

Did Jesus Really Die as the Substitute for Our Sins?

Did Jesus really pay for our sins on the cross, taking our punishment for us? Did He really die as an atoning sacrifice on our behalf?

In recent years, this doctrine, known as penal substitutionary atonement (PSA), has come under increasing attack, with some Christian leaders claiming that for God to punish His Son for our sins would be an example of “cosmic child abuse” (Steve Chalke).

This past Saturday, I was able to debate this important issue with pastor Brian Zahnd, who was eloquent in his arguments against PSA, claiming that it made our Father into a “monster god” and a “pagan deity.” (You can watch the debate [here](#).)

Are these charges true?

As I stated in the debate, I find it highly offensive when anyone characterizes my heavenly Father, the God and Father of the Lord Jesus, as a “monster” who engaged in “cosmic child abuse.”

This is a perverse description of the glorious gospel, since the doctrine of PSA describes the greatest act of love the world has ever seen: The Father sending His Son to die in our place, and the Son willingly laying down His life to save us from our sins and to make us holy. What love!

We sinned; He died. We were guilty; He took our punishment.

Jesus died for our sins. The Messiah died for the ungodly (Rom. 5:6). The Son of God took our place!

That Jesus died as the substitute for our sins is one of the central truths in the Bible, as stated in Is. 53:6: “All we

like sheep have gone astray; we have turned—every one—to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all” (Is. 53:6, ESV; the Hebrew for “laid on him” is very strong; note the NET’s “caused the sin of all of us to attack him,” HCSB’s “punished Him,” and the NJV’s “visited upon him”).

As Paul expressed in Rom. 8:32, “He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?”

That’s why Jesus is described as a sacrifice for our sins. See John 1:29, where He is called “the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world”; 1 Cor. 5:7, where Paul describes Him as “our Passover Lamb, who has been sacrificed”; and 1 Pet. 1:19, where is depicted as “a lamb without defect or blemish, by whose blood we have been redeemed.”

Is. 53:10 is more vivid still, especially for those who raise the “cosmic child abuse charge.” The prophet wrote this: “Yet it was the Lord’s will to crush him and cause him to suffer, and though the LORD makes his life an offering for sin, he will see his offspring and prolong his days, and the will of the LORD will prosper in his hand” (Is. 53:10, NIV).

Not only, then, was it the Father’s will that Jesus suffer and die, but His death on the cross served as an *asham*, a guilt offering. And what was at the heart of the sacrificial system in Israel? Substitution!

That’s why the High Priest on the Day of Atonement would lay his hands on the scapegoat and confess the sins of Israel over the goat, which would then be sent into the wilderness, while the blood of another goat would provide expiation, meaning atonement and cleansing for the nation (see Lev. 16).

This is what John taught when he described our Savior as the “propitiation” for our sins (see 1 John 2:2; 4:10), which speaks of His being a sin offering, a means of forgiveness and reconciliation.

In keeping with this Jesus said in Mark 10 and Matthew 20 that He came to give His life a ransom for many (Mark 10:45; Matt. 20:28), and the Greek word used is *lutron*, meaning the price of release.

And when we go back to the Hebrew concepts behind this and the root *k-p-r* (to make atonement; expiate), we see that there is a two-fold aspect to atonement: It turns away God's wrath and it cleanses from sin. (See, for example, Num. 16:40-48; 25:1-11; both use the word "atone" in the sense of "turn away wrath.")

This is what Jesus did on the cross as our Great High Priest, satisfying God's wrath and taking away our sins, and He and His Father did it out of love.

Because Jesus died for our sins, the price has been paid in full, and God can be both just and merciful in forgiving us: just, because our guilt has been punished; merciful, because it was totally underserved.

As Paul explained in Romans 3: "God presented [Jesus] as a propitiation through faith in His blood, to demonstrate His righteousness, because in His restraint God passed over the sins previously committed. God presented Him to demonstrate His righteousness at the present time, so that He would be righteous and declare righteous the one who has faith in Jesus" (Rom. 3:25-26, ESV).

That's what Jesus did for us on the cross, not only suffering the most horrific and ignominious death known in the ancient world, but in doing so, bearing our sins: "He Himself bore our sins in His body on the tree, so that, having died to sins, we might live for righteousness; you have been healed by His wounds. . . . For Christ also suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, that He might bring you to God" (1 Pet. 2:24; 3:18).

At the cross, we see the horrific ugliness of sin, the

devastating consequences of sin, and the extraordinary, mind-boggling, totally humbling, incredibly massive love of God. And when Jesus rose from the dead, He declared victory over all the powers of darkness and provides our justification and vindication. That is our Savior and Lord!

It is therefore a terrible shame, not to mention a totally false and very ugly accusation, to speak of the cross in terms of “cosmic child abuse” and to describe our heavenly Father as a “monster God” and to liken Him to a pagan deity.

How could such selfless love be so terribly misunderstood? In response, I say to one and all, “Behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!” (John 1:29) As stated in John 3:16, “For God so loved the world that He gave His only Son ...”

That is the heart of the gospel.

(For the doctrine of PSA in church history, see here for many examples from the first five centuries.)

Michael Brown *is author of Can You Be Gay and Christian? Responding With Love and Truth to Questions About Homosexuality and host of the nationally syndicated talk radio show The Line of Fire on the Salem Radio Network. He is also president of FIRE School of Ministry and director of the Coalition of Conscience. Follow him at AskDrBrown on Facebook or at @drmichaellbrown on Twitter.*