You sinners hung Jesus on a cross, but God raised him up.

7:51-53, Stephen says, “Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? They killed those who had previously announced the coming of the Righteous One, whose betrayers and murderers you have now become; you who received the law as ordained by angels, and did not keep it.” Betrayers and murderers killed the Righteous One, just as betrayers murdered the prophets before Him.

10:39, Peter says, “We are witnesses of all the things He did both in the land of the Jews and in Jerusalem. They also put Him to death by hanging Him on a cross. God raised him up on the third day and granted that He become visible.” Sinners crucified Jesus, but God raised him from the dead.

13:28, Paul says, “And though [those in Jerusalem] found no ground for putting Him to death, they asked Pilate that He be destroyed . . . But God raised Him from the dead.” Sinners put Jesus to death, though they had no grounds for putting him to death, but God raised Him from the dead.

From the Passover, to the Levitical sacrificial system, through the event of the crucifixion and to the Apostolic preaching of the cross, we have a consistent thread in which it is the sinners that slay sacrifices, and sinners that slay the ultimate sacrifice, Jesus Christ.

Thomas McCall, professor at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, states, “The pattern of gospel proclamation (in Acts) is clear and consistent: You killed him. But God raised him. We are witnesses. Repent and believe for the forgiveness of sins (*Forsaken*. P.122).” On Penal Substitution, Humanity’s problem is that they deserve punishment, and the positive reversal of fortune is that Jesus intercedes to die in our place to exhaust this punishment. *In Acts however, the problem is that human sin is so destructive that it has even led to the destruction of God’s incarnate Son, but the positive reversal of fortune is that God raises His Son from the dead as the catalyst for restoring the world* **and granting forgiveness of sin.** (?) The transition in the sequence of logic, the “but God,” is *not* “but God punished his own Son to satisfy His wrath so He would not have to satisfy it on us.” The transition is, “but God raised Jesus from the death which we inflicted upon him, and He grants us forgiveness of sins if we confess and repent.” The reversal of fortune that gives us hope for salvation is the resurrection. The fact that Jesus died is only good news because He rose from the dead. See Ephesians 2:1-6,

“And you were dead in your trespasses and sins, in which you formerly walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, of the spirit that is now working in the sons of disobedience. Among them we too all formerly lived in the lusts of our flesh, indulging the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, even as the rest.

But God, being rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, *even when we were dead in our transgressions, made us alive together with Christ* (by grace you have been saved), and raised us up with Him, and seated us with Him in the heavenlies in Christ Jesus.”

What is the problem? We are dead in our sins. It is not that we are deserving of death for our sins; no, the sentence has been carried out and *we are dead*. Not about to die, dead. Our doom is not impending; it is upon us. What is the solution? “But God made us alive together with Christ and raised us up with Him.” Jesus’ resurrection is the solution to the problem of sin and the positive reversal of our bad fortune.

**III – Historical defense of the Resurrection as the reversal of Jesus’ unjust death**

Again, my argument is that on the cross, Jesus suffers all of our sin’s destruction as an injustice, so that Justice will be “satisfied” by the restoration of all things through the power of His resurrection. Jesus dies under the unjust judgment of humans, and is raised by the just judgment of God. The idea that Justice demands the reversal of all that Jesus unjustly suffered through the power of his resurrection, is not new, weird, or outside the Reformed tradition. Theologians lay different emphases on *who* killed Jesus, whether it was the devil, the Law, or sinful humans, but there is agreement that Jesus’ death was an injustice that secured the just reversal of sin’s destruction by the power of the resurrection. This is commonly referred to as the *Christus Victor* model, which is not primarily about Jesus’ conflict with Satan, as is often assumed. The *Christus Victor* model is better stated as: “A hero suffers defeat by the villain in order to defeat the villain. The hero’s defeat by the villain is in fact the central means by which the hero defeats the villain.” Or put another way: “A villain condemns an innocent party, thereby condemning himself, and the innocent party is restored from condemnation.” If we look for this pattern in the Bible, we find it all over the place (Judah and Tamar, Joseph, Daniel, Esther, Jesus, Paul, to name a few). Note this is *not* the same as the ‘ransom to the devil’ idea, by which God owes the devil something that Jesus pays. I agree that God owes the devil nothing, and Jesus paid nothing to the devil in His death. Rather, Jesus’ death was payment to God of the love and righteousness that humans owe God.

Augustine, in the early 5th century, states that the cross is where the devil lost his right of death over Humanity because he unjustly killed the Son of God in whom there was no sin:

It is not then difficult to see that the [devil](http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/04764a.htm) was conquered, when he who was slain by Him rose again. It is something more, and more profound of comprehension, to see that the [devil](http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/04764a.htm) was conquered when he thought himself to have conquered, that is, when Christ was slain. For then that blood, since it was His who had no [sin](http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/14004b.htm) at all, was poured out for the remission of our [sins](http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/14004b.htm); *that, because the*[*devil*](http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/04764a.htm)*deservedly held those whom, as guilty of* [*sin*](http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/14004b.htm)*, he bound by the condition of death, he might deservedly loose them through Him, whom, as guilty of no*[*sin*](http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/14004b.htm)*, the punishment of death undeservedly affected.* The strong man was conquered by this righteousness, and bound with this chain, that his vessels might be spoiled, which with himself and his [angels](http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/01476d.htm) had been vessels of [wrath](http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/01489a.htm) while with him, and might be turned into vessels of mercy.[[2]](#footnote-2)

John Chrysostom in the 5th century agrees,

“It is as if Christ said, ‘Now shall a trial be held, and a judgment be pronounced. How and in what manner? He (the devil) smote the first man (Adam), because he found him guilty of sin; for it was through sin that death entered in. But he did not find any sin in Me; wherefore then did he fall on Me and give Me up to the power of death? . . . How is the world now judged in Me?’ It is as if it were said to the devil at a seat of judgment: ‘Thou didst smite them all, because thou didst find them guilty of sin; wherefore then didst thou smite Christ? Is it not evident that thou didst this wrongfully? Therefore the whole world shall become righteous through Him.’”[[3]](#footnote-3)

Anselm of Canterbury, in the 11th century, says this aspect is part of the popular view of atonement in his day. It is justice that sets Jesus free from death, not justice that kills Jesus:

“That God, in order to set mankind free, was obliged to act against the devil by justice rather than mighty power. We reason that thus the devil, having killed Him in whom there was no guilt deserving death and who was God, would justly lose the power which he used to have over sinners.”[[4]](#footnote-4)

Thomas Aquinas, in the 13th century, affirms this as well.

“[Christ's Passion](http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/11527b.htm) delivered us from the [devil](http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/04764a.htm), inasmuch as in [Christ's](http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/08374c.htm) [Passion](http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/11527b.htm) [the devil] exceeded the limit of power assigned him by [God](http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/06608a.htm), by conspiring to bring about [Christ's](http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/08374c.htm) death, Who, being sinless, did not deserve to die. Hence [Augustine](http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/02084a.htm) says (De Trin. xiii, cap. xiv): "The [devil](http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/04764a.htm) was vanquished by [Christ's](http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/08374c.htm) [justice](http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/08571c.htm): because, while discovering in Him nothing deserving of death, nevertheless he slew Him. And it is certainly just that the debtors whom he held captive should be set at liberty since they [believed](http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/02408b.htm) in Him whom the [devil](http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/04764a.htm) slew, though He was no debtor."

This loss of power by the devil is a Biblical idea, as Hebrews 2:14-15 states:

Therefore, since the children share in blood and flesh, [Jesus] Himself likewise also partook of the same, *that through death He might render powerless him who had the power of death, that is, the devil,* and might free those who through fear of death were subject to slavery all their lives.

And even Martin Luther, in the 16th century, applies the loss of rights to the Law rather than the devil:

“Thou hearest that Christ was caught in the bondage in which we all were held, was set under the Law, was a man full of all grace, righteousness, etc., full of life, yea, He was even the Life itself; now comes the Law and casts itself at Him and would deal with Him as with all other men. Christ sees this, lets the tyrant perform his will upon Him, lets the reproach of all guilt fall against Himself as one accursed, yea, bears the name that He Himself is the curse, and goes to suffer for this cause, dies, and is buried. Now, thinks the Law, He is overpowered; but it knew not that it had so grievously mistaken itself, and that it had condemned and throttled the Son of God; and *since it has now judged and condemned Him, who was guiltless and over whom it had no authority, it must in its turn be taken, and see itself made captive and crucified, and lose all its power, and lie under the feet of Him whom it had condemned*.”[[5]](#footnote-5)[[6]](#footnote-6)

When our Lord was roaming around Narnia in the form of a giant, magical, not-safe-yet-good lion, he said,

“when a willing victim who had committed no treachery was killed in a traitor’s stead, the Table would crack and Death itself would start working backward.” (it is interesting to think that if we read *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* through the lens of Penal Substitution, the White Witch would represent God the Father! I highly doubt this was Lewis’ intention in the allegory)

And even John Stott, a Penal Substitution advocate, agrees that the Resurrection was God’s reversal of man’s injustice:

“The resurrection was the divine reversal of the human verdict.”[[7]](#footnote-7)

The Bible emphasizes that sinners unjustly killed Jesus. The Early Church Fathers emphasized that the devil unjustly killed Jesus. Luther emphasized (at least in this quotation) that the Law unjustly killed Jesus. The common denominator here is that Jesus suffered death unjustly, so that by reversing this injustice through the power of Jesus’ resurrection, God could justly bring restoration to sinners that do deserve death, that God could be both “just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus” (Romans 3:26).

**IV - Philosophical arguments that Penal Substitution relies on a faulty conception of punishment**

I am not objecting to the clear Biblical depiction of God as a God of wrath. I understand, for many reasons, why guilty parties ought to be punished. But punishment loses these purposes when it is aimed at an innocent person, or any substitute, rather than the guilty persons. Even if we entertain the idea that our guilty status was imputed to Jesus, I do not see any point in pouring out wrath on a guilty status rather than a guilty person.

(A) “Satisfaction of wrath” as described in Penal Substitution is not a requirement of Biblical justice

If I gouge out your eye, I do not burden you with the obligation to gouge out someone’s eye. The Biblical principle of Retribution requires that I, the guilty party, lose an eye, but it does not require you, the offended party, to gouge one out. It would be unjust and pointless for you to gouge out the eye of anyone except for me. *Justice is not a balance of offenses*. Similarly, when Bob murders someone, he does not burden the Justice system with the obligation to kill someone; Bob burdens the Justice system with the obligation to kill Bob, the murderer. It would be unjust and pointless for Bob’s innocent brother, Mike, to go to the electric chair in place of Bob so that Bob could go free. According to common sense and according to the Bible, justice does not require that offended parties commit a commensurate offense to that which they have received. Yet the logic of Penal Substitution is organized around satisfying this exact obligation, an obligation that does not exist. On Penal Substitution, we have offended God’s infinite worth, and so God must answer this offense by pouring out an infinite degree of wrath. And so, a being of infinite worth, Jesus, absorbs this wrath in Humanity’s place. But the problem with this model is that God is not satisfying any requirement of Justice. Therefore, Jesus’ substitutionary sacrifice is unjust and pointless. Furthermore, it is useless for PS advocates to argue that Jesus’ punishment from God was just because our guilty status was imputed to him, or that Jesus is our covenant representative and can therefore justly suffer the curse of the covenant in our place. Even if it was just for God to pour out His wrath on a substitute rather than a guilty party, it would still be pointless, because God’s obligation to pour out wrath in this way does not exist in the first place, since offended parties are not burdened with the obligation to commit commensurate offenses to that which they have received. Justice does not require God to pour out wrath; justice requires guilty persons to suffer it. Therefore, Biblical justice does not have any requirements that substitutionary punishment can satisfy.

(B) God’s honor/glory is not damaged by Human sin, so He need not attempt to repair it by punishing sin.

Many Penal Substitution advocates would argue that Humanity’s sin has damaged God’s honor, or glory, and God’s outpouring of wrath repairs this damaged glory. Here is the problem with this line of argument: sin does not damage the glory of God. Sin damages sinners. Consider the definition of sin that God gives us in Jeremiah 2:13, where He says: “For my people have committed two evils: (1) They have forsaken Me, the fountain of living waters, (2) And hewn cisterns for themselves, broken cisterns that hold no water.” When someone refuses to drink of the fountain and dies of thirst, neither the fountain nor the glory of the fountain is damaged. The glory of a fountain is to satisfy and sustain desert dwellers. When someone refuses to drink and ends up dissatisfied and dead, the glory of the fountain is not damaged, but demonstrated. Similarly, the glory of a brick wall is its strength. The glory of the brick wall will be demonstrated whether or not someone leans against the brick wall for support, or punches the brick wall and breaks his arm. Finally, when sinners reject God’s goodness, love, and beauty, and thereby destroy themselves in evil and ugliness, the glory of God is not damaged, but demonstrated. And so, it is not God or His glory that are damaged by sin, but sinners that are damaged by sin. In the case of sin against God, the offense is purely to the destruction of the offender. It is not a high view of God that claims He is damaged by our sin.

(C) God does not *need* to exercise punishment on account of human sin.

John Stott claims, “The one thing God could not do in the face of human sin was nothing (*The Cross of Christ* p.152).” On Stott’s view, God *needed* to do something about human sin. This is false. The fact is that when Adam sinned, God lost nothing that He *needed*. So God does not *need* to do anything to reclaim that which was lost. To say that God *needs* to punish on account of human sin is to say that God in some sense needs humans. But if God does not need humans prior to the fall, how much less should God need humans after the fall? And yet, Penal Substitution argues that human sin took away something that God needed and so God needs to exercise punishment (on the cross or in hell) in order to reclaim it. Such a formulation of Penal Substitution is a compromise of God’s aseity, and is therefore a very man-centered view. To say, “God needs to punish me” is just as arrogant as to say, “God needs to save me.” The view claims, “God needs to punish me because God needs something from me because God needs me.” The truth is that God does not punish to satisfy a need within Himself. God punishes because He desires to save sinners from sin. *God only exercises active wrath in the context of His redemptive purposes for the world*. If God did not enact a redemptive plan in the world, I believe He also would not exercise any active punishment. Such active wrath would be pointless, as *He could simply leave us to destroy ourselves in sin*. It is redundant for God to destroy those who are destroying themselves in sin, *unless He is pouring out destruction as part of a redemptive plan*. *Active wrath is therefore a subset of His gracious interaction in human history to* *save* many (all). *It is part of His marshalling of our sin’s destruction for His ultimately redemptive purposes*.

(D) Penal Substitution undermines the seriousness of sin.

On Penal Substitution, sin is a problem because it warrants active punishment from God. Practically speaking, this view is problematic. For if we relegate the negative consequences of sin to God’s punishment for sin, then *we end up entertaining a view that sin is a happy, fun, joyous thing as long as we can escape God’s punishment for it.* Such a view is demonic. When Satan tells us that sin can be happy, fun, and joyous, he tells us lies; he does not tell us truths that God dislikes and therefore punishes. It is impossible to commit sin and escape getting caught. The sinner has already been caught, by sin. The thing he is “getting away with” is the very thing he will quickly find that he needs getting away from. There is no such thing as sin with impunity. *Sin always becomes its own punishment*. It is blasphemy against the goodness of God to say that rebellion against Him could bring anything but misery. A view of sin that does not have a robust emphasis on its self-destructive nature is a view that does not take sin seriously enough. But the self-destructive nature of sin causes a problem for Penal Substitution. If sin is self-destructive, then what is the purpose of God’s active destruction in response to sin? Why does God not just let sinners destroy themselves in sin? What does God accomplish by destroying sinners that are already destroying themselves in sin? So sin creates no need for God to satisfy by exercising active punishment.

(E) Penal Substitution confuses payment and punishment.

Romans 6:23 says that “The wages of sin is death.” John Stott uses this verse to say that Jesus “paid sin’s wage (*The Cross of Christ* p.270)” on our behalf. Anyone who has ever had a job knows this makes no sense. Wages are not something that we pay; wages are something we earn. Owing and earning are opposite sides of the economic metaphor. Thus, we do not owe death to God. We earn death for our sin. And we all justly receive the death we have earned when we suffer our sin’s consequences in this life and finally when we physically die. Our suffering and physical death is not a payment to God for our sin, and does not atone for our sin. Our atonement is in this: Jesus has voluntarily interceded to receive the wages of our sin along with us by suffering and dying on the cross. But he, being without sin, has received these wages undeservedly and unjustly. *Justice therefore demands that these wages be taken back, and that Jesus’ suffering and death be undone, reversed; Hence, Jesus’ resurrection. Jesus imputation of His death and resurrection to us is our atonement*.

**V – Brief refutations to interpretations of verses commonly cited in support of Penal Substitution**

These refutations are brief, but they are strong enough to stop these texts from necessarily supporting Penal Substitution.

**Isaiah 53:4-5**

“Surely our griefs He Himself bore,

And our sorrows He carried;

Yet we ourselves esteemed Him stricken,

Smitten of God, and afflicted.

But He was pierced through for our transgressions,

He was crushed for our iniquities;

The chastening for our well-being upon Him,

And by His scourging we are healed.”

First, many Penal Substitution advocates will cite that Jesus was “smitten of God.” The text does not actually say that. It says, “Yet *we ourselves esteemed* Him stricken. Smitten of God, and afflicted.” That Jesus is smitten of God is the perception of the “us” in the passage, and it is a false perception that verse 5 then sets out to correct: “*But* He was pierced through for *our* transgressions, He was crushed for *our* iniquities.” The truth is that the suffering servant is not someone whom God is smiting, or is angry with, but who is suffering on behalf of others.

Second, why was he pierced for our transgressions and crushed for our iniquities? The logic of Penal Substitution is “Jesus suffered the punishment for our sins in our place so that we would not have to suffer that punishment.” In the language of Isaiah 53, this would be translated “Jesus was wounded for our transgressions to save us from being wounded for our transgressions.” But this is not what Isaiah 53 says. The text says, “By his scourging we are healed,” NOT, “By his scourging we avoid being scourged.” So the logic of Isaiah 53 runs, “He was wounded for our transgressions *so that we could be healed from our wounds.*” The suffering servant is wounded so that those who *are wounded (by sin) can be healed.*  Jesus is wounded for our transgressions so that our wounds can be healed by the power of his resurrection. It may seem too simple, but this argument is enough to unhinge Isaiah 53 from Penal Substitution.

**Galatians 3:13**

“Christ redeemed us from the curse of the Law, having become a curse for us, for it is written, ‘Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree,’ in order that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we would receive the promise of the Spirit through faith.”

First of all, it is helpful to look at the previous quotation by Martin Luther, in which he describes the curse of the Law falling upon the Messiah and, not satisfying its retributive demands, but losing its power because it unjustly condemned the man who was guiltless. The idea that the curse of the law fell upon Jesus does not mean its function was to “satisfy wrath” in the Penal Substitution sense.

Secondly, I think the logic Paul uses in this verse is analogous to the logic behind the incident with the fiery serpents in Numbers 21. In this story, God sends a curse of fiery serpents amongst the Israelites, but tells Moses to make a serpent of brass and set it on a pole, so that a wounded Israelite can look to the brass serpent on the pole and be healed. To be hung on a tree was a sign of cursedness (Deut 21:23), and so for the other agent of cursing, the fiery serpent, to hang on the pole sent a very clear message: on this pole the curse itself is cursed, and so undone. Jesus likens the cross to the pole with the serpent, when he says, “As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up (John 3:14).” The cross is where the curse of the law is cursed, and so reversed in the resurrection. The curse is reversed because it falls upon an innocent party: Jesus. But Numbers 21 does not accord with Penal Substitution. If the brass serpent behaved as a Penal Substitute, the brass serpent would suffer the bites of the fiery serpents so the Israelites would not have to suffer their bites. This does not happen in the Biblical text. Like the suffering servant in Isaiah 53, the brass serpent is not wounded so that the Israelites will not have to be wounded, but so that those who *are* wounded can be healed. If the logic of Galatians 3:13 is analogous to the logic of Numbers 21, then the verse does not support Penal Substitution. Numbers 21 therefore presents us with the same logic as Isaiah 53: Jesus is wounded so that the wounded can be healed, *not* so that sinners can avoid being wounded.

**2 Corinthians 5:21**

“He made him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.”

Penal Substitution advocates use this verse to support the concept of double imputation, that our sin was imputed to Jesus so that his righteousness could be imputed to us. They want the verse to say something like, “He made him who knew no *guilt* to be *guilty* on our behalf so that we might *receive* the righteousness of *Christ* from him (modifications in italics),” but this is not what the text says, and I do not think this is what it means. NT Wright’s commentary on this verse is very helpful.[[8]](#footnote-8) In the second part of the verse, the phrase “the righteousness of God” does not mean “the righteousness of Christ,” which would refer to the Messiah/Son’s legal status of righteousness. The “righteousness of God” refers, rather, to Yahweh’s covenant faithfulness. So when Paul says, “we become the righteousness of God,” he is saying that the people of God have become an outworking, demonstration, and manifestation of God’s faithfulness to His covenant promises. Paul is not talking here about the imputation of Christ’s righteousness to us. So, if Paul is talking about a demonstration or manifestation rather than an imputation in this second part of the verse, it follows that he is doing the same thing in the preceding half of the verse, in which he says “God made him who know no sin to be sin”. Paul is not saying that our sin or guilt was imputed to Jesus, but that the sinless man Jesus was made into an outworking, demonstration, and manifestation of sin. This certainly describes the cross. The cross is the greatest sin in human history, in which all sin against God and all sin against Man are inflicted upon the God-Man Jesus Christ. No sin that any of us has ever committed is greater than the sin we committed when we crucified Jesus. We may think we have committed many sins, but in reality we have only committed one: the murder of Jesus. The worst aspect of any one of our sins is that it contributed to the death of God’s Son. On the cross, Jesus was made my sin. He was made into a demonstration of every human’s sin. Why? So that through Jesus’ resurrection, God would show His faithfulness to his covenantal promises to restore the earth from sin’s destruction. If this is the correct understanding of the verse, then 2 Corinthians 5:21 does not support Penal Substitution.

A second alternative: Tom McCall defends that Paul’s language that Jesus “became sin” means that Jesus became a *sin offering*. Recall that in every version of the sin offering in the Torah, it is the sinner that kills the sacrifice, not a representative of the offended party. This is a second Biblically sound interpretation of 2 Corinthians 5:21 that does not lend support to Penal Substitution.

**Zechariah 8:13**

“’Awake, O sword, against My Shepherd, and against the man, My Associate,’ declares the Lord of hosts. ‘Strike the Shepherd that the sheep may be scattered.’”

Well, there it is, right? God’s sword struck His Shepherd, Jesus. But the couplet to this verse then says, “*And I will turn My hand against the little ones.*” God’s sword does not strike the Shepherd in a substitutionary way, that is, so that he will not turn His hand against the little ones (the little ones are Jesus’ disciples). The act against the one is accompanied by the act against the many. So the striking of the Son belongs in the category participation, not substitution. God will strike Jesus and turn His hand against the disciples. God goes on in this passage to say that two thirds of all the people in the land will be cut off and perish, and the third part He will bring through the fire and refine as if they were silver. So there is no avoiding a painful experience in this passage for anyone. Everyone is either struck with the sword, bears God’s hand against them, is cut off and perishes, or is brought through the refining fire. The striking of God’s sword against the Shepherd may be “penal” in a sense, but it is impossible to defend that it is also substitutionary. Therefore, in Zechariah 8:18 we do not have the “substitution for the sake of satisfaction of wrath” logic that Penal Substitution demands. Furthermore, I would argue that in the case of the cross, the “sword of the Lord” is forged from the sins of Humanity. The suffering of the cross is not the direct, active wrath of God.

**Psalm 22**

“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

The cry of dereliction is not unique to Jesus. David cried it first, because he is the one who wrote the psalm. Additionally, he wrote it in a corporate format, which means many others sang the psalm to express their feelings of distress, abandonment, or God-forsakenness. The Psalmist himself, within the psalm, looks to what the fathers did when they were in moments of distress, feeling abandoned and forsaken by God (v. 4-5). So it is hard to argue that the cry of dereliction in Psalm 22 is unique to Jesus and therefore “substitutionary.” The cry of dereliction is participatory, for in it Jesus identifies with David, with all others who have sung the psalm, and with the fathers of Israel that the psalmist looks to as examples. Jesus is “forsaken” so that he can save the forsaken. He is not forsaken “instead of us” so that we will not be forsaken. Once again, we have a verse that belongs in the category of participation or recapitulation and not substitution. (The logic of recapitulation is, “just as, so also.” *Just as* Jesus felt forsaken, *so also* David and others felt forsaken).

I also think that it is hard to argue that the cry of dereliction in psalm 22 is “penal.” Both in the immediate context of the psalm and in the context in which Jesus quotes it, the situation is very clearly a Godly man given over into the hands of sinners. Neither the gospels nor psalm 22 depict a “sinner in the hands of an angry God” scenario. Jesus is forsaken into the hands of sinners, but He is not forsaken of the Father’s love, for verse 24 of psalm 22 explicitly says, “Nor has [God] hidden His face from Him, but when he cried to Him for help, He heard.” I am tired of hearing preachers like Tim Keller use Psalm 22 to support the idea that the Father turned His face away from the Son, when the psalm clearly and directly says the opposite. Such preaching is the result of a submission to Reformed philosophy rather than Biblical theology. Jesus’ struggle on the cross is to love God by obeying Him unto death, and *to trust in God’s love for Him in the midst of enduring all of Humanity’s sin against him*. The Atonement is the event in which God’s Trinitarian love for God (?) overcomes all of Humanity’s sin against God.

**Conclusion**

I will finish my arguments by citing a key verse from Isaiah 49, which is the passage Paul is commenting on in 2 Corinthians chapters 5 and 6 (the home of 2 Corinthians 5:21). Isaiah 49 opens with the words of the suffering servant, also referred to as God’s “select arrow” whose “mouth is like a sharp sword” who “will show forth God’s glory.” This is Jesus speaking. He says in verse 4, “I have spent my strength for nothing and vanity, *yet surely the justice due to me is with the Lord*, *and my reward with my God*.” I believe in this verse Jesus is describing his crucifixion and resurrection. It is in the crucifixion that Jesus is challenged with feelings that he “has spent his strength for nothing.” But what allows Jesus to overcome these feelings is the trust He has in God’s justice and rewards, which will manifest in his resurrection. Jesus does not undergo the cross for the satisfaction of God’s Retributive Justice, Jesus willingly undergoes the injustice of the cross so that sin and death will be reversed and restored by the power God’s Resurrection Justice.

1. Leon Morris, a prominent scholar within the Reformed tradition, says, “We must examine the meaning of the Greek verb that has traditionally been translated ‘to propitiate’ or ‘ to make propitiation,’ and which is rendered in some other way in most recent translations. This verb, ‘hilaskomai, is in common use in Greek in general and it means *the turning away of anger.*”The other word Paul uses for propitiation is *hilasterion*, which Morris defines as the “means of turning away wrath.” Morris says, “nothing deals with salvation from the divine wrath other than *hilasterion*, which means, ‘the averting of wrath.’” JI Packer agrees, “What is a ‘propitiation?’ It is a sacrifice that *averts wrath* through expiating sin, and canceling guilt.” These scholars define propitiation exactly the way I do: wrath aversion. Where I disagree with Morris and Packer is in their assumption that propitiation means “wrath aversion *via wrath exhaustion*.” [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Augustine. De Trinity. Chapter 15. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Chrysostom, John. *Homily LXVII*. Database online. http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf114.iv.lxix.html [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Anselm, *Why God Became Man*. Book 1, Chapter 7. Anselm does not fully agree with this idea, but it is important to not that this was a popular view among Christians in the 11th century. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Luther, Martin. *Works*, XXIII., p.709 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. I am indebted to Gustaf Aulen’s *Christus Victor,* for the references to Chrysostom and Luther. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Stott, John. *The Cross of Christ*, p.40 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. NT Wright. “Unbelievable: Justification debate between NT Wright and James White.” https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Zp8rMsOCsvY [↑](#footnote-ref-8)