

In Defense of Penal-Substitutionary Atonement

Samuel A. Dawson, Ph.D.
Professor of Theology
Detroit Baptist Theological Seminary

I. Introduction

II. Defining Penal-Substitutionary Atonement.

A. Factors to consider before defining.

1. *Man's Problem*

- a. God is holy.
- b. God is righteous.
 1. God demands perfect holiness in mankind.
 2. This perfect standard is revealed in His law, which is a reflection of His character (cf. Rom 2:14–15; Ex; Deut; Gal 6:2; 1 Cor 9:19–23).
- c. God is just.
 1. God has set the punishment for breaking His law.
 2. God is determined to carry out that punishment and will do so justly.
- d. Man is a sinner — Having failed to fulfill God's perfect standard man has incurred an infinite penalty for sin (cf. Gal 3:10; Rom 6:23), which he is unable to pay and thus abides under the wrath of God (Jn 3:36; Rom 1:18–32).

2. *God's solution*

- a. The Law's demands must be met (especially since it is a reflection of His character).
 1. Eternal death for sin (Rom 6:23).
 2. Perfect righteousness for acceptance.
- b. While mankind was powerless to meet the Law's demands, God Himself met the Law's demands for mankind.

1. Death for sin – Jesus Christ died for mankind’s sins (substitution). He took the curse of death on Himself (penal) [cf. Gal 3:13; 2 Cor 5:21]. He provided an atonement.
 2. Perfect righteousness for acceptance – Jesus Christ fulfilled all the demands of the Law in perfect obedience (cf. 2 Cor 5:21; Acts 3:14; Heb 4:15; Matt 5:17; Rom 10:4). His righteousness also is necessary for sinful mankind (cf. Rom 8:1–4).
 3. *Atonement*
 - a. Atonement basically means to “wipe away”; “remove.”
 - b. Atonement is made when blood shed in sacrificial death is accepted by God (cf. Lev 17:11).
- B. A Simple Definition/Description –

III. Other Views of Atonement.

- A. *Classic or Ransom Theory* (Irenaeus, Origen, Aulén, et. al.)
 1. Because of sin, man had fallen under Satan’s dominion, God delivered Christ up to Satan as a ransom for those lost souls in captivity. Christ died to appease Satan but Satan could not hold on to Christ permanently. Christ rose powerfully from the grave (cf. Mark 10:15; Col 2:15).
 2. However, the NT teaches that the ransom paid was for the penalty incurred when mankind broke God’s Law. Therefore, atonement is not a payment to Satan, but the payment of the penalty incurred by breaking God’s Law.
- B. *Satisfaction or Juridical Theory* (Anselm, et. al.)
 1. God, like a feudal overlord had His honor offended. Christ’s death satisfied His wounded honor. Sinful man could not have satisfied God’s wounded honor, because he had nothing to offer God. Someone Divine must do it. Furthermore, only someone representing man could satisfy God’s wounded dignity. So a perfect God-man, born of a virgin, paid humanity’s debt.
 2. We might say this theory holds that “Christ offered satisfaction to God’s honor rather than to His wrath” (Demarest, *Cross & Salvation*, p. 152).

3. Anselm argued that, at least, an equal number of men had to be saved in comparison to God's loss of fallen angels, in order to compensate for the loss.
4. Not substitutionary – Christ gained a super-abundance of merit for which He had no need. Thus, He is able to bestow it on those who please Him (this is the predominant Roman Catholic view).

C. *Example or Moral Influence Theory* (Abelard, Socinians, Liberals)

1. No obstacle needed to be removed in order for sinners to be restored to favor with God.
 - a. Man is spiritually and morally capable of doing God's will without any aid from God.
 - b. God is not a God of retributive justice and so He does not demand some sort of satisfaction for sin.
 - c. Socinians held that Christ was just an ordinary man chosen by God to be His Son and provide an example for man by dying on the cross for them.
2. Christ's example influences man to return to God, rather than be estranged from Him.
3. This theory minimizes God's holiness, wrath, justice and righteousness and makes God's love for man His controlling attribute. Christ's death is subjective in its benefit, not objective.

D. *Governmental or Rectoral Theory* (Remonstrants and Arminians, Grotius, Miley)

1. Christ made a token payment to God for man's sins.
2. God, thus, upheld His moral governance and, at the same time, set aside His law that required punishment for sin.
3. God did not have to send Christ to the cross to make a token payment for man's sins.
4. He could have relaxed His laws entirely, but God wanted to highlight the seriousness of sin and His great hatred for it.
5. Man will be saved as he sees how awful sin is and how much it cost God. Thus, he will repent of his sins and reform his life.
6. Again, God didn't have to do this to save man. He could have absolved him of guilt without it. But it was better for the moral fiber of the universe to do it this way.

7. This theory emphasizes the objective purpose of maintaining the moral order in the universe. But Christ did not bear the full penalty of man's sin, nor did He propitiate God's wrath.

E. *Universal Reconciliation Theory* (Barth, etc.)

1. In attempting to oppose Liberals, Barth affirmed that that Christ's death "objectively reconciled the world to God" (Demarest, *Cross & Salvation*, p. 157).
2. In Jesus' incarnation and death, He united humanity in Himself, and both He and humanity bore the penalty of humanity's sins. Furthermore, all men participate in Jesus' resurrection and God forgives men not on the basis of penal satisfaction but on the basis of His own determination to forgive.
3. All men are redeemed. Many don't know it. It is the Spirit's job to awaken all humanity to this truth.

F. *Liberation Theory* – Christ's death was a decisive victory over Satan that gives man hope of victory in this life and the next. This is the theory of many repressed people who have swallowed Liberation Theology. They speak of atonement/redemption in political terms.

IV. Criticisms/Defense of Penal-Substitutionary Atonement.

A. *Atonement is more multi-faceted than penal-substitution.*

- Response: True. But penal-substitution is central to the nature of the atonement Jesus provided. ***It is the hub of the wheel.***

Other motifs of Christ's work on the cross:

1. RANSOM/REDEMPTION – To meet man's problem of *bondage*, which arises from sin against God and the penalty incurred.
2. RECONCILIATION –To meet man's problem of *enmity*, which arises from sin against God and the penalty incurred.
3. EXPIATION – To meet man's problem of *guilt*, which arises from sin against God and the penalty incurred.
4. PROPITIATION – To meet man's problem of *God's wrath*, which arises from sin against God and the penalty incurred.

B. *Penal-substitution diminishes other aspects of Jesus life and work (e.g., life, resurrection).*

▪ Response: Not so.

1. Jesus' incarnation was necessary for the effectiveness of penal-substitutionary atonement.
2. Jesus' perfect life was necessary for the effectiveness of penal-substitutionary atonement.
3. Jesus' resurrection was necessary for the effectiveness of penal-substitutionary atonement.

C. *Differences of opinion over penal-substitutionary atonement should not cause division within the church.*

▪ Response:

1. Improper division dishonors God (cf. Eph 4:2–3; Phil 2:1–5, etc.).
2. Proper division glorifies God (cf. Gal 1:8–9; 1 Cor 5:11; 16:22; 2 Tim 3:1–5; Titus 3:9–10; 2 Jn 9–11).
3. Penal-substitutionary atonement is at the heart of the gospel. Rejection of it leads to the acceptance of a different Jesus and the proclamation of a different gospel.

Once rejection is settled, there must be division!

D. *Penal-substitutionary atonement is a relatively new teaching of the church and prevails only in cultures/societies where it fits into the notions of justice which that culture/society holds.*

▪ Response:

1. Society – At times, society is informed by biblical principles, especially when those influential in a society value the Bible. But at no time does the attitudes and values of a particular culture/society determine the correctness of doctrine espoused by Scripture.
2. History – Penal-substitutionary atonement has been taught at all times in all kinds of cultures/societies. Below are selective examples from church history (for a fuller account see Jeffrey, Ovey and Sach, *Pierced for Our Transgressions*, pp. 161–204).

Note: The examples listed below are not meant to condone all the actions and teachings of those cited, nor to necessarily suggest that all of their statements are the best ways to express penal-substitutionary atonement. I simply mean to demonstrate that penal-substitutionary atonement has been held by many since the early centuries of the church.

a. Justin Martyr (c. 100–165) —

“If, then, the Father of all wished His Christ for the whole human family to take upon Him the curses of all, knowing that, after He had been crucified and was dead, He would raise him up, why do you argue about Him, who submitted to suffer these things according to the Father’s will, as if he were accursed, and do not rather bewail yourselves?” (*Dialogue with Trypho, a Jew*; in *Pierced for Our Transgressions*, p. 165).

b. Eusebius of Caesarea (c. 275–339) —

“And the Lamb of God...was chastised on our behalf, and suffered a penalty He did not owe, but which we owed because of the multitude of our sins; and so He became the cause of the forgiveness of our sins, because He received death for us, and transferred to Himself the scourgings, the insults, and the dishonour, which were due to us, and drew down upon Himself the appointed curse, being made a curse for us.” (*Proof of the Gospel*; in *Pierced for Our Transgressions*, p. 166–167).

c. Athanasius (c. 300–373) —

“The Word perceived that corruption could not be got rid of otherwise than through death; yet He Himself, as the Word, being immortal and the Father’s Son, was such as could not die. For this reason, therefore, He assumed a body capable of death, in order that it, through belonging to the Word Who is above all, might become in dying a sufficient exchange for all, and, itself remaining incorruptible through His indwelling, might thereafter put an end to corruption for all others as well, by the grace of the resurrection. It was by surrendering to death the body which He had taken, as an offering and sacrifice free from every stain, that He forthwith abolished death for His human brethren by the offering of the equivalent. For naturally, since the Word of God was above all, when He offered His own temple and bodily instrument as a substitute for the life of all, He fulfilled in death all that was required.” (*On the Incarnation*; in *Pierced for Our Transgressions*, p. 172).

d. Gregory of Nazianzus (c. 330–390) —

“As for my sake He was called a curse, Who destroyed my curse; and sin, who taketh away the sin of the world; and became a new Adam to take the place of the old, just so He makes my disobedience His own as Head of the whole body. As long then as I am disobedient and rebellious, both by denial of God and by my passions, so long Christ also is called disobedient on my account.” (*Theological Orations IV*; in *Pierced for Our Transgressions*, p. 174).

e. Ambrose of Milan (339–397) —

“And so then, Jesus took flesh that He might destroy the curse of sinful flesh, and He became for us a curse that a blessing might overwhelm a curse, uprightness might overwhelm sin, forgiveness might overwhelm the sentence, and life might overwhelm death. He also took up death that the sentence might be fulfilled and satisfaction might be given for the judgment, the curse placed on sinful flesh even to death. Therefore, nothing was done contrary to God’s sentence when the terms of that sentence were fulfilled, for the curse was unto death but grace is after death.” (*Flight from the World*; in *Pierced for Our Transgressions*, p. 175).

f. John Chrysostom (c. 350–407) —

“If one that was himself a king, beholding a robber and malefactor under punishment, gave his well-beloved son, his only-begotten and true, to be slain; and transferred the death and the guilt as well, from him to his son (who was himself of no such character), that he might both save the condemned man and clear him from his evil reputation; and then if, having subsequently promoted him to great dignity, he had yet, after thus saving him and advancing him to that glory unspeakable, been outraged by the person that had received such treatment: would not that man, if he had any sense, have chosen ten thousand deaths rather than appear guilty of so great ingratitude? This then let us also now consider with ourselves, and groan bitterly for the provocations we have offered our Benefactor; nor let us therefore presume, because though outraged He bears it with long-suffering; but rather for this very reason be full of remorse.” (*Sermon on 2 Corinthians 5:21*; in *Pierced for Our Transgressions*, p. 176).

g. Augustine of Hippo (354–430) —

“But as Christ endured death as man, and for man; so also, Son of God as He was, ever living in His own righteousness, but dying for our offences, He submitted as man, and for man, to bear the curse which accompanies death. And as He died in the flesh which He took in bearing our punishment, so also, while ever blessed in His own righteousness, He was cursed for our offences, in the death which He suffered in bearing our punishment.” (*Against Faustus the Manichean*; in *Pierced for Our Transgressions*, p. 178–79).

h. Cyril of Alexandria (375–444) —

“The Only-begotten was made man, bore a body by nature at enmity with death, and became flesh, so that, enduring the death which was hanging over us as the result of our sin, he might abolish sin; and further, that he might put an end to the accusations of Satan, inasmuch as we have paid in Christ himself the penalties for the charges of sin against us: ‘For he bore our sins, and was wounded because of us’, according to the voice of the prophet. Or are we not healed by his wounds?” (*De adoratione et culta*; in *Pierced for Our Transgressions*, p. 180).

i. John Calvin (1509–1564) —

“Suppose he learns, as Scripture teaches, that he was estranged from God through sin, is an heir of wrath, subject to the curse of eternal death, excluded from all hope of salvation, beyond every blessing of God, the slave of Satan, captive under the yoke of sin, destined finally for a dreadful destruction and already involved in it; and that at this point Christ interceded as his advocate, took upon himself and suffered the punishment that, from God’s righteous judgment, threatened all sinners; that he purged with his blood those evils which had rendered sinners hateful to God; that by this expiation he made satisfaction and sacrifice duly to God the Father; that as intercessor he has appeased God’s wrath; that on this foundation rests the peace of God with men; that by this bond his benevolence is maintained

toward them. Will the man not then be even more moved by all these things which so vividly portray the greatness of the calamity from which he has been rescued?" (*Institutes of the Christian Religion*; in *Pierced for Our Transgressions*, p. 186).

j. Francis Turretin (1623–1687) —

"The question concerns a penal satisfaction properly so called by which he not only fulfilled the will of God, but also his justice (Christ having taken upon himself our sins). This the Socinians deny; we affirm.

Second...the question concerns a true and proper satisfaction made by the payment of a full price and which meritoriously obtains the liberation of the guilty on the ground of justice. This we preach from the word of God...

Third...the question is whether he [Christ] died for us substitutively (i.e., in our place, that by being substituted in our place, he suffered the punishment due to us). We affirm that he did." (*Institutes of Elenctic Theology*; in *Pierced for Our Transgressions*, p. 187).

k. John Bunyan (1628–1688) —

Note: "Hopeful" tells "Christian" what he learned from "Faithful"... that he must 'obtain the righteousness of a man that had never sinned' in order to be accepted before God. "Christian" asks who this man is. Hopeful answers:

'[Faithful] told me [Hopeful] that you must be justified by him [Jesus Christ], even by trusting to what he hath done by himself in the days of his flesh, and suffered when he did hang on the Tree. I asked him further, How that man's righteousness could be of that efficacy, to justify another before God? And he told me, He was the mighty God, and did what he did, and died the death also, not for himself, but for me; to whom his doings, and the worthiness of them, should be imputed, if I believed on him.'

[Later in the conversation:]

'From all which I gathered, that I must look righteousness in his person, and for satisfaction for my sins by his blood; that what he did in obedience to his Fathers [sic] Law, and in submitting to the penalty thereof, was not for himself, but for him that will accept if for his Salvation, and be thankful. And now was my heart full of joy, mine eyes full of tears, and mine affections running over with love, to the Name, People, and Ways of Jesus Christ.'" (*Pilgrim's Progress*; in *Pierced for Our Transgressions*, p. 188–89).

l. John Owen (1616–1683) —

"Christ so took and bare our sins, and had them so laid upon him, as that he underwent the punishment due unto them, and that in our stead: therefore, he made satisfaction to the justice of God for them."

Owen's continues, and affirms:

"First, That Christ took and bare our sins, God laying them on him. Secondly, That he so took them as to undergo the punishment due unto them. Thirdly, That he did this in our stead."

"...we affirm that our Saviour underwent the wrath of God which was due unto us." (*The Death of Death*; in *Pierced for Our Transgressions*, p. 190–91).

m. George Whitefield (1714–1770) —

“Here then opens the amazing scene of divine philanthropy; I mean, God’s love to man: for, behold, what man could not do, Jesus Christ, the Son of his Father’s love, undertakes to do for him...he obeyed, and thereby fulfilled the whole moral law in our stead; and also died a painful death upon the cross, and thereby became a curse for, or instead of, those whom the Father had given to him.”

Whitefield again:

“God the Father entered into an eternal covenant with God the Son; he made Christ the head, the representative of the elect, as Adam was the head, the representative of all his seed. For these the Lord Jesus Christ undertook to fulfill the covenant of works. For these Jesus Christ died a painful, cursed, ignominious death; and by his obedience, and by his death, wrought out an everlasting righteousness for them.” (“Sermons”; in *Pierced for Our Transgressions*, p. 192–93).

n. Charles H. Spurgeon (1834–1892) —

“God cannot look where there is sin with any pleasure, and though as far as Jesus is personally concerned, he is the Father’s beloved Son in whom he is well pleased; yet when he saw sin laid upon his Son, he made that Son cry, ‘My God! my God! why hast thou forsaken me?’ It was not possible that Jesus should enjoy the light of his Father’s presence while he was made sin for us; consequently he went through a horror of great darkness, the root and source of which was the withdrawing of the conscious enjoyment of his Father’s presence. More than that, not only was light withdrawn, but positive sorrow was inflicted. God must punish sin, and though the sin was not Christ’s by his actual doing it, yet it was laid upon him, and therefore he was made a curse for us...God only knows the griefs to which the Son of God was put when the Lord made to meet upon him the iniquity of us all. To crown all there came death itself. Death is the punishment for sin, and whatever it may mean...in the sentence, ‘In the day thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die,’ Christ felt.” (Sermon – “Sin Laid on Jesus”; in *Pierced for Our Transgressions*, p. 194).

o. D. Martin Lloyd-Jones (1899–1981) —

First sermon on Romans 3:25:

“This is a statement to the effect that God’s wrath has been appeased and that God has been placated as the result of the work which our Lord did there by dying upon the Cross.”

Second sermon on Romans 3:25:

“That means [cf. 1 Pet 2:25; cf. Is 53:4] that not only have the sins been laid upon him, but that the wrath of God has been poured out upon him. The punishment that should have come to you and to me on account of our sinfulness and our sins came to him.” (“Sermons on Romans 3:25”; in *Pierced for Our Transgressions*, p. 195).

p. John R. W. Stott (1921–) —

“The sinless one was ‘made sin for us’, which must mean that he bore the penalty of our sin instead of us, and he redeemed us from law’s curses by ‘becoming a curse for us’, which must mean that the curse of the law lying upon us for our disobedience was transferred to him, so that he bore it instead of us...”

When we review all this Old Testament material...and consider its New Testament application to the death of Christ, we are obligated to consider that the cross was a substitutionary sacrifice. Christ died for us. Christ died instead of us.” (*The Cross of Christ*; in *Pierced for Our Transgressions*, p. 197).

q. J. I. Packer (1926–) —

“The task which I have set myself in this lecture is to focus and explicate a belief which, by and large, is a distinguishing mark of the worldwide evangelical fraternity: namely, the belief that Christ’s death on the cross had the character of penal substitution, and that it was in virtue of this fact that it brought salvation to humankind.” (*What Did the Cross Achieve? : The Logic of Penal Substitution*; in *Pierced for Our Transgressions*, p. 198).

Packer again:

“With the other New Testament writers, Paul always points to the death of Jesus as the atoning event, and explains the atonement in terms of representative substitution—the innocent taking the place of the guilty, in the name and for the sake of the guilty, under the axe of God’s judicial retribution.”

“Christ bore the curse of the law which was directed against us, so that we might not have to bear it. This is representative substitution.”

“It was a sacrifice for sinners, enduring the death penalty in their stead, that ‘one died for all’ (2 Corinthians 5:14; 18–21). This is representative substitution.” (*Knowing God*; in *Pierced for Our Transgressions*, p. 198).

Other advocates of penal-substitutionary atonement (again selective):

Martin Luther, John Wesley, Jonathan Edwards, Louis Berkhof, Charles Hodge, John Murray, Leon Morris, etc., etc.

E. *Penal-substitutionary atonement does not meet the felt needs of society. Therefore society rejects it.*

▪ Response:

1. From the beginning of gospel preaching, the Jews viewed penal-substitutionary atonement as a “*stumbling block*” and the Gentiles deemed it “*foolishness*” (cf. 1 Cor 1:23–24).
2. Not surprisingly, sinful men “suppress” the truth. Instead of the true gospel, they substitute a “gospel” that is palatable to man,...a “god” in man’s image (cf. Rom 1:18, 21; Eph 4:17–18; Jn 3:19; 1 Cor 2:14; 2 Cor 4:4; 2 Tim 4:3).
3. Penal-substitutionary atonement offends proud, arrogant, sinful man. It is irrelevant to his felt needs. Therefore, he rejects it. Should this cause us to change the gospel? God forbid!

F. *The teaching of penal-substitutionary atonement has its roots in sacrificial concepts found in pagan religions.*

Note: Packer well summarizes the attitudes of pagan worshipers in appeasing their “gods”:

“There are various gods, none enjoying absolute dominion, but each with some power to make life easier or harder for you. Their temper is uniformly uncertain; they take offence at the smallest things, or get jealous because they feel you are paying too much attention to other gods and other people, and not enough to themselves, and then they take it out on you by manipulating circumstances to your hurt. The only course at that point is to humour and mollify them by an offering. The rule with offerings is the bigger the better, for the gods are inclined to hold out for something sizeable...Human sacrifice, in particular, is expensive but effective. Thus pagan religion appears as a callous commercialism, a matter of managing and manipulating your gods by cunning bribery...the appeasing of celestial bad tempers.” (*Knowing God*; in *Pierced for Our Transgressions*, p. 227).

- **Response:** The difference between the pagan practice of sacrifice and the God-ordained practice of sacrifice is like the difference between light and darkness.
 1. God Himself revealed the pattern for sacrifices which were acceptable to Him (cf. Lev 1–7; Ex 29–30; Num 15, 28–29), which forbade imitation of pagan sacrifices (cf. Deut 12:4, 31; 18:9; Lev 18; 2 Kgs 17:15–17; 21:2; 2 Chron 33:2) and child sacrifice, especially (Deut 12:31; 2 Kgs 17:17; 2 Chron 28:3; 33:6; Jer 7:31; 19:5; Eze 20:31).
 2. God’s pattern of sacrifice is fundamentally different from pagan sacrifices.
 - a. The true God of settled wrath may be ultimately propitiated by sacrifice, but not the gods of capricious wrath. Their wrath is never completely satisfied.
 - b. Ultimately God Himself provides the completely acceptable sacrifice [to Him] in the Person of His Son. Pagan gods did not give themselves in sacrifice for their devotees, so that their devotees could have their problems satisfied once-for-all.

Note: What a travesty to believe that God-accepted sacrifice is founded upon the concepts of pagan sacrifice. Rather, pagan sacrifices are false, impure copies of God-approved sacrifice, which God instituted at the beginning of mankind’s history (cf. Gen 3:21; 4:1–8; Heb 11:4).

G. *Penal-substitutionary atonement teaches a form of child abuse by God the Father.*

- **Response:**

1. Child abuse involves an unwilling victim. Christ gave Himself willingly to pay the penalty of our sins for us (Matt 20:28; Mk 10:45; Jn 10:15, 17–18; Gal 1:4; 2:20; Eph 5:25; 1 Tim 2:6).
2. Child abuse gratifies the abuser, not the child. Christ provided a penal-substitutionary atonement to glorify Himself (cf. Jn 17:1; Phil 2:8–9; 12:1–3; Rev 5:12) and to ultimately save the “gifts” which the Father had given Him (cf. Jn 6:37–40; Heb 10:1–10; Rom 5:8; 1 Cor 15:3; 1 Tim 2:6; 1 Pet 3:18).

Note: This criticism is a frontal attack on God’s great plan of redemption. “*The Lord [the Father] was pleased to crush Him*” (Isa 53:10). God the Father planned from eternity past to send His Son to die on our behalf and the Son gave Himself willingly and joyfully to pay the penalty for us (cf. Acts 2:23; 3:18; 4:27–28; Heb 12:1–3; Is 53:10; Zech 13:7).

H. *The retributive justice demanded by penal-substitutionary atonement is not consistent with God’s message of love and peace, which we are to imitate. It demands punishment before forgiveness (contra Matt 5:38–39; 43–48; 18:21–22; cf. Lev 19:18).*

▪ Response:

1. We **are** to imitate God (cf. Eph 5:1; 1 Pet 1:16; also, Lev 11:44–45; 19:2; 20:7; Mk 8:34).
2. We are not to imitate God in everything. For example:
 - a. Worship only belongs to Him (cf. Ex 20:1–6; Deut 5:6–10; Is 45:18; Matt 4:10; also, Acts 12:21–23). We are not to imitate Him by receiving worship ourselves.
 - b. Retribution against sin is His prerogative alone (cf. Rom 12:17–19). Even though He treats His enemies kindly (as we are to do), His justice ultimately demands retribution (punishment) for sin. We are not to imitate God by seeking retribution for ourselves.
3. God ultimately forgives sins committed against His perfect law, which reflects His perfect character, only in Christ. All outside of Christ (those still in Adam) will face His retributive justice. This is perfectly consistent with His character.

I. *Violence begets more violence, so the violence involved in penal-substitutionary atonement does not work. It just adds to man’s problem by way of example. It does not help it.*

- Response:
 1. Violence does not necessarily beget more violence (cf. Num 25:1–13).
 2. Jesus did not think that His violent death was ultimately problematic for all mankind, or He would have avoided it (cf. Matt 16:21–23; 17:12; 22–23; 20:18–19; 26:51–54).
 3. The violence in Jesus’ penal-substitutionary atonement leads to the redemption of many (cf. 1 Pet 3:18, etc.).

J. *It is unjust for someone to be punished for someone else, even if the victim suffers willingly. God is not unjust. Therefore, the atonement provided is not a penal-substitutionary atonement.*

- Response:
 1. God is just (cf. 1 Pet 2:23; Rom 2:2, etc.).
 2. God declares that it was just for Christ to bear the punishment for our sins (cf. 1 Pet 2:23–24; Rom 3:21–26, etc.).
 - a. Adam represented us to our detriment (cf. Rom 5:12–19).
 - b. Christ represented believers to their benefit (cf. Rom 5:12–19; 1 Cor 15: 42–49).

Note: God instituted this representative principle in the Garden and planned for two representatives, and two representatives only. You are either represented by Adam or Christ (cf. 1 Cor 15:42–49). All, in Adam, are condemned on the basis of his sin being imputed to them. All, in Christ, are saved on the basis of His one act of righteousness being imputed to them.

3. If our sin was not imputed to Christ on the cross, then an innocent man died which is a travesty of justice.
4. If our sin was not imputed to Christ on the cross, then we stand condemned.
5. If our sin was not imputed to Christ on the cross, then certainly His righteousness cannot be imputed to us either, which destroys the doctrine of justification.

K. *Retribution is not biblical. Restoration is.*

- Response:
 1. Ways to handle crime:
 - a. Redefine it — No such thing as crime.

- b. Ignore it — No such thing as accountability.
 - c. Forgive it — No such thing as punishment.
 - d. Punish it — Seek justice.
2. Purpose of punishment.
- a. *Retributive* – Punishment’s purpose is to give criminals what they deserve; no more (human vengeance), no less (human weakness).
 - b. *Deterrent* (preventative) – Punishment’s purpose is to deter/prevent others from committing crime.
 - c. *Corrective* (rehabilitative) – Punishment’s purpose is to change the behavior of the criminal. Restore the criminal to society.

Note: Deterrence is a proper biblical purpose for punishment (cf. Deut 13:6–11; 17:8–13; 19:15–21; 21:18–21). Correction/Restoration is also a proper biblical purpose for “discipline” (cf. Deut 4:26; 11:2; Heb 12:4–11; Rev 3:19; Proverbs). But retribution is central to God’s holy justice. The unbeliever who does not repent and trust Christ will face God’s retributive justice. The punishment meted out at this judgment will not be deterrent or corrective; it will be eternal (cf. Rev. 20:11–15).

3. Biblical criteria of justice.
- a. Only guilty people should be punished, because they deserve to be punished (“just dessert”) [e.g., Num 35:31; Ps 94:2; Prov 17:15; Ez 16:59; Lk 23:41; Rom 2:6; etc.].
 - b. Punishment must fit the crime (proportionally). Distinguishes between major crimes and misdemeanors (cf. Ex 21–23; Lk 12:47–48).
 - c. Punishment must be impartial (equitable) [cf. Rom 2:11; Deut 10:17; 2 Chron 19:7; Matt 22:16; Acts 10:34–35; Gal 2:6; Eph 6:9; Col 3:25; 1 Pet 1:17].

Note: When judging proportionally and impartially, God takes into account motives (cf. Matt 6:1–5; Rom 2:16; etc.), circumstances (Ex 21:28–29, 35–36 — such as available “light”; cf. Lk 10:10–15; Rom 2:12–15; Lk 12:47–48), as well as the act itself (cf. 2 Cor 5:10; Rom 14:10–12; Rev 20:11–15). In our jurisprudence we also take motives into account (e.g., premeditated murder versus manslaughter).

4. Retribution fits the biblical concept of justice.
- a. Retribution seeks to punish guilty people in proportion to their crime without partiality.

- b. Only God can ultimately judge the eternal punishment due to unbelieving mankind retributively, because only God sees all things clearly and knows all things completely.

5. Alleged biblical objections to retributive justice.

- a. 1 Peter 3:9: “*not returning evil for evil or insult for insult, but giving a blessing instead; for you were called for the very purpose that you might inherit a blessing.*” (NASB)

In the context of 1 Peter, the State is supposed to punish wrongdoing (cf. 1 Pet 2:14). What 1 Peter 3:9 is prohibiting is personal revenge, not all retributive justice [carried out by the State—as God’s “*minister*” (Rom 13:4); or God Himself (Rom 12:19)].

- b. Matthew 5:38–39: “*You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth.’* ³⁹“*But I say to you, do not resist an evil person; but whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn the other to him also.*” (NASB)

Jesus is urging His listeners to demonstrate mercy in their personal relationships. He was not canceling retributive justice.

In fact, Jeffrey, Ovey and Sach add:

“The ‘eye for an eye’ principle was intended to prevent the uncontrolled escalation of vengeance while allowing for an appropriate retributive punishment to be imposed. It expressed the maximum penalty, not a mandatory one, and the law allowed the victim to demand less or to substitute an equivalent compensatory payment (e.g. Exod. 21:22, 29–30). Jesus simply restated this teaching, exhorting people to show mercy in their personal relationships, and rebuking a society that had twisted the law by reinterpreting the legal maximum as the legal norm.” (*Pierced for Our Transgressions*, p. 260).

- c. John 8:1–11 — Woman taken in adultery

- 1. Jesus exposes Pharisee’s ulterior motives (v. 6; cf. Ex 23:1; Deut 19:16–19).
- 2. The legal process would have included both woman *and* man present and both punished for the adulterous relationship (cf. Deut 22:22–24).
- 3. Jesus pardoned the woman, which was His divine prerogative (cf. Mk 2:1–12). He Himself suffered for her sins at Calvary.
- 4. This passage certainly is not denying retributive justice.

L. *If God exacts payment for sin in the penal-substitutionary atonement, then He does not really forgive sin, because there is nothing to forgive. It has all been paid for.*

▪ Response:

1. The language of payment (atonement) and forgiveness are “partners” in Scripture (cf. Lev 4:20, 26, 31, 35; 5:10, 13, 16, 18; 6:7; 19:22; Num 15:25, 28; Eph 1:7, etc.).
2. God Himself, in the Person of the Son provides the payment for sin which offended Him personally. He Himself pays for sin and He Himself forgives sin.
3. Furthermore, God did not forgive our sins at the cross. He forgives our sins when we believe the gospel. It is at the point of our believing the gospel that the benefits of Christ’s death on the cross and His fulfilling the righteous requirements of the Law for us are imputed to our account. Before this, we were “*dead*” in “*trespasses and sins*” (Eph 2:1).

M. *Penal-substitutionary atonement is not possible because Christ did not suffer an equivalent punishment due to us. The unbeliever’s punishment for sin will be eternal. Christ suffered only temporarily.*

- Response: It is true that because man sinned against the infinite Person of God, man’s punishment is to be eternal. It is true that Christ suffered on the cross only temporarily, not eternally.

But the punishment inflicted in those few hours was inflicted on an infinite Person. Therefore, the penal-substitutionary atonement had infinite value and infinite worth. To put it in the words of the Synod of Dort (1618–19), Article 3, pt 2:

“The death of God’s Son is the only and entirely complete sacrifice and satisfaction for sins; it is of infinite value and worth, more than sufficient to atone for the sins of the whole world” (cf. 1 Pet 1:18–19; Heb 7:23–28; 9:11–15; 10:14).

Note: Christ’s penal-substitutionary atonement on the cross was not identical to the suffering due to us, but it was more than sufficiently equivalent and therefore satisfied the justice of God.

N. *If Christ made a penal-substitutionary atonement for all men, then all men will be saved, which is unbiblical.*

- Response: This criticism confuses the two concepts of “*provision*” and “*application*.” Christ died for the sins of all men, in the sense that He *provided* a sufficient payment for the sins of all men on the cross. However, the benefits of the penal-substitutionary atonement of Christ on the cross are only effectively *applied* to those who believe the gospel.

O. *Penal-substitutionary atonement would entail that the Father and Son acted independently and thus would destroy the unity of the Godhead. Or, penal-substitutionary atonement would entail that one person (God) was both the subject and object of the action, destroying the tri-unity of the Godhead.*

▪ Response:

1. God is One (cf. Deut 6:4; Is 44:6; 1 Cor 8:4; etc.).
2. God is Triune – Three Persons in one essence
3. The relationship of the Three Persons to each other is one of mutual indwelling (cf. Jn 10:38; 17:10–11, 20–24).
4. Thus, there is complete union in action (cf. Jn 10:30). Each Person *must* agree on all actions, and neither Person acts “*independently*” of the other two.
5. Yet, the actions of each Person are distinguishable. The Father sends the Son to die for our sins. The Son does the Father’s will. He makes the penal-substitutionary atonement. The Father does not.
6. So, each Person of the Trinity is involved in every act of the other Persons of the Trinity (mutual dependence), but not in the same way.
7. One Person is *not* both subject and object of penal-substitutionary atonement. Again, the Son makes the penal-substitutionary atonement. The Father does not.
8. Penal-substitutionary atonement does not damage the unity or Tri-unity of God.

P. *Penal-substitutionary atonement contradicts the character of God. It posits that God is personally angry at sinful mankind rather than loving as the Bible depicts God.*

▪ Response:

1. God loves sinners (cf. Jn 3:16; Rom 5:8; 1 Jn 4:8, 10, 16; also see 1 Tim 1:16; 1 Cor 15:9; Gal 2:20).
2. God also hates sinners in such a way that they are under His wrath (cf. Deut 9:8; Num 16:46; 2 Sam 6:7; 2 Kgs 17:17–23; 2 Chron 36:16; Jer 32:29; Lam 2:2–3; Jn 3:36; Rom 1:18; 2:5; 12:19; Col 3:6; Eph 5:6; 1 Thess 1:10; Rev 14:20; 19:15, etc.).
3. God’s wrath is revealed against all ungodliness (cf. Rom 1:18), and yet at the same time, God moved in love to provide a penal-substitutionary atonement for the sins of mankind.

4. Thus God is angry and loves at the same time. This is not self-contradictory. Even though God does both simultaneously, He does both righteously. So it is wrong to reject penal-substitutionary atonement on this account.
- Q. *God punishes sin passively by letting men experience the natural consequences of sin in their lives. He does not punish sin actively, retributively. Thus penal-substitutionary atonement is wrong. Christ did not die for our sins; He died to identify Himself with this sin-cursed world.*
- Response:
 1. God does permit man to experience the natural consequences of sin in their lives (cf. Rom 1:18–23).
 2. Yet, God’s wrath is also poured out actively. In fact, it is provoked further as the natural consequences of sin lead to more sin (cf. Col 3:5–6; Rom 2:5; 1 Thess 5:2–3; 2 Thess 2:2; 2 Pet 3:4–10).
 3. Both the “*passive*” punishment of God’s “*permitting*” man to experience the natural consequences of sin (cf. Rom 1:24, 26, 28) and the “*active*” punishment of God’s direct supernatural judgment (cf. Rev 20:11–15) are retributive justice. Both need a penal-substitutionary atonement to placate.
 4. If Christ was not either punished for our sin, or His own personal sin, then He was punished unjustly. Yet, He did suffer justly. He suffered a penal-substitutionary atonement for our sins...not for His own personal sin, because He had none (cf. 2 Cor 5:21).
- R. *Penal-substitutionary atonement implies that God was bound to uphold a set of rules outside of Himself, which caused Him to kill His Son...something He would rather not have done...but was constrained to do.*
- Response:
 1. God’s law is not external to Himself...something which governs Him externally. Rather God’s Law is a reflection of His holy character. It is intrinsic to Him, not extrinsic (cf. Lev 11:44–45; 19:2; 20:7–8, 26; 21:8, 15, 23; 22:2, 9, 16, 32; Ex 19:56; 1 Pet 1:14–15).

2. When one disobeys God's law, he is creating a personal affront against the holy character of God, which God must punish because it is necessary ***and*** He wants to do so.
3. It is true that God was constrained to provide a penal-substitutionary atonement for sinful man through the death of His Son, if He was to redeem any human being. That He did so, does not imply a grudging willingness on His part, but a gracious, merciful, joyful love (cf. Is 53:10; Heb 12:2; etc.).

Note: Some take this criticism to an impersonal level. To them, penal-substitutionary atonement is an impersonal, mechanistic equation...a mere formula. But as noted above, God is personally affronted by our sin...and personally committed to punish it. However, in personal love, He provides a penal-substitutionary atonement in the personal sacrifice of His Son on the cross for the sins of mankind.

In reality, the opponents of penal-substitutionary atonement, actually themselves relegate God's punishment to an impersonal, "passive", mechanistic outworking of the natural consequences of sin, without God's personal involvement.

S. *Penal-substitutionary atonement is too individualistic. It fails to address political and social evils, as well as environmental evil.*

▪ Response:

1. The penal-substitutionary atonement of Christ deals with the core problem of sin: personal, individual sin. However, God's children who have benefited from the application of the penal-substitutionary atonement are "*salt*" and "*light*" in politics and society...and, therefore, affect society and politics (cf. Matt 5:13–16; Phil 2:14–15).
2. Creation has been bound to decay, since God cursed it after the Fall (cf. Gen 3:17–19; Rom 8:20). But when the sons of God are revealed in glory, the creation will be liberated "*from its slavery to corruption*" (Rom 8:21). Thus, the penal-substitutionary atonement is also connected with the liberation of creation via the manifestation of the sons of God.

T. *Penal-substitutionary atonement does not adequately address the subjective side of salvation.*

▪ Response:

1. As we have said, there are more benefits to the atonement than penal-substitution; for example expiation, redemption, propitiation, reconciliation, etc.
2. Regeneration is based on the penal-substitutionary atonement and is certainly subjective (cf. Jn 3:3 with 3:15).
3. Penal-substitutionary atonement is the central foundation for the Christian life. It is the engine. But there are other parts of the car.

U. *Penal-substitutionary atonement leads people to be afraid of the God Who loves them.*

▪ Response:

1. Fear of God is viewed positively in Scripture (cf. Ps 34:7, 9; Prov 1:7; 1 Pet 1:17; Rev 14:7; also see Ps 36:1; Jer 5:20–25).
2. Matthew Henry helpfully distinguishes between fear of God and being afraid of God in 1 John 4:18:

“We must here distinguish, I judge, between fear and being afraid of; or, in this case, between the fear of God and being afraid of him. The fear of God is often mentioned and commanded as the substance of religion (1 Pet. 2:17; Rev 14:7); and so it imports the high regard and veneration we have for God and his authority and government. Such fear is consistent with love, yea, with perfect love, as being in the angels themselves. But then there is a being afraid of God, which arises from a sense of guilt...fear here may be rendered *dread*; *There is no dread in love.*” (*Matthew Henry’s Commentary*; in *Pierced for Our Transgressions*, p. 319).

3. The believer does not dread God’s wrath, because it has been propitiated in Christ’s penal-substitutionary atonement (cf. 1 Jn 2:1–2; 4:10).
4. But the believer does fear God (reverence, adore, tremble), because he/she knows the awesomeness of the true God (cf. Lk 12:4–5; 1 Pet 2:16; Heb 12:29; Is 6:1–13; 66:2; etc.); His great love for them (cf. Rom 8:32–39) and their lack of deserving His great grace (Eph 2:8–9).

V. *Penal-substitutionary atonement sanctions human violence. If God abused His Son and His Son took it, then husbands can abuse wives and wives should gladly submit to it. Furthermore, parents can abuse children and the children should willingly submit.*

▪ Response:

1. Retributive judgment (vengeance) belongs to the Lord. Only He can handle retributive judgment in a pure, holy and righteous way.
2. Individual mankind is not to engage in vengeance. Individual vengeance leads to evil vindictiveness.

3. God does give governments the authority to punish evildoers and praise those who do right (cf. Rom 13:1–7). But even governments, because they are made up of individuals, have different degrees of corruption in judgment.
4. Furthermore, God gives husbands authority to lead their wives and parents authority to train/correct/discipline their children, but always in a loving, patient way...certainly, never abusing their authority (cf. Eph 5:22–6:4; Col 3:18–21).
5. Jesus submission to His persecutors *is* an example for us to follow (1 Pet 2:18–25). But we are not to view those who cause us to suffer for doing right, as practicing intrinsic good (cf. Acts 2:23; 3:13–15; 4:27–28; 7:51–53). If we are in a position to change this kind of corrupt practice (vote, enforce the law, etc.), we should. If not (that is, injustice is inescapable), then patient endurance under it is commendable before God (1 Pet 2:18–25; cf. 1 Pet 4:12–16; Mk 8:34).

Note: Thankfully, American law protects the abused wife and child, etc. Wives and children should not have to put up with abuse. When a crime of this nature is committed, the matter can properly be dealt with by civil authorities...which God ordained for this purpose (cf. Rom 13:1–7; 1 Pet 2:13–14).

V. *Biblical Texts supporting penal-substitutionary atonement* (selective)

A. *Exodus 12 (Passover)* —

B. *Leviticus 16 (Atonement/Scapegoat)* —

C. *Isaiah 52:12–53:12 (Suffering Servant/Messiah)* —

D. *Mark 10:38, 45; 14:33–36 (Ransom/Drinking the Cup)* —

E. *John 3:14–18 (Lifted Up)* —

F. *Romans 3:21–25 (Propitiation)* —

G. *Romans 4:25 (Delivered Over)* —

H. *Romans 5:8–10 (Saved from Wrath)* —

I. *Romans 8:1–3 (Sin Offering)* —

J. *Galatians 3:10–13 (Curse for us)* —

K. *1 Peter 2:21–25 (Bore our Sins)* —

L. *1 Peter 3:18 (Died for Sins)* —

VI. Conclusion