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2 - What About “Penal Substitution”?

During the Reformation of the early 1500’s, Calvinist ideas became influential in Europe. From Calvin (1509-1564) came the doctrine of Penal Substitution - the principle that Christ was punished in the place of sinners, and this satisfied God’s justice regarding sin.

There is much truth to this. However, if taken the wrong way, one might easily wonder, did Jesus have to come in order to rescue us from God? Is God a tyrant who must be pacified? Obviously, that is the wrong conclusion.

Obvious too is the source of Calvin’s Penal-Substitution doctrine: the *Old Testament* practice of sacrificial worship. In those days continual sacrifices for sin served as a constant reminder to the people: something is wrong with humanity, and for this forgiveness is needed.

But then a person might ask, “Why do I have to worry so much about forgiveness? God is perfect, and we’re not. But since we are His creations, and if He loves us, then is He not obliged to forgive us?” That sort of familiarity with God tends to view His benefits in a kind of selfish, superstitious way. God becomes a magic genie whose only job is to grant us our every wish; or conversely, if one has not grasped the merciful side of His nature, then God becomes a kind of stern overlord who must be appeased.

Probably the answer to the question about forgiveness is that, yes, God is obliged to forgive us if and when we turn away from evil and turn to Him. And He does so faithfully because He is merciful in nature. For His pleasure we were created; He desires relationship with us. But if we’re dwelling in sin, then probably we’re not all that pleasant. The fact is, *“there is none righteous”,* and we all *“fall short of the glory of God”*. (Romans 3:10,23)

The combination of God’s holiness, righteousness, and justice fully

condemns humankind. Every human being sins, and thus offends God’s holiness—His very nature. As He is righteous and just, He must give everyone what they deserve; and what we all deserve, as sinners, is punishment for sin. Since God’s holiness requires His separation from sin, because of our sin we deserve permanent separation from Him.

...

God’s righteousness and justice can seem frightening in some ways. To know that He hates sin, that He feels indignation every day, and that sin must be punished, can be fearsome. At the same time, this is why salvation is so beautiful and important. God loves us and sent His Son to save us from the punishment that we, as sinners, deserve.

[[“God’s Righteousness and Justice”](#) in *The Heart of it All: The Nature and Character of God* series, 20 September 2011]

So how can we please God? When we accept His gift, the sacrifice of His Son, we are released from the bondage of corruption that befell the human race long ago in the Garden of Eden. We are on the road to recovery and reconciliation with God. *“For by one offering He has perfected forever those who are being sanctified.”* (Hebrews 10:14)

Nowadays, we live in a culture where sacrificial worship is not practiced. Furthermore, there is a general lack of awareness of the supernatural realm, no consciousness of God’s presence. Although our science-oriented culture has wiped out superstitious beliefs and practices, the downside to this is that the emphasis on rationalism has sent much of humanity into the ignorance of materialism: no consciousness of the supernatural - total materialism, naturalism, atheism.

So how can there be such a thing as sin when there is no God to be accountable to? This, coupled with the end of sacrificial worship, has engendered a new breed of secular culture, one that is totally oblivious to the reality of sin. But we need to be aware of our sinful nature and see things from God’s viewpoint. The following quote articulates the kind of perspective we should have (but is often missing in modern culture):

Because of God’s inherent holiness, He cannot abide sin; yet all humans sin. As... a result of God’s perfect righteousness and justice,

there is, and must be, retribution and punishment for sin. However, because God is also supremely loving and merciful, He designed the plan of redemption which required Jesus’ incarnation, His sinless life, and the sacrifice of His life on the cross for the sins of humankind—all of which satisfies the righteousness and justice of God... which brings reconciliation between God and those who receive Jesus. God did this out of love for us, His creation. [from “[God’s Holiness](#)” in *The Heart of It All: The Nature and Character of God* series, 13 September 2011]

This quote outlines two opposing positions that only the God who inhabits infinity could hope to resolve: 1) the holiness of God leading to retribution for sin 2) the mercy of God leading to humanity’s reconciliation with Him.

That mercy was accomplished through God entering our world, becoming human in the Person of Jesus Christ, carrying that huge weight of sin on Himself, getting punished for it and dying under it, then returning from Death, whole again, resurrected!

This is the reality of what happened some 2,000 years ago. And it is believed by millions throughout the world. And it is also disbelieved and rejected by millions throughout the world - especially in modern, secular culture.

Those who are imbued with secular values in modern secular culture lack both consciousness of sin and consciousness of supernatural reality - a very deep level of ignorance! In days of old, these were the foundational underpinnings of human society, regardless of the type of worship - whether that of the true God or the worship of idols.

But in our modern culture, people often find themselves stranded in a void of nothingness. To accept this morbid view of reality, according to Existentialist philosophy, is the supreme attainment, the brave stance of the rugged individual (although existentialists would not like to use the word “stranded”). To them religion/faith in God is a cowardly retreat from the stark reality (the only reality they will say) of an impersonal, material universe. And you, by your own strength and willpower, just have to make the best of it.

Do without this imaginary God, they would say. Don't rely on that “crutch”. Of course, to anyone who has known Christ, this so-called “crutch”, this God, is anything but imaginary. As the apostle Peter noted long ago, *“For we did not follow cunningly devised fables when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but were eyewitnesses of His majesty.”* (2Peter 1:16)

Anyway, all that to say, in this modern day, the concepts that used to undergird the faith of those in old time are not there anymore. The practice of offering sacrifices as a form of worship has disappeared from use in modern culture. And for awareness of the spiritual realm, that has been replaced by the science-oriented embrace of the physical-material realm as the only existing reality. As a result the conceptions that were generally accepted in ancient times seem strange to us in the modern world.

For a person in modern times, let us say someone imbued with existentialist and atheist philosophy, that person, not having much consciousness about sin (the way people did in days of old), the penal-substitution explanation would not resonate so well. “Why should I worry about my ‘sins’, or even going to Hell?” he or she might think. “I’m more concerned with the question of, is there any existence at all beyond death and the grave?” For such a person, their focus of concern is different. Christ’s Resurrection, victory over death, and return to life would be the “explanation”, that would resonate with that person.

Like a many-faceted jewel, there are different aspects to Christ’s atonement, all of which are important, of course. But at different times and in different cultures and concerns, certain aspects of the atonement will stand out more than others. This feature of God’s nature, His holiness, was better understood in days of old. But in this modern, secular age, it seems more difficult to grasp the full measure of what it means.

C.S. Lewis expressed the dilemma and limitations of trying to understand how Christ’s death and the “atonement” should work:

The central Christian belief is that Christ’s death has somehow put us right with God and given us a fresh start. Theories as to how it did this are another matter. A good many different theories have been

held as to how it works; what all Christians are agreed on is that it does work... Theories about Christ’s death are not Christianity: they are explanations about how it works. Christians would not all agree as to how important these theories are... But I think they will all agree that the thing itself is infinitely more important than any explanations that theologians have produced. I think they would probably admit that no explanation will ever be quite adequate to the reality...
[“Chapter II-4: What Christians Believe”, *Mere Christianity* by C.S. Lewis, 1952]

In the days of the Old and New Testament, the modern-day escape from supernatural reality - as articulated in philosophies like existentialism, atheism, evolution, materialism - had not yet swept through the cultural landscape, at least not to the extent that it has nowadays.

There are allusions in the ancient Scriptures to this peculiar viewpoint of modern times:

Then the king [Antichrist]... shall exalt and magnify himself ABOVE EVERY GOD, shall speak blasphemies against the God of gods... He shall regard neither the God of his fathers nor the desire of women, NOR REGARD ANY GOD; for he shall EXALT HIMSELF ABOVE THEM ALL. (Daniel 11:36-37)

That Day [of Final Judgment] will not come unless... the man of sin is revealed, the son of perdition, who OPPOSES AND EXALTS HIMSELF ABOVE ALL THAT IS CALLED GOD OR THAT IS WORSHIPED... (2Thessalonians 2:3-4)

It is interesting that the atheistic cultural landscape of our day was foreseen in the ancient Scriptures. Some philosophers from ancient times (like the Epicureans) were even heading in that direction. But on the whole, the kind of philosophical outlook that characterizes our modern day held little currency back in the days of the *Old and New Testament* writings. In those days, even emperors, who had the status of divine beings, were obliged to worship the other gods in their society’s religious pantheon.

In those days, science had not advanced to the point where it could be

used to undermine the foundational belief in the supernatural realm. That is a big subject, by the way, and is addressed in the [Retrieving Our Lost Heritage](#) series of posts.

And related to belief in the supernatural realm, of course, was the practice of sacrificial worship. That form of worship would often devolve into a going-through-the motions ritual. And the same happens in this day and age. People want to bargain with God rather than enter into direct personal relationship with him. In the *Book of Isaiah* we read, *“These people draw near with their mouths and honor Me with their lips, but have removed their hearts far from Me.”* (Isaiah 29:13)

This theme of God’s disillusionment with sacrificial worship appears several times in the *Old Testament*. In Isaiah 1, the Lord goes so far as to say, *“I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams and the fat of fed cattle. I do not delight in the blood of bulls, or of lambs or goats.”* (1:11) Further ahead, the Lord explains what He really desires: *“Wash yourselves, make yourselves clean; put away the evil of your doings from before My eyes. Cease to do evil, learn to do good.”* (1:16-17) The people were using their religious service as a cover for their misdeeds. God saw and didn’t like it.

And elsewhere, especially from king David, we learn that God prefers to know us intimately, rather than just having our obedience through religious observance:

“For You do not desire sacrifice, or else I would give it; You do not delight in burnt offering. The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit, a broken and a contrite heart - these, O God, You will not despise... Then You shall be pleased with the sacrifices of righteousness... The LORD is near to those who have a broken heart, and saves such as have a contrite spirit.” (Psalm 51:16-17,19; 34:18)

To know God intimately, as these Psalms put it, requires being *“broken”* and *“contrite”*. That is the starting point: the realization that we *“fall short of the glory of God”* and *“have sinned”*, and that causes us to feel sorrow, to be *“contrite”*. Although we were made in the *“image of God”* (Genesis 1:26-27), we have this sinful nature that we need to be aware of and not allow to rule over us. And how do we do this? By

depending on God’s help, the Holy Spirit, to overcome that lower side of our nature.

This does not mean to say that the Penal-Substitution idea is wrong. John the Baptist declared, *“Behold! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!”* (John 1:29) As the lamb had been a sacrifice for sins in the Old Testament days, so Christ’s sacrifice of Himself, the *Lamb of God*, has atoned for our sins.

But it doesn’t stop there. In addition, God has bestowed on us the power to overcome the sin-nature that we’ve inherited; it goes beyond payment for sin. For this reason the *Old Testament* viewpoint became limited, which prompted some to want to throw out the Penal-Substitution view altogether:

If it be asked how... the doctrine of substitution can have been permitted to remain so long an article of faith to so many, I answer, On the same principle on which God took up and made use of the sacrifices men had, in their lack of faith, invented as a way of pleasing him... God accepted men’s sacrifices until he could get them to see... that he does not care for such things. [from the sermon “Justice” in *Unspoken Sermons* series by George Macdonald (1824-1905)]

But Penal Substitution was how God’s people understood worship in the days of the Old Testament. This is not hard to understand. The Hebrews were living amongst cultures and nations whose religions and gods demanded appeasement in the form of sacrifices, even human sacrifices. The Hebrews’ manner of worship reflected somewhat that of their cultural surroundings. And it did help to reinforce their understanding of the basic sin nature of humanity and of the purpose of their coming Messiah’s work. Even in the New Testament, we read, *“without the shedding of blood there is no remission”* and *“the blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanses us from all sin.”* (Hebrews 9:22, 1John 1:7)

In addition, the emphasis in the *Old Testament* era focused on the revealing of God’s power as superior to the gods and idols of surrounding nations. But then in the *New Testament* age, with Christ’s Coming, and as God began to reveal more about Himself, our conception of God’s nature grew into a level of greater spiritual maturity.

“He [Jesus] introduced and affirmed a new understanding of God as Father and the brotherhood of mankind.” [from “Christ Seeking the Lost” sermon by John Lincoln Brandt, 1907]

And when God Himself, in the person of His Son, became the sacrifice that would rescue the human race, that changed the dynamics totally. Jesus Himself, as the Son of God, had the power to forgive sins. And not only was He divine, but He was also human, like us. No more need for sacrifices. The Penal-Substitution view, adequate in the days of the *Old Testament*, became a limited viewpoint in light of the great transformation that the Coming of Christ has brought to our world.

C.S. Lewis has expressed it well:

...We believe that the death of Christ is just that point in history at which something absolutely unimaginable from outside shows through into our own world... if we found that we could fully understand it, that very fact would show it was not what it professes to be - the inconceivable, the uncreated, the thing from beyond nature, striking down into nature like lightning... [“Chapter II-4: What Christians Believe”, *Mere Christianity* by C.S. Lewis, 1952]

“*Grace and truth came through Jesus Christ*” - which far surpassed the rules and regulations of the old Law and practices of sacrificial worship. (John 1:17) Actually, this was not new; His “*grace and truth*” had already been evident in the Old Testament.

But the *Old Testament* sacrifices and the *New Testament* view of Penal-Substitution do get across the point that we humans fall far short of the righteousness that the holiness of God demands. Sacrificial worship makes us aware of that. And that is important. But going beyond that, as the *Old Testament* prophets pointed out, God wants to enter into personal relationship with us. And Jesus taught the same to His disciples:

***“I no longer call you slaves, because a master doesn’t confide in his slaves. Now you are my friends, since I have told you everything the Father told me.”* (John 15:15, NLT)**

With Christ’s coming, the time had come for God’s truth and favor

(grace) to break out of the confines of Judaism and spread abroad into all the world. Rather than emphasizing the power of “God Almighty”, it came time to emphasize the love of God, that *“God so loved the world”* and *“God is love”*. (John 3:16, 1John 4:8)

In other words, God’s aim was to demonstrate His care and concern for the entire world, rather than limit it to just one race of people who had been “chosen” - but chosen only for a particular time in history (and in this present Age, no more “chosen” than any other race of people in the Earth).

For the Jewish people of old, the conception of Christ as the *Lamb of God* sacrificed once and for all for human sin helped them in that cultural environment to understand the change that had taken place in their worship of God. And the Scriptures place much emphasis on this Penal-Substitution viewpoint. There is nothing amiss here. It was an integral part of the cultural understanding and expectation of people in those days.

Regarding this matter of Christ’s atoning sacrifice, some thinkers and theologians, such as C.S. Lewis and his mentor George MacDonald, took a dim view of the popular conception of Christ as being a substitute, taking the punishment that we deserve. They felt that viewpoint was limited and failed to encompass the totality of how God wants to relate to the human race.

In the view of Lewis and MacDonald, Christ came, not only to forgive us of our sins, but also to save us from our sinful nature. And that is certainly true. And it adds greater depth to John the Baptist’s declaration, *“Behold! the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!”* (John 1:29)

In their view, to build on the *Old Testament* emphasis on sin-forgiveness, the focus needed to shift to the *New Testament* emphasis on becoming *“a new creation”*, to *“serve in the newness of the Spirit”*. (Galatians 6:15, Romans 7:6)

That Christ is our substitute sacrifice is true enough, but the problem is that believers can focus on that aspect too much and forget all about becoming *“renewed in the spirit of your mind”* and to *“put on the new*

man which was created according to God, in true righteousness and holiness” (Ephesians 4:23-24) It was about the sin-disease itself, the disease of cosmic evil that humankind had become infected with, and the need to destroy it. So, being no longer under its power, that enables us to “walk in newness of life”.

As Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life. (Romans 6:4)

Our old sinful selves were crucified with Christ so that sin might lose its power in our lives. We are no longer slaves to sin. (Romans 6:6, NLT)

For this purpose the Son of God was manifested, that He might destroy the works of the devil. (1John 3:8)

So, the issue of forgiveness of sins was settled once and for all by the death of Christ. ([Hebrews 10:12,14](#)) And that is a great relief for many a guilt-ridden, sin-laden soul to realize. But going beyond this, the gift of Salvation in Christ motivates believers to cooperate with the Holy Spirit to become renewed, to become more Christ-like, to become true lovers of God and fellow human beings. This adds a lot more depth to the meaning of atonement, which goes beyond forgiveness of sins. The theological term for this, by the way, is sanctification.

And it was summed up long ago in this prophetic description about the purpose of the *New Covenant*: *“But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel* after those days, says the LORD; I will put My law in their minds, write it in their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people.”* (Jeremiah 31:33) (*“House of Israel” means “God’s people” which in turn means the followers of Christ, a reality that is outlined in the *New Testament*: *“If you are Christ’s, then you are Abraham’s seed.”* - Galatians 3:29, along with several other Scriptures in the *New Testament*)

There is yet more to consider on this subject about the *Wrath of God*, having to do with how we understand the oft-used word *“punishment”* - *which* is the subject of the next Post.

What Do We Mean by the “Wrath of God”? (2)

Continue to: [3 - What Do We Mean by “Punishment” ?](#)