
IN MY PLACE CONDEMNED HE STOOD: JESUS, OUR SUBSTITUTE

OVERVIEW

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I. INTRODUCTION: THE DEATH OF CHRIST—IT WAS *FOR* US

In his death and resurrection, Jesus achieved something that God the Father recognized, namely, humanity’s sin crisis was rectified once and for all. To use longstanding theological categories, the atonement was *objective* (i.e., directed toward God), not merely *subjective* (directed toward humanity). The reason the atonement can be viewed objectively is because the New Testament presents Jesus as God’s acceptable **representative of**—and chosen **substitute for**—all humanity:

- Christ died *for* the ungodly (Rom 5:6).
- Christ died *for* us (Rom 5:8).
- Christ died *for* our sins (1 Cor 15:3).
- God made him who knew no sin to be sin *for* us (2 Cor 5:21).
- ...who gave himself *for* our sins (Gal 1:4).
- ...who gave himself *for* me (Gal 2:20).
- Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse *for* us (Gal 3:13).
- ...who gave himself as a ransom *for* all (1 Tim 2:6).
- Christ suffered *for* you (1 Pet 2:21).
- Christ also suffered once *for* sins, the righteous *for* the unrighteous (1 Pet 3:18).

Historic Christian orthodoxy has largely (though not exclusively) understood the “**for**” in these verses as “**in the place of.**” That is, the atonement involved the substitution of Christ “for” or “in the place of” the sinner. As the old hymn by Phillip Bliss (1838-1876) puts it:

Bearing shame and mocking rude,
In my place condemned he stood.

II. THE CROSS—A TRAVESTY OF JUSTICE?

Substitution is not the only legitimate image of the atonement, but it certainly is prominent in both the Old and New Testaments. A ram in the thicket dies so that Isaac doesn't have to. A Passover lamb dies so that the firstborn doesn't have to. Two Yom Kippur goats die so that the nation of Israel doesn't have to. The entire sacrificial system is built on the concepts of propitiation and expiation. Animal substitutes die so that humans alienated from God may live. In Jesus, "the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29), animal sacrifices give way to the ultimate substitute, the Son of God (cf. Heb 10:4).

Nevertheless, this understanding of Jesus' death has been widely criticized in recent years. The rationalistic Professor at Oxford University, **Sir A. J. Ayer** once called the idea of substitutionary atonement "intellectually contemptible and morally outrageous." The common objection of unbelievers usually goes something like this: "I can't possibly believe in a God who has to see blood before he can forgive sin." To the contemporary mind, the very idea is offensive, disgusting, primitive, and obscene. Even believers, when we ponder the issues surrounding forgiveness via the cross, we have to admit it's an extraordinary claim we're making. In some ways, it's scandalous (cf. 1 Cor 1:23).

That God should victimize the innocent Jesus in order to acquit the guilty sinner is seen to be a *travesty* of justice. It seems to attribute to the court of heaven a more monstrous corruption than the court of Pilate. At least Pilate resented the crowd's cry to execute Christ rather than Barabbas. Even though he eventually yielded to it, he didn't like it. But the Bible goes out of its way to suggest that God planned the cross as a similar kind of judicial exchange. Isaiah 53:10a says, bluntly, "It was the Lord's will to crush him and cause him to suffer." Indeed, the whole thrust of Isaiah 53:4-6 features substitutionary language:

- ⁴ Surely he took up our infirmities
and carried our sorrows,
yet we considered him stricken by God,
smitten by him, and afflicted.
- ⁵ But he was pierced for our transgressions,
he was crushed for our iniquities;
the punishment that brought us peace was upon him,
and by his wounds we are healed.
- ⁶ We all, like sheep, have gone astray,
each of us has turned to his own way;
and the Lord has laid on him
the iniquity of us all.

Victimizing the innocent in order to acquit the guilty—that's what scandalizes people. But it's not just unbelievers who make this objection anymore. In the last few decades, even some believers have begun to describe the concept of substitution as "**divine child abuse.**" As such, we can't understand the cross as penal substitution, they say.

That which is so predominantly advanced in Scripture has to be re-thought now because people don't like it, and we've gotten it wrong for so long. Consequently, alternative views of the cross have been elevated in our day, including **subjective** or "**moral influence**" theories. Why? Because they're far less offensive to contemporary sensibilities.

III. THE CROSS—JUST AN EXAMPLE?

The purpose of the cross, they say, is for God to provoke some sort of emotional impact *in* us, or moral influence *on* us. In other words, when we look at the cross, we feel conscience-stricken about our failures, and we determine to live our lives as better people as a result. So, **the cross is our example to live well and to do good**. It's our model for living a more selfless, self-sacrificial, and non-retaliatory life. That's the purpose of the cross, they say, and that's why, ultimately, it "works." That's why God honored his Son's sacrifice with a resurrection to follow.

There is indeed some truth to this view. Christ's behavior on the cross is explicitly described as an **example** for believers in 1 Peter 2:21-23:

"To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you **an example**, that you should follow in his steps. 'He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth.' When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly."

When we look at the cross and see what Christ did there, we can't help but be moved by the depth of his love and sacrifice on our behalf. It has emotional power in and of itself.

IV. THE CROSS—MORE THAN AN EXAMPLE

But the cross is much *more* than an example for humanity. Peter goes on to say of Jesus, "He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree" (1 Pet 2:24a). That is, he didn't just die to show us how to live. Indeed, if the cross is not more than an example, then we have to conclude that Jesus saw his death as little more than **a form of emotional blackmail**. His intent was to get us to behave in a certain way by making us sad about his ordeal or sad about ourselves. Such a view, however, puts the cross of Christ into the same category as a political hunger strike.

Do we really want to suggest that Jesus intends to manipulate us into being better people by this kind of emotional lever—a histrionic gesture that achieves nothing but embarrassing those of us who have to watch it? If so, that could rightly be considered an *immoral* influence.

Moreover, viewing the cross in this way not only reduces it to a form of crass manipulation, it renders the theory **hopelessly incoherent**. Yes, the death of Jesus can serve as an example to us, but the cross must

first have a real (objective) value in order for it to have any personal (subjective) value. Why is this the case?

Imagine seeing a man standing on top of a tall building, and hearing him yell, **“I love you all, and to prove how much I love you, I’m going to jump from this building and die for you.”** Would you go home saying, “Wow, I saw a most wonderful demonstration of love today”? Or, “I saw a man die for me today”? No, you’d go home saying, “I saw a mentally disturbed man jump to his death today. How sad.” And you’d be right, because unless some objective benefit flows out of that death to somebody else, it can’t be considered a moral example. It is more rightly considered a tragic display of lunacy. On the other hand:

- If I were drowning out in a frigid lake, and somebody jumped into the icy water to save me, drowning in the process himself, then I can rightly say, **“He died for me.”**
- Or if I were a terminal cardiac patient in a hospital and needed a transplant, and someone stepped in and said, “I’ll give you my heart so that you can live,” then I can rightly say, **“He died for me.”**
- Or if I were on death row expecting execution at dawn, and someone stole into my cell the night before and said, “I’ll take your place on the gallows tomorrow,” then I can rightly say, **“He died for me.”**

There has to be some *real* situation of danger in which I am placed, and some *real*, objective benefit flowing to me out of the other person’s death. Otherwise it doesn’t make sense to say that the other person died *for* me. In the same way, we can only have a subjective view of Jesus’ death if there’s an objective benefit preceding it. Otherwise, the death of Christ *for* me is incoherent.

V. THE CROSS—WHERE THE PUNISHMENT REALLY FALLS

Still, people object to this view of the cross—that it was a substitutionary sacrifice—because they think it portrays God as a spiteful and ruthless monster. He comes across as a being who punishes an innocent third party in order to satisfy his insatiable lust for revenge that he has somewhere in his heart. He’s like a rogue soldier who executes innocent civilians who aren’t even part of the battle. We’re outraged when something like that happens, and rightly so. **Punishing the innocent is no virtue.**

Those who criticize an objective, substitutionary view of the cross say it portrays God like that—punishing an innocent third party so that the guilty can go free. But that’s a caricature and gross misrepresentation of what the Scriptures teach. According to the New Testament, and according to Jesus’ own self-understanding, Christ is not a third party.

Of course God could not take an innocent man and arbitrarily make him a substitutionary sacrifice for the sins of the world. That would have been a total *miscarriage* of justice. But what the New Testament dares

to suggest to us is that at the cross, God did not arbitrarily punish an innocent third party; **he deliberately punished himself.**

Jesus said, “Whoever has seen me has seen the Father” (John 14:9). Jesus said, “I and my Father are one” (John 10:30). Jesus is called, “Emmanuel,” God with us—God in human flesh (Matt 1:23). So, **Jesus is not some innocent third party. He’s innocent, all right, but he’s not a third party. He’s the first party.**

Consequently, when we look at the cross, we shouldn’t think of Jesus as being there doing all the work in isolation, with God the Father being somewhere far away—totally disinterested in what’s happening, or totally unaffected by it (cf. Hos 11:8c). No, Paul said that at the cross, **“God was *in* Christ reconciling the world to himself”** (2 Cor 5:19; cf. Gen 15:17-18a).

The Father was right there “taking it on the chin,” so to speak, as his own Son bled and died *for* humanity. God in Christ took full responsibility for human sin, even though it obviously wasn’t *his* sin. That’s why Acts 20:28 refers to “God’s own blood.” In God’s mind, **divine blood shed is the price required for divine forgiveness granted.** God did not sweep humanity’s sins under the rug, he swept them onto his Son—with *his adult Son’s permission* (cf. John 12:27; Mark 14:32-42; Matt 26:52-54; Heb 10:5-7). This can hardly be considered divine “child abuse.” It’s more akin to the brave and noble soldier going off to war and giving his life in battle for the sake of his fellow citizens.

VI. THE CROSS—GOD’S INSTRUMENT OF RECONCILIATION

We sometimes assume it should be *easy* for God to forgive sin. After all, when does God ever have to break a sweat to do anything? Besides, isn’t it God’s *job* to forgive sin? It’s just what he does, right? God said, “Let there be light,” and there was light. Why then can’t he likewise say, “Let there be forgiveness,” and there is forgiveness? In short, **why is forgiveness not by divine fiat?**

Historically, the former statement, “Let there be light,” has always been seen as entailing no breach of God’s nature or ways. God *is* creator, and God *is* light. The latter statement, however, “Let there be forgiveness,” has often been seen as entailing a potential violation of at least *some* of God’s nature and ways. God is holy, so sin must be punished. God is love, so sin must be pardoned. Herein lies the dilemma, and one that doesn’t seem to have an easy resolution. God must always be true to his own nature; otherwise, he cannot be God.

So, in the end, will God’s justice lead to the *condemnation* of sinners, or will God’s grace lead to the *forgiveness* of sinners? Is there a way for God to cut this Gordian knot, admittedly of his own making (by virtue of the fact that he created a race he knew would rebel against him)? Is there a morally acceptable way for him to separate sinners from their

sin so that he can judge the sin while sparing the sinner—thus keeping all his attributes perfectly intact?

However the issue is resolved, one can surely say that if forgiveness is by divine fiat alone, it renders the cross of Christ little more than a foolish waste. As Paul writes (in a related but slightly different context), “If righteousness could be attained through the law, then **Christ died for nothing**” (Gal 2:21). That the eternal Son of God should come to earth and deliberately squander his life in crucifixion—which he had the power to prevent—for no objective gain or benefit is unthinkable.

It appears, then, that there is a divine necessity to the cross. Hebrews 8:3 says, “Every high priest is appointed to offer both gifts and sacrifices, and so **it was necessary** for this one [Jesus] also to have something to offer.” Moreover, Hebrews 9:23 says, “**It was necessary**, then, for the copies of the heavenly things to be purified with these sacrifices, but the heavenly things themselves with better sacrifices than these” (Heb 9:23). In God’s mind, the cross of Christ was objectively essential to the full grant of divine forgiveness.

But how does the cross of Christ effect the final atonement that God accepts? **How and why does the cross “work”?** The dilemma is acute. If God overlooks evil, it’s as good as saying morality doesn’t matter in his universe after all. His righteousness would be undermined by his own neglect and inconsistency. Moreover, God would be open to the charge of moral apathy. But that is an accusation God cannot allow to pass unchallenged. His moral consistency must remain flawless and unimpeachable. He must always act justly, or the very idea of righteousness loses its meaning.

And that is why forgiveness can be said to be “difficult” for him—if we dare speak of deity in such terms. **Forgiveness is “difficult” precisely because it is not easily distinguishable from moral indifference.** How could one tell the difference between a God who forgives sin and one who couldn’t care less about it? If goodness is to mean anything in his universe, it is absolutely necessary that God’s righteousness should be beyond dispute. God must, in some way, dissociate himself personally from evil in the world. He must make a clear stand against it. If he doesn’t, then all moral standards and values are themselves called into question. So, how is forgiveness possible if God is to remain righteous? It is possible because **no dilemma is bigger than God.**

Jack and Jill were married. They had been living together for several years, and everything seemed perfect. But then along came Joe, a blond, blue-eyed, muscle-bound boy with an English accent and a bronze tan. Jill became infatuated with him, so one day, quite suddenly, she walked out and left her husband Jack so she could go be with Joe.

Six months passed—six months in which Jack spent a good deal of time weeping inconsolably. But eventually, he pulled himself together. He decided that he was better off living alone and tried his best to put Jill out of his mind.

Then, as suddenly as Jill had departed, there she was again—on the doorstep now, luggage in hand. Things hadn't worked out with Joe. She discovered that her English hunk had a mean streak and a wandering eye, so the infatuation fizzled. She wanted to apologize to Jack and make amends. She wanted things to go back to the way they were. She wanted to come home. All this she communicates to Jack while standing on the stoop.

The question at this point is this: "What is Jack going to do?" What would *you* do? It's possible that Jack's love for Jill has died—murdered by the cruel stab in the back of her betrayal and desertion. Perhaps he now just feels emotionally numb to the relationship. If so, his reaction to Jill's appeal is going to be one of total indifference. "Well, you can come in and collect the rest of your stuff if you want, but that's it. I couldn't care less about you or anybody else anymore. I'm done with women. I'm done with marriage. I just want to be left alone."

Another possibility is that Jack is still fuming with inner rage, his sense of honor scalded by his wife's callous infidelity. If that's the situation, he might well lose his temper and scream, "How dare you come back to me! Get out, you wretched woman! I don't ever want to see you again! Go to hell!" Both scenarios are real possibilities.

But what if Jack's love for Jill is still burning within his heart? What if he has long dreamed of their reconciliation? What if he wants to be with her again? How would he react then? He can't fake indifference; he cares about her too deeply. He can't pretend he isn't angry, because he is, and he has every right to be. Yet, he can't tell Jill to get lost either, because he desperately wants her to stay. So, what does he do?

For Jack to be true to himself, he has to say something like this: "I still love you, Jill. And I *do* want you back. I've *longed* for you to come back. In fact, it's my heart's desire that we be together again. But you have to understand how much you've angered me and hurt me by what you've done. Your betrayal caused me deep personal pain and great public humiliation. I was devastated by it. And I've never felt so dishonored in all my life. You really hurt me."

If there is to be any chance of their relationship being restored, Jack must find the inner resources to absorb the injury that Jill has inflicted on him. His love must be large enough to overcome his indignation. His grace must be deep enough to swallow his own dishonor. His mercy must be great enough to accept the pain associated with extending the hand of reconciliation toward his wayward wife. **For Jack to forgive Jill, he has to be willing to suffer whatever pain there may be in not exacting vengeance, drinking instead the bitter cup himself.**

While this may not be a perfect illustration, according to the New testament, something like that is happening on the cross. We have deserted God, as Jill had deserted Jack. We have angered God as Jill had angered Jack. We have dishonored God as Jill had dishonored Jack. We have broken God's law, and, more to the point, we have broken his

heart. We have sinned against him—every one of us. And, as a result, God *could* have turned the cold shoulder of indifference toward us. Or he *could* have, with perfect justice, vented his wrath toward us and told us to go to hell.

But here is the good news that spells hope for the world: God’s divine heart yearns for reconciliation. He does not want to give us up (cf. Hos 11:8), so he says to humanity, “I love you, and I want you back. My deepest desire is that we have a true and lasting relationship once again. I want genuine reconciliation. But you have to realize how much you’ve dishonored me by what you’ve done. That’s all I ask. Just come back to me humbly, and grace will be yours in abundance—and we can be together again. I am willing to swallow the pain myself to make it happen.”

Do we realize the cost of human reconciliation with God? Do we need to see it spelled out in dramatic form? If so, look at the cross, for it’s there we see the God of the universe allowing his heart to be ravaged by the sin of this world. There we see the cataclysmic collision of divine attributes—holiness and love, justice and mercy, righteousness and grace—all resolving themselves in mutual satisfaction until there is a just and settled peace in the violent death of his beloved Son.

When we look at the cross, no one can accuse God of moral indifference now. As Paul argues in the book of Romans, the cross of Christ demonstrates the *righteousness* of God, not just the *grace* of God. All things are properly settled. As gruesome as it may be to consider, the bruised and bleeding Jesus—humanity’s perfect *substitute*—became the focal point of God’s revulsion toward sin. Here, then, is the gospel at its core. For those who embrace Jesus as their substitute, no revulsion remains. Humanity’s sin crisis has been rectified once and for all.

VII. CONCLUSION: THE DEATH OF CHRIST—IT IS FOR US

On one occasion, Jesus said to his disciples, “Even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom *for* many” (Mark 10:45). Additionally, the Apostle Paul wrote, “God made him who had no sin to be sin *for* us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Cor 5:21).

Here is the good news of the cross: A great transaction took place there that God the Father accepted. He planned it, authorized it, carried it out, and honored it. That transaction is this: **God treated Jesus as we deserved so that he could treat us as Jesus deserved.** Whatever else the cross may entail, it surely entails the concept of substitution. As Charitie Lees Bancroft (1841-1892) wrote:

When Satan tempts me to despair
And tells me of the guilt within
Upward I look and see Him there
Who made an end of all my sin
Because the sinless Savior died

My sinful soul is counted free
 For God the just is satisfied
 To look on Him and pardon me

Luke Garrett (1959-2016) captured the same theological truth in his song, “Wondrous Exchange”:

The victim on a cross of execution
 The Lamb of God that sacrificed his life
 And the sky grew dark, and the rain poured down
 The price of my redemption was so high
 For on that hill was done the great transaction
 As God paid out the ransom for my sin
 I can walk away; I am truly free
 From the prison and the hell my life had been

A wondrous exchange
 A wondrous exchange
 An offer so great I can scarcely believe
 His crown for my shame
 His loss for my gain
 His death for my life
 What a wondrous exchange

The **objective** dimension of Christ’s redeeming work on the cross opens up a wide variety of legitimate **subjective** expressions of its efficacy and impact on believers and their spiritual lives.

In his book *The Cross of Christ*, John R. W. Stott (1921-2011) writes, “I could never myself believe in God, if it were not for the cross. The only God I believe in is the One Nietzsche ridiculed as ‘God on the cross.’ In the real world of pain, how could one worship a God who was immune to it?” In similar fashion, Edward Shillito (1872-1948) wrote in his poem “Jesus of the Scars”:

The other gods were strong; but Thou wast weak;
 They rode, but Thou didst stumble to a throne;
 But to our wounds only God’s wounds can speak,
 And not a god has wounds, but Thou alone.

Finally, the subjective impact of Christ’s objective atonement is well illustrated in the famous hymn by Horatio Spafford (1828-1888), “It Is Well with My Soul”:

My sin—oh, the bliss of this glorious thought—
 My sin, not in part but the whole,
 Is nailed to the cross, and I bear it no more,
 Praise the Lord, praise the Lord, O my soul!

The atonement is objective before it is subjective—and that is precisely what gives its subjective dimension so much power for the church in every age. Because Jesus is our substitute, we *love* him and want to follow his example.