



Soteriology

The Atonement

Introduction:

Throughout church history, numerous interpretations of the atonement have been proposed in an effort to explain Christ's redemptive work on the cross. Examining these views is vital, for it not only guards us from repeating past theological errors but also sharpens our understanding of the truth revealed in Scripture.

I. Insufficient Views of the Atonement

A. Ransom to Satan Theory

1. "Advocates of this theory believe that on the cross a commercial transaction took place in which Jesus' death was the price paid to ransom the human race from its bondage to sin. This idea seems to be precisely what Scripture suggests in Matthew 20:28, which cites Jesus himself as saying, 'The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life—a ransom for many.'"¹
2. In the postapostolic age, early church fathers who held to this position are, but aren't limited to: Origen (who is credited with the origination of this theory), Gregory of Nyssa, Augustine, and Irenaeus.
3. This position teaches that when Jesus died, he paid a ransom to the devil. Gregory taught that the purpose of the incarnation of Jesus was to be the "bait on the hook of his deity" to deceive Satan. When Satan had Jesus killed, he was deceived and beaten; therefore, the ransom was paid by the death of Christ.
4. "It is interesting to note that this would be the dominant understanding of the atonement for almost one thousand years, at least until the time of Anselm."²
5. The problem with this is that a perfectly holy and sovereign God owes Satan nothing. Satan doesn't own the unbelieving souls; Scripture never asserts this idea. The Bible never once states to whom a ransom is paid, even though Matthew 20 does say Jesus gave His life as a ransom. This theory gives Satan more credit than he is due.

B. Recapitulation Theory

1. Irenaeus of Lyons (AD 130–202) is the one who proposed this theory of the atonement.³
2. "[This theory] teaches that Jesus 'recapitulated' the life of Adam, Israel, and all people, bringing humanity into fullness before God."⁴
3. Recapitulation Theory of Atonement says that Jesus saved us by redoing human life the right way. The key thought that Irenaeus was trying to communicate is "what was lost in Adam in restored in Christ."
4. "In essence, Christ reversed the course for mankind upon which Adam had set humanity."⁵

¹ Paige Patterson, "The Work of Christ," in *A Theology for the Church* (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2014), 459.

² Ibid., 459.

³ Ibid., 458.

⁴ D. Brockway, "Atonement," in *The Lexham Bible Dictionary*, ed. John D. Barry et al. (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press,

2016).

⁵ Paige Patterson, "The Work of Christ," in *A Theology for the Church* (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2014), 458.

5. This view just doesn't encapsulate all that the Scripture teaches. While it may be somewhat true in what it teaches, it doesn't encompass everything that Scripture does.

C. Satisfaction Theory

1. "Anselm of Canterbury (1033–1109) made two major contributions to theology. He provided specificity and development for the ontological argument for the existence of God. Even more important, Anselm fashioned the *satisfaction theory* of the atonement."⁶
2. In his book, *Cur Deus Homo*, which was written around 1098 A.D., Anselm tried to answer a huge theological question: "Why did God become man?"
3. "[This theory is an] understanding of the work of Christ based on the metaphor of God as a Sovereign who, having been dishonored by sin, must receive satisfaction."⁷
4. "Anselm developed the idea that heaven had been depleted of its full coterie of inhabitants in the fall of Satan and his entourage. The necessity of replacing these fallen angels with redeemed humans called for an atonement in which payment was provided to satisfy the wounded honor and majesty of God. On the one hand, only man, as the offender, could render this satisfaction. On the other hand, God alone can forgive sin. The dilemma is resolved by the incarnation of the Word of God. The incarnate Son, the God-man, satisfies this debt on the cross."⁸
5. While this theory of atonement is somewhat good, it fails to explain all that Scripture does. The problem is that sin doesn't just dishonor God; it breaks His law, which deserves punishment. God's justice demands that sin be punished, not merely that His honor must be restored. Anselm saw sin more as an insult to a king, which is dishonorable, but the Bible teaches that sin is a violation of a holy God's law.

D. Governmental Theory

1. Hugo Grotius (1583–1645), a Dutch jurist and student of Jacobus Arminius, propounded this theory, which posited the death of Jesus as an offering to God, not to make possible forgiveness of sin but to restore moral order to the universe. Thus, God can freely forgive sin, and the cross restores a sense of moral rightness to the universe.⁹
2. "The governmental theory downplays the notion that Christ actually paid a penalty corresponding to man's particular sins. Instead, Christ's death served as a token suffering for sins in general—demonstrating that a penalty must be paid when laws are broken, but not actually paying a specific penalty imposed against specific infractions."¹⁰
3. Charles Ryrie rightly summarized this theory when he said, "God's government demanded the death of Christ to show His displeasure with sin. Christ also did not suffer the penalty of the Law, but God accepted His suffering as a substitute for that penalty."¹¹
4. This theory is another case of capturing part of what Scripture teaches while missing the whole of it. Christ didn't just pay for random sins as a catch-all, but He suffered for specific sins, as 1 Corinthians 15:3 and Hebrews 2:17 state.

⁶ Ibid., 460.

⁷ Stanley Grenz, David Guretzki, and Cherith Fee Nordling, *Pocket Dictionary of Theological Terms* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1999), 105.

⁸ Paige Patterson, "The Work of Christ," in *A Theology for the Church* (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2014), 460.

⁹ Ibid., 461.

¹⁰ John MacArthur and Richard Mayhue, eds., *Biblical Doctrine: A Systematic Summary of Bible Truth* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2017), 537.

¹¹ Charles Caldwell Ryrie, *Basic Theology: A Popular Systematic Guide to Understanding Biblical Truth* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1999), 356.

- **1 Corinthians 15:3** — *For I delivered unto you first of all that which I also received, how that **Christ died for our sins** according to the scriptures;*
 - **Hebrews 2:17 (ESV)** — *Therefore he had to be made like his brothers in every respect, so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, **to make propitiation for the sins of the people.***
5. Christ's sufferings were not merely a token example of God's antipathy toward evil, as if God were simply averse to evil in general but tolerates it on the whole. No, God's justice is meticulous; he has provided a fully sufficient payment for sin in Christ. Without particular payment for particular sins, God's absolute justice is not satisfied, and thus sinners have no hope of forgiveness.¹²

E. More Theories Rapid-fired

1. Moral Influence

- This view was formulated by Abelard (1079-1142). It teaches that the death of Christ was not an expiation for sin but a suffering with His creatures to manifest God's love. This suffering love should awaken a responsive love in the sinner and bring an ethical change in him. This, then, liberates from the power of sin.¹³ **Just soft and weak.**

2. Example Theory

- This view was formulated by Socinus (1539-1604). It teaches that Christ's death did not atone for sin, but revealed faith and obedience as the way to eternal life and inspiring people to lead a similar life.¹⁴ **Gross.**

3. Dramatic Theory aka Christus Victor

- This view was formulated by Aulen (1879-1978). It teaches that Christ in His death gained victory over the powers of evil.¹⁵ **Very insufficient to the whole of Scripture.**

4. Barthian Theory

- This view was formulated by Barth (1886-1968). It teaches that Christ's death was principally a revelation of God's love and His hatred of sin.¹⁶
- These views are not that distant in the past. People still hold to some of these views, and while some of them may not be heretical, they are insufficient in what Christ's atoning work on Calvary accomplished.

II. Penal Substitutionary Atonement

- **Definition:** *Penal Substitutionary Atonement* teaches that Jesus Christ, in His death, bore the penalty for human sin by substituting Himself in the place of sinners, thereby satisfying the justice of God and reconciling humanity to Him.

A. The History of PSA

1. During the Reformation, both Luther and Calvin wrote on the atonement. "Conflating the classic view and the satisfaction model, Luther saw the death of Jesus as a substitute for human condemnation. Death is the just penalty attached inevitably to sin, and the death of Jesus defeats Satan and evil. For Luther, the impossibility of securing salvation by human

¹² John MacArthur and Richard Mayhue, eds., *Biblical Doctrine: A Systematic Summary of Bible Truth* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2017), 538.

¹³ Charles Caldwell Ryrie, *Basic Theology: A Popular Systematic Guide to Understanding Biblical Truth* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1999), 356.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 356.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 356.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 356.

efforts rendered penal substitution inevitable, even though his own struggles against personal and ecclesiastical evil led him to expressions of the doctrine that echoed the classic view. Calvin's view, elucidated both in the *Institutes* and in his commentaries, emphasized both the sacrifice of Jesus and the *penal substitution* view of the atonement."¹⁷

2. Calvin noted the necessity of the Mediator who is both truly God and truly man. "Citing John 3:16; Romans 5:8, 21; and Philippians 2:7, he insisted that Christ's sacrificial death was a propitiation of the wrath of God."¹⁸

B. The Essential Components of PSA

1. The Nature of Sin

- a. "When man sinned against God, his sin erected a legal and relational barrier between him and God. The divine law was broken; man thus incurred guilt and is required to pay the penalty of spiritual death. The holiness of God was offended, and thus God's wrath was aroused against sin. This leaves man alienated from God; broken fellowship and even hostility mark the relationship between God and man, who is in bondage to sin and death. If there is to be any redemption from sin and reconciliation to God, man's sin must be atoned for."¹⁹

- **1 John 3:4** — *Whosoever committeth sin transgresseth also the law: for sin is the transgression of the law.*
- **Romans 6:23a** — *For the wages of sin is death;*

- b. Man cannot do anything to atone for his own sin, except be punished for all eternity in hell, separated from a holy God. There is no amount of good works that man can do to pay penance for his own sin.

- **Isaiah 64:6** — *But we are all as an unclean thing, And all our righteousnesses are as filthy rags; And we all do fade as a leaf; And our iniquities, like the wind, have taken us away.*

2. Divine Justice

- a. God is holy; therefore, He cannot tolerate sin in His presence. God's justice requires that sin not go unpunished.

- **Romans 3:25–26 (CSB)** — *25 God presented him as the mercy seat by his blood, through faith, to demonstrate his righteousness, because in his restraint God passed over the sins previously committed. 26 God presented him to demonstrate his righteousness at the present time, so that he would be just and justify the one who has faith in Jesus.*
- **Habakkuk 1:13** — *Thou art of purer eyes than to behold evil, And canst not look on iniquity: Wherefore lookest thou upon them that deal treacherously, And holdest thy tongue when the wicked devoureth the man that is more righteous than he?*
- **Joshua 24:19–20** — *19 And Joshua said unto the people, Ye cannot serve the LORD: for he is an holy God; he is a jealous God; he will not forgive your transgressions nor your sins. 20 If ye forsake the LORD, and serve strange gods, then he will turn and do you hurt, and consume you, after that he hath done you good.*

¹⁷ Paige Patterson, "The Work of Christ," in *A Theology for the Church* (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2014), 462.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 462.

¹⁹ John MacArthur and Richard Mayhue, eds., *Biblical Doctrine: A Systematic Summary of Bible Truth* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2017), 522.

- **Isaiah 5:16** — *But the LORD of hosts shall be exalted in judgment, And God that is holy shall be sanctified in righteousness.*
- **Romans 1:18** — *For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who hold the truth in unrighteousness;*

3. Christ became our Substitution

- a. "God in his love has appointed the Lord Jesus Christ to stand in the place of sinners to bear their sin, guilt, and punishment and thereby satisfy God's wrath on their behalf."²⁰
 - **Romans 5:8** — *But God commendeth his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.*
- b. Isaiah's Suffering Servant prophecy (Isa. 53) is fulfilled in Jesus, who bore humanity's sins and punishment. By imputation, God counted our guilt to Christ, who became a curse for us (Gal. 3:13) and bore our sins on the cross (1 Pet. 2:24). Through his suffering—being "pierced for our transgressions" and "crushed for our iniquities" (Isa. 53:5)—Christ secured our peace and healing. These passages specifically point to Christ being the substitution for us.
- c. "The New Testament attaches the concept of penal substitution to the cross of Christ by using four Greek prepositions that all have a substitutionary force: *peri* ("for," "concerning"), *dia* ("because of," "for the sake of"), *anti* ("in place of," "instead of"), and *hyper* ("on behalf of"). First, Christ "suffered ... for sins" (*peri hamartiōn*, 1 Pet. 3:18) and thus is "the propitiation for our sins" (*peri tōn hamartiōn hēmōn*, 1 John 2:2; 4:10). These texts teach that our sins demanded that we suffer under the wrath of God yet that Christ has done this in our place. Second, Jesus is said to have died "for your sake" (*di' hymas*, 2 Cor. 8:9; cf. 1 Cor. 8:11), another clear indicator of substitution."²¹
- d. Christ took our place; He was our substitute for the punishment of our sin. Our penalty for sin was laid on Him and His righteousness is imputed to believers.
- e. "There is no more well-attested doctrine in all the New Testament than the vicarious suffering of the Lord Jesus Christ on behalf of his people. Penal-substitutionary atonement is woven into the fabric of new covenant revelation from beginning to end, for it is the very heart of the gospel message."²²

III. The Extent of the Atonement

- The question that undoubtedly must be arising in our minds must be, "For whom did Christ die?" This has been a debate for centuries, if not millennia. Did Christ die for the sins of the whole world or just the elect? If He died for all, then why aren't all saved? Is there a limit to the atonement? All of these questions and more have been debated, and yet there is no perfect unity on this position.
- A. What does the Bible say?
- **John 3:16–17** — *16 For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life. 17 For God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world; but that the world through him might be saved.*

²⁰ John MacArthur and Richard Mayhue, eds., *Biblical Doctrine: A Systematic Summary of Bible Truth* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2017), 523.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 523.

²² John MacArthur and Richard Mayhue, eds., *Biblical Doctrine: A Systematic Summary of Bible Truth* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2017), 524.

- **John 1:29** — *The next day John seeth Jesus coming unto him, and saith, Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world.*
- **Romans 11:32** — *For God hath concluded them all in unbelief, that he might have mercy upon all.*
- **1 John 2:2** — *And he is the propitiation for our sins: and not for ours only, but also for the sins of the whole world.*
- **John 10:15, 26 (ESV)** — *15 just as the Father knows me and I know the Father; and I lay down my life for the sheep. 26 but you do not believe because you are not among my sheep.*
- **1 Timothy 2:3–6** — *3 For this is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Saviour; 4 Who will have all men to be saved, and to come unto the knowledge of the truth. 5 For there is one God, and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus; 6 Who gave himself a ransom for all, to be testified in due time.*
- **Titus 2:11** — *For the grace of God that bringeth salvation hath appeared to all men,*
- **1 Timothy 4:10** — *For therefore we both labour and suffer reproach, because we trust in the living God, who is the Saviour of all men, specially of those that believe.*
- **1 John 4:14** — *And we have seen and do testify that the Father sent the Son to be the Saviour of the world.*
- **Acts 20:28** — *Take heed therefore unto yourselves, and to all the flock, over the which the Holy Ghost hath made you overseers, to feed the church of God, which he hath purchased with his own blood.*
- **Isaiah 53:11–12** — *11 He shall see of the travail of his soul, and shall be satisfied: By his knowledge shall my righteous servant justify many; For he shall bear their iniquities. 12 Therefore will I divide him a portion with the great, And he shall divide the spoil with the strong; Because he hath poured out his soul unto death: And he was numbered with the transgressors; And he bare the sin of many, And made intercession for the transgressors.*

Conclusion:

While many theories attempt to capture the meaning of Christ's death, only the Penal Substitutionary Atonement fully satisfies the biblical teaching that Jesus bore the penalty of sin on behalf of sinners. It upholds both God's holiness and His love, demonstrating that divine justice and mercy meet perfectly at the cross. Therefore, believers must hold firmly to this truth, for it is the heart of the gospel and the foundation of our reconciliation with God.