

EVALUATING THE CROSS & 'PENAL SUBSTITUTION' (or Penal Satisfaction: hereafter P. S.)

By Bob Wilson

P.S. says our sin violates a holy God & the perfect righteousness He requires. So, God can only forgive us *if* a perfect Jesus pays our penalty by suffering its' full punishment as a Substitute dying in our place. Bearing God's wrath, he satisfies the need for justice, and so lets God excuse believers in this *transaction* from sin's results. *But*, the **Bible** never uses the underlined phrases, *and its' truths conflict with P.S.*

1. P.S. is needed to **change** God's inclination toward sinners, because giving us grace would contradict His *wrath* toward sin, *unless* inflicting it on Jesus alleviates it. Thus expositor John Stott can say, "God gave himself to save us from God." *But*, the Bible *never* says God needs a sacrifice to be more gracious toward our sin. Romans 1 & 2's focus on God's *wrath* would be a perfect place to explain that the cross met God's need to satisfy 'justice.' *Instead*, it says, "We are reconciled," because "*while* we were still *enemies*," the cross showed God's *already* merciful nature. So, the cross satisfies & "*demonstrates* His love," *not* his wrath (Rom. 5:6-10). Change is never needed in God's inclination toward sinners (Mal. 3:6).

"God was in Christ reconciling the *world* to himself," *not* God to us. The change needed is in *our* life & disposition toward God. Jesus died to empower us to "no longer live for ourselves" (2 Cor. 5:15,18-21). This enables "God's law to be met *in* us, who *live* not by the sinful nature, but by the Spirit" (Rom. 8:3f). He died "*so that* we might die to sins and *live* for righteousness... following in his steps" (1 Pet. 2:21,24).

2. P.S. says that God is unable to simply **forgive**, or write off our debt. P.S. argues that the sinner's offense against God can only be 'satisfied' when He obtains the punishment that sin & the Law requires. *But* in reality, *without* requiring such a full penalty, Jesus proclaims God's Good News of forgiveness, and regularly displays God as one fully able to graciously embrace and forgive sinners. Jesus' parable of God's relationship to a lost prodigal presents God as a wronged "Father" able to *choose* to restore a broken relationship by *forgiving*, *not* as One who needs retribution or wrath (Lk. 6:27-38; 7:36-50; 15:1f, 11-32).

Jesus said *our* calling to forgive enemies *without* securing payment is based on imitating how *God* gives mercy to rebels. Requiring *no* payment is the heart of being like our "Father" (Mt. 5:38-48). God does *not* say, "Forgive as I say, not as I do," as if *God* can not do it without huge recompense. *We* are to *keep* loving & forgiving those who do us evil, seeking no pay back, and surely God has *no less* love than us. In truth, God's core nature as love *is* able to forgive whenever there is repentance (1 John 4:10).

Since "forgiveness," by definition, is not conditioned on any payment, it cannot be explained in terms of a debt paid. To say Jesus paid the full *price* of sins, such that it *cancel*s that debt, is like saying I owed you \$50, and someone provided you full payment. Then, *no* debt is left for God to consider 'forgiving.' If God can only forgive, *if* he gets the payment due, then it would appear that God never truly *forgives*!

3. For P.S., '**justice**' means satisfying God's requirement for a retribution proportionate to the offense, as Jesus suffers the penalty our sins deserve. *But* Jesus opposed proportionate "eye for an eye" trans- actions (Mt. 5:38), and *transferring* the wicked's moral consequences to another was unbiblical (Eze. 18:20; Pr. 17:15; Dt. 24:16). Unlike financial debt, someone else can't pay to erase *our* moral guilt. So, redirect-ting wrath to an innocent One never makes the guilty acceptable, or represents *any* form of 'justice.'

Establishing God's righteous 'justice' requires that God *restore* the wholeness that evil takes away. For example, executing our child's killer *won't* satisfy or cancel the wrong. Only restoring him to us could 'put right' the loss. God's desire for *justice* (=righteousness) emphasizes taking away *sin*, not its' penalty. Thus, it is satisfied when wrong things are graciously made right. *But* what both defeats evil *and* heals, is not a violent payment, but God's forgiveness of enemies, displayed in graciously absorbing such evil.

4. P.S. says God requires a '**retribution**' for sins, and so inflicts that on Jesus. *But*, God only applies needed consequences for sin, *not* pay back. So, Jesus rejected basing relationships on obtaining repayment for wrongs, and insisted God is like a good parent (Mt. 7:9-11; 5:38f; 23:1,9). A loving parent's 'wrath' for wrongs is never for pay back. It is always part of *love's* discipline that seeks to benefit the child.

5. In P.S., we can enjoy God's love *because* 'punishment' satisfied his **wrath**. *But* "wrath" is not an emotion to be vented; it is *not* contrary to his love, but an instrument *of* love that displays his opposition to evil, and *corrects* us (Lev. 26:14-45; Lam. 3:22,31-33; Jer. 3:12,13; 30:24; 32:37-40; Isa. 26:9; 51:17,22; 54:8; 57:16-18). So, wrath is *satisfied* when rebels come to repentance, *not* by getting vented. God's love & wrath goes on. *But* Jesus' life, death, and resurrection can restore and change *us*, so that we do not *need* "wrath."

6. P.S.'s cross secures 'payment' that fully *cancel*s sin's penalty, and nothing else is necessary. *But* Jesus' death by itself has *not* purchased man's salvation or immunity from judgment and hell. For in 1 Cor. 15:17, "You are still in your *sins*... if Christ had not been *raised*." Only his **resurrection**'s power in us can enable the victory necessary over sin's power & death. For Easter *validated* Jesus' forgiving way with sinners, *and* made him alive in the Spirit, bringing His power into our battle with sin and self.

7. P.S. *focuses* on 'believing' the cross provided the punishment that *God* requires. Since Jesus' **life & teaching** aren't vital to provide that, his *focus* on forming disciples who follow the way of his teaching & death is minimized (Mt. 28:19f). He regularly required taking up *our* own cross (Mk. 8:34f; Lk. 9:22-25; 14:27; Mt. 10:38; 16:24; Jn. 12:25). For his cross is *not* a past transaction which cancels our need for a righteous *life*. *But* Jesus' *life* upheld God's provocative way of bringing grace & shows why he was killed & is exalted.

8. **Concern with ongoing sins** is weakened by P.S.'s focus on escaping sin's *penalty*. For Jesus 'paid it all' and eliminates it, *without* subduing sin in our life which needs consequences. *But*, God's ongoing 'punishments' *and* forgiveness have the *same* purpose as Jesus' death: to deliver us from evil. So, even *believers* (who *don't* persevere in faith & holiness) face God's judgment & wrath. "If we deliberately keep sinning... only fearful expectation of judgment & fire... The Lord *will* judge His people" (Heb. 10:26-31; Rom. 11:22; 2 Pet. 2:20; Rev. 3:5). So, *our* own repentance, perseverance & holiness *are* essential, and in *each* judgment passage, who is *saved* is decided "according to our *works*" (Rom. 2:6-16; Mt. 25:31-46; Rev. 20:12,13).

The cross is not to 'transfer' our penalty, but it serves to "save us from *sin*," and "take away" our sin (Mt. 4:1; Jn. 1:29; Ex. 34:6f; 23:7), by enabling a renewal inside *us*, as promised in Jesus' *New Covenant* (Lk. 22:20; Jer. 31:31-34). Thus in Romans 6:1-22, Jesus' death pleases God *because* it "frees" us to live "*in Christ*" a "*new life*... no longer as slaves to sin," as we "offer our self to God" and find such "holiness... results in eternal life." Then, as we "die *with Him*" to self, his cross enables us to be God's reconciled people.

The cross makes us 'stumble' *because* it shows what God requires in *our* life, is that *we* too must forgive without securing any payback. Luke 24:25f explains, the prophets' message that suffering & death must *precede* "glory" makes it sound 'foolish.' What we resist is His call to a *life* of repentance & forgiving. (Lk. 23:34; 17:3f; 24:47; 11:4; Mt. 6:15; Acts 3:17-19; 2:38; 5:31; 17:30; 1 Pet. 2:12,19f-24; 3:1f; 4:1f, 13f; 1 Cor. 1:18-25)

9. P.S. finds God's 'satisfaction' in the punishment of sins in the O.T. **sacrifices** too. *But*, these sacrifices did *not* receive God's wrath, pay for *or* cause God to forgive sin, or even please God, who does "*not* desire" them (Mic. 6:6-8; Hos. 6:6; Isa. 1:11ff). The verb (*kipper*'/'propitiate') related to sacrifice acted on *sin* (this verb's direct object), *not* on God's wrathful disposition. Sacrifices assured that God forgives (Ps. 51:1-17; 40:6). So, when repentant hearts looked to his grace, God's "mercy" "is what changed them, as it curbs sin's consequences and wrath.

Hebrews 10 explains, Jesus' sacrificial life and death is superior *because* it can "perfect" what God seeks to do in us, *not* because it better pacified God's wrath. Thus, Jesus "established" a *life* that does God's "will" (1-9), to "perfect those *being made holy*" (12-16; 2:11, 14, 18), and "*set aside*" the way of sacrifice and scape-goating!

10. P.S. explains 'justice' for individuals, but *not* why the cross will one day "reconcile *all* things" (Col. 1:20).

11. P.S. depicts God the **Father** inflicting the violence that satisfies the need for justice on a merciful **Son**. P.S. supposes that Jesus' word "forsaken" on the cross (Mt. 27:46), proves God's holy presence was repulsed by sin, and so abandons him. *But*, that would contradict his quotation's context, in which God turns his face *to* embrace him (see Ps. 22:1 & 24! 31:5; 139; Heb. 5:7). Arguing that God *can't* 'look upon sin' rejects Jesus' revelation of God in the flesh as the One who never recoils from sinners, but embraces and forgives them. For Jesus displays the *same* heart as God (Jn. 14:9), one *already* governed by love and grace toward sinners.

12. P.S.'s God seeks and *causes* the **violence** Jesus got. *But*, God in Jesus denounced violent solutions, and *absorbed* men's violence, *not* God's (Mt. 26:52; 5:38-48; 12:18-20; Lk. 9:54f; 19:42-44). Divine *love* destroyed violence's power by *refusing* to return it. It "keeps no accounts," forgiving *without* evening the score (1 Cor. 13:5).

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