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Penal Substitutionary Atonement

*by Ryan Rippee*

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## **The Father’s Love for the Son in Penal Substitutionary Atonement**

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**Abstract:** In what Joshua Farris and S. Mark Hamilton label the *Christus Odium* variant of penal substitutionary atonement, the Son becomes the object of the Father’s perfect hatred on the cross. However, within a penal substitutionary model of the atonement, when propitiation was made, did it necessitate that the Father hates the Son? No, on the contrary, a biblical model of penal substitutionary atonement is the most glorious display of the Father’s love for his Son in the Spirit. The Father’s eternal plan of the atonement is rooted in his love for the Son and brings him great pleasure in accomplishing his purpose at the cross. The Father sent the Son, empowered by the Spirit to be a penal substitutionary sacrifice so that those worshippers would not only see the glory of the Father in the face of Christ, but would experience the Father’s love in the Son by the indwelling Spirit. Further, the Father hates sin but cannot hate his Son, and so was greatly pleased that the Son laid down his life and took it up again, accomplishing redemption and propitiation and reconciliation as the perfect sacrifice for sin. For only as a substitute can he actually pay for sins, bring real forgiveness and make peace.

**Key Words:** penal substitution, Father’s wrath, atonement, work of Christ, Father’s love, forgiveness

In his first epistle, the Apostle John employs a contrast between light and dark to demonstrate that all that is good and true and righteous comes from and is defined by God: “This is the message we have heard from him [the Son] and proclaim to you, that God is light, and in him is no darkness at all” (1 John 1:5). In contrast, the fallen sinner is said to be “walking in darkness” (1 John 1:6), and yet a way is made for any of us in the darkness to come to the light: “the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin” (1 John 1:7). John then anticipates a further scenario. What happens when we who are in the “light” commit an act of sin? Do we return to the darkness? No, John argues for “we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous. He is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world” (1 John 2:1–2).

John is getting at the heart of the atonement, when he explains that the Father, who is “light,” who is holy and righteous, enables a way for those in the “dark” to be

with him; namely, through the “advocacy” of the Son, who is also “righteous” (2:1). Furthermore, the Son’s advocacy is more than that of mere lawyer arguing our case. He is the one who “propitiates” the righteous requirement of the Father’s character (his wrath towards sin, e.g., Rom 1:18) through his own blood (1:7), thus forgiving sinners and cleansing them from all sin.<sup>1</sup>

Later in the letter, John returns to the idea of “propitiation” (1 John 4:10), distinguishing it from the pagan understanding of his own day, which meant placating or appeasing an angry Deity. It is not, then, that the Father is unwilling, and the Son wins him over (and somehow, along the way, the Spirit is uninvolved or forgotten). Rather, John considers it as a fundamental description of the Father when he says, “love is from God” (1 John 4:7) and “God is love” (1 John 4:8, 16).<sup>2</sup> This loving Father defines the meaning of love at the cross (“In this is love”) by sending his the Son of his love in the Spirit to be the “propitiation for our sins” (1 John 4:10).<sup>3</sup> Thus, according to John, the Father’s love flows from the divine nature and motivates his plan for those in the “dark” to come to the “light.” The Father conceives a way to “propitiate” this righteous requirement of his own nature, exhibited in wrath toward sinners who transgress his law.

The question under discussion is, “At the cross, when propitiation was made, did it mean that the Father hated the Son?” Dubbed *Christus Odium*, the affirmative argues that yes, the Father hated the Son since he was “forsaken of God” (Matt 27:46), identified with the cursed (Gal 3:13), with the lawless (Isa 53:12), and with sin itself (2 Cor 5:21). Nevertheless, the implication that the Father hated the Son at the cross is problematic for a number of reasons: it undermines divine simplicity, misunderstands the unity of the divine will residing in the nature, denies the reality of inseparable operations, and most importantly, has no basis in Scripture.

One further question, if acceptance of penal substitutionary atonement may lead to the teaching that the Father hated the Son at the cross, does this mean we need to rethink the nature of substitution or take up another alternative? No. The excesses or homiletical emphases of some does not undermine the validity of the biblical teaching on penal substitutionary atonement.

The goal of my paper, then, is not to simply answer the question, “How can the Father love the Son in penal substitutionary atonement?” Rather, it is to argue that penal substitutionary atonement is the most glorious display of the Father’s love for

1. See Colin Kruse’s discussion of ἱλασμός (*hilasmos* “propitiation”) and its cognates where he concludes: “What this suggests is that the notion of atonement in the OT is best understood comprehensively to include both the cleansing and forgiveness of the sinner, and the turning away of God’s anger.” Colin G. Kruse, *The Letters of John*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), 76.

2. The context makes clear that θεός (*theos* “God”) is not in the generic or a reference to the Trinity because this same God “sent his Son into the world” (v. 9) “to be the propitiation for our sins” (v. 10). Furthermore, he has given “his Spirit” (v. 13).

3. The Spirit is the “Spirit of truth” (1 John 4:6) who testifies of the work of Christ (1 John 4:2) and confirms its reality to our hearts (1 John 4:13).

his Son in the Spirit. For the Son's sake, then—that is, in order to place his Son's glory on display and make his pleasure for the Son public—he sent the Son to be a substitutionary sacrifice, satisfying the righteous requirement of his holy character (the wrath of God, arising from his outraged holiness), forgiving an infinite debt, and reconciling a people to be his glorious inheritance in Christ by the Spirit.

## **The Father's Plan is Rooted in His Love**

The plan of salvation played out on the stage of creation is an overflow of the *Father's* eternal love for the Son in the Spirit. From all eternity, this love has been eternally and perfectly poured out on the Son (John 3:35; 5:20; 10:17; 15:9-10; 17:24). Reciprocally, the Son loves the Father (John 14:31), and though no mention is made of the Father or Son's love for the Spirit or the Spirit's love for Father and Son, the fruit of the Spirit is love (Gal 5:22), and the Spirit is the one who makes known the Triune God's love (Rom 5:5; 15:30). Furthermore, a fundamental part of the Christ's atoning work is so that all those who believe in Christ might participate in the intra-trinitarian fellowship of love that existed "before the foundation of the world" (John 17:22-24).

## **In the Incarnation**

In the incarnation, the eternal love of the Father for the Son has gone public (1 John 4:9) by the Spirit. The angel explains to Mary, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High [the Father] will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy—the Son of God" (Luke 1:35). Then, in the life and ministry of Jesus, the Father pours out his Spirit on the Son (Matt 3:16-17; 12:18; Luke 3:22; 4:18-19; Acts 10:38), so that the Son can perform the Father's works (John 5:19; 10:32-33) and speak the Father's words (John 12:49-50).<sup>4</sup>

The Father makes his love public at both the baptism and transfiguration of Jesus. He told the witnesses, "You are/This is my beloved Son, with you/whom I am well-pleased" (Mark 1:11; 9:7; cf. Matt 3:17; 17:5; Luke 9:35; 2 Pet 1:17-18). Further, John

4. In John's Gospel, the works of the Father through the Son circle around seven specific signs. They are: (1) water changed to wine (John 2:1-11), (2) healing of the nobleman's son (John 4:46-54), (3) the healing of the man at the pool (John 5:1-18), (4) the feeding of the five thousand (John 6:1-14), (5) walking on the water (John 6:16-21), (6) healing of the blind man (John 9:1-41), and (7) raising of Lazarus (John 11:1-44). Regarding these signs, Nicodemus tells Jesus, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him" (John 3:2). Morris affirms that the signs not only point to the Father but originate with him as well. "Perhaps it would be true to say that where John sees miracles from one point of view as σημεῖα (semeia "signs"), activities pointing people to God, from another he sees them as ἔργα (erga "works"), activities that take their origin in God. Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995), 612. These signs were worked out in the sovereign, providential timing of the Father (John 9:3), and in response to Jesus's prayer (John 11:21-22, 41-42). Therefore, the works testify that the Father has sent the Son (John 5:36-38; 10:25) and that the Father and Son are one (John 10:37-38).

teaches that the Father gave to the Son the “Spirit without measure” (John 3:34),<sup>5</sup> and so too, the Father is always with him (John 8:29; 16:32). Thus, the Son laid aside his own will to do the will of the Father (John 6:38), to accomplish his work (John 4:34; cf. Heb 3:1-6), and to “always do the things that are pleasing to him” (John 8:29). In short, Jesus said, “but I do as the Father has commanded me, so that the world may know that I love the Father” (John 14:31; cf. John 15:10).

Jesus even rebukes his enemies for not understanding the purpose of the incarnation: The Father, Son, and Spirit, working their plan of salvation, giving life and exercising judgment so that “all may honor the Son, just as they honor the Father. Whoever does not honor the Son does not honor the Father who sent him” (John 5:23). Therefore, in Jesus’s glorification of the Father, the Father glorified the Son (John 8:49-50, 54-55). Furthermore, and most important for our discussion, the mutual glorification and honor of Father and Son arising from their mutual love culminates in the work of the cross (John 12:28; 17:1).

## **In the Crucifixion**

In the crucifixion of Jesus, the Father gives the Son to be the Savior of the world by making him to be a penal substitutionary sacrifice for his elect. To be sure, what we are not saying is that Jesus, who is full of love, offered himself in such a way to placate the Father, who is full of wrath. On the contrary, both Father and Son in the Spirit are united in divine love and holiness to satisfy the righteous requirement of their divine nature.

Therefore, the suffering and shame was not purposeless, a mere accident of history (Matt 26:53-54); it happened for a reason. In sending the Son, the Father fulfills his “plan and foreknowledge” (Acts 2:23; cf. Acts 4:28), delivering him up to death to be a sin offering (Mark 10:45; 2 Cor 5:21; Rom 8:32).<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, the Son also offered himself up (John 10:17-18) through the anointing ministry of the Holy Spirit (Heb 9:14), which he received from the Father.<sup>7</sup>

As a result of the cross, the Father condemned sin (Rom 8:3), and as the “Lamb of God” (John 1:29, 36), he is the gift provided by the Father in order to “take away the sin of the world” (John 1:29).<sup>8</sup> This the Father does by putting his Son forward

5. Grammatically, the one who gives the Spirit could be understood as the Son; however, verse 35 makes it clear that the Father, who gives all things to the Son, is the one who gives the Spirit. See D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991), 212.

6. The use of ὑπέρ (*hyper* “on behalf of”) is used often to speak of substitutionary atonement (e.g., John 11:50; 15:13; Rom 5:6, 1 Cor 11:24; 15:3; 2 Cor 5:14; Gal 1:4; 2:20; 3:13; Eph 5:2, 25; 1 Thess 5:10).

7. Consistent with inseparable operations and divine simplicity.

8. Substitutionary atonement is often criticized in Johannine studies; nevertheless, it is the teaching of Scripture. For a defense of substitutionary atonement in the Gospel of John, see Charles A. Gieschen, “The Death of Jesus in the Gospel of John: Atonement for Sin?” *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 72, no. 3 (July 1, 2008): 243–61; and George Leonard Carey, “The Lamb of God and Atonement Theories,” *Tyndale Bulletin* 32 (January 1, 1981): 97–122.

(as I argued in the introduction) as a means of propitiation (Rom 3:25).<sup>9</sup> Thus, as the Son is “lifted up” (John 8:28), he fully satisfied the Father’s righteous requirement through drinking the “cup that the Father has given [him]” (John 18:11; cf. Mark 10:38).<sup>10</sup> Peter Bolt, in *The Cross from a Distance*, connects the imagery of the cup of wrath with Isaiah’s servant of the Lord. He writes,

Just before the final servant song, in which the servant dies a sacrificial death, we read that Israel has drunk the cup of God’s wrath to the dregs, and this cup will be handed to Israel’s tormentors (51:17, 22). Isaiah’s next chapter shows that it is the servant’s death that has exhausted the cup of God’s wrath on behalf of Israel. Jesus now [Mark 10:38] predicts that, as the servant of the Lord, he will drink the cup of God’s wrath.<sup>11</sup>

At the cross, the Son was suffering the wrath and judgment of the Father as an offering for sin. How then can the Son experience the Father’s wrath but not his hatred? Are wrath and hatred synonymous? No. Because Christ “became a curse” (Gal 3:13), because the Father made him to “be sin” (2 Cor 5:21) and sent him “for sin, [the Father] condemned sin in the flesh” (Rom 8:3). His wrath and judgment towards sin was satisfied in the substitutionary work of Christ on the cross. Nevertheless, in those same passages, the Father cannot hate his Son because the Son is the perfect one who “knew no sin” (2 Cor 5:21) and who came in the “likeness of sinful flesh” (Rom 8:3). Thus, the Father’s motivation to send the son to the cross as a penal substitutionary sacrifice bearing the Father’s wrath was love, not hate.

And though Christ experienced “forsakenness” on the cross (Matt 27:46; Mark 15:34), it was not an absolute abandonment to outer darkness but rather the feeling of Christ in his humanity after nine hours on the cross that his Father had abandoned him. Even the Son’s expression cannot be understood to be an absolute statement for he calls the Father, “My God” and was confident of the Father’s loving care: “For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life that I may take it up again” (John 10:17). He was able to pray as he breathed his last words, “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit” (Luke 23:46). The Son’s entrusting of his spirit to the Father reveals the fact that the outpouring of the Father’s wrath is not an act of love ontologically, but rather an act of perfect just wrath in the context of a loving plan to reconcile sinners to himself.

9. Again, the Father himself here takes the initiative to send the Son to be the means of satisfaction. See Thomas R. Schreiner, *Romans*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament 6 (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1998), 191–92. For a thorough lexical and theological treatment of ἱλασμός (hilasmos “propitiation”), see Leon Morris, *The Apostolic Preaching of the Cross* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1955), 155–74.

10. The Old Testament allusions associate the cup with suffering and with the wrath of God the Father (Ps 75:8; Isa 51:17; Jer 25:15; Ezek 23:31–33). The book of Revelation has similar connections (Rev 14:10; 16:19), which fit well with the doctrine of propitiation.

11. Peter G. Bolt, *The Cross from a Distance: Atonement in Mark’s Gospel* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2004), 67.



## **The Father's Plan Brings Him Pleasure**

Because the Father's plan of salvation is motivated by his love, it brings him good pleasure to design his plan for the ages (Eph 1:5).<sup>12</sup> Paul writes to the Ephesians that the mystery of the Father's will is "according to *his* purpose, which *he* set forth in Christ as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him [the Son], things in heaven and things on earth [emphasis mine]" (Eph 1:9-10). In other words, the great pleasure of the Father is to sum up all things in his Son. Later, Paul writes that the Father achieves his plan in Christ (Eph 3:11), and to the Colossians, Paul reiterates that the Father's mystery is Christ (Col 2:2) and the glorious riches of this mystery is Christ in the saints, the hope of glory (Col 1:26-27). Thus, there will be no corner of the world or feature of heaven where Christ's honor and glory will not reach. This is why the crucifixion cannot be discussed apart from the resurrection and exaltation of the Son.

### **In the Resurrection and Exaltation**

It brought the Father great pleasure to raise the Son up from the dead, exalting the Son to his throne as king and high priest. That the Father accepted the Son's substitutionary sacrifice is demonstrated in the resurrection (Acts 2:24, 32; 3:15; 4:10; 5:30; 10:40; 13:30, 33-35; 17:31; Gal 1:1; 1 Thess 1:10; 1 Cor 15:15; 2 Cor 4:14; 2 Cor 13:4; Rom 6:4; 10:9; Col 2:12; Heb 5:7; 13:20; 1 Pet 1:21). Further, Peter writes that the Father not only raised him from the dead but also "gave him glory" (1 Pet 1:21). Therefore, as a part of the resurrection, the Father publicly revealed Christ to be his Son (Rom 1:4),<sup>13</sup> and Jesus, as the Christ, lives by the power of the Father (2 Cor 13:4), and lives to honor and glorify him (Rom 6:10).<sup>14</sup>

Thus, the Father desires to placard his Son in the Spirit before the world as a demonstration of his lavish love and faithfulness to his promises. It is no surprise that in the throne room of heaven the continuous response of the heavenly court is unceasing worship of the Father and the "Lamb" (Rev 5:13-14).<sup>15</sup> The "Lamb" language rings throughout the pages of Scripture. From the lamb slain at Passover

12. The Father's plan is rooted in his love, which brings him εὐδοκία (eudokia "purpose") (1:5). Translated as "purpose" in the ESV, it is used in connection with the Father's will and as Clinton Arnold says, it "refers to the pleasure and delight in one's heart that forms the basis for decision making and action," and is therefore better translated "good pleasure." See Clinton E. Arnold, *Ephesians*, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary Series on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010), 83.

13. ὁρίζω (horizo) can mean "appointed," but better to mean "marked out" or "designated." I have translated it above as publicly revealed.

14. See Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996), 379.

15. The Spirit is, of course, included since he is represented by the "seven spirits" (Rev 3:1; 4:6) bringing the Son's message to the churches: "let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches" (Rev 2:7, 11, 17, 29; 3:6, 13, 22).

(Exod 12:1–14) as a redemption (e.g., Exod 6:6; 13:13, 15; 15:13; Deut 7:8), to the Levitical sacrifices of sin and burnt offerings and the ritual of the Day of Atonement (Lev 16). From the prophetic promise of a Messiah who will be “like a lamb that is led to the slaughter” (Isa 53:7), redeeming his people (Isa 35:9; 41:14; 43:1, 14; 44:22, 23, 24; 45:13; 51:11; 52:3; 62:12; 63:9) by the substitution of himself (Isa 53:4–5), to the cry of John the Baptist, “Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1:29). Jesus is the one who by his blood ransomed a people from “every tribe and language and people and nation” (Rev 5:9).

This reality answers the question, “Why was it the will or good pleasure of the Father to crush him” (Isa 53:10)? Did the Father take some sadistic pleasure in pouring out his wrath upon the Son? No. The Father and Son knew that the “offering for guilt” that “[bore] their iniquities” would result in “offspring” who would be “accounted righteous” and he would “see and be satisfied” (Isa 53:10–11). To use the language of John’s Gospel: The Father has a people he gives to his Son (John 6:37; 10:29; 17:2, 6, 9, 24; 18:9). Furthermore: (1) All that the Father gives the Son will come (John 6:37), (2) the Son knows them (John 10:27), (3) they will never be snatched out of the Father or Son’s hands (John 10:28–29), (4) it is for the purpose of seeing the Father’s character (John 17:6),<sup>16</sup> (5) they will be with the Son and see the Father’s love and generosity toward the Son (John 17:24),<sup>17</sup> (6) none will be lost (John 18:9), nor will they be left as orphans since they will be indwelt and empowered by the Holy Spirit (John 14:16–18).

The will of the Father who sent the Son, then, is that he would lose “nothing” of all that he has given to the Son (John 6:38–40). Because of the Father’s love for the Son in the Spirit, Jesus can tell Nicodemus that the Father in this way “loved the world, that he gave his only son” (John 3:16). John, later reflecting on this love in 1 John 3:1 calls his readers to consider the greatness of the “kind of love” the Father has bestowed, which is exhibited in their adoption as his children through Christ by the Spirit. It is why for all eternity, all “blessing and honor and glory and might” are forever due the one “who sits on the throne” and “the Lamb” (Rev 5:13), and why it brings great pleasure to the Father to see all things summed up in his Son, the one “who did not come to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many” (Mark 10:45).

D. A. Carson captures it well in his *The Difficult Doctrine of the Love of God*:

Thus, when we use the language of propitiation, we are not to think that the Son, full of love, offered himself and thereby placated (i.e., rendered propitious) the Father, full of wrath. The picture is more complex. It is that the Father, full of righteous wrath against us, nevertheless loved us so much that he sent his Son. Perfectly mirroring his Father’s words and deeds, the

16. To manifest the Father’s name is to reveal his character. Carson, *John*, 558.

17. Köstenberger, *John*, 501.



Son stood over against us in wrath—it is not for nothing that the Scriptures portray sinners wanting to hide from the face of him who sits on the throne *and from the wrath of the Lamb*—yet, obedient to his Father’s commission, offered himself on the cross. He did this out of love both for his Father, whom he obeys, and for us, whom he redeems. Thus God is necessarily both the subject and the object of propitiation. He provides the propitiating sacrifice (he is the subject), and he himself is propitiated (he is the object). That is the glory of the cross.<sup>18</sup>

Here then is the heart of the argument. The eternal love of the Father for the Son in the Spirit produced a plan for redemptive history that would bring all honor and glory to the Father and Son by the Spirit. In order to redeem a multitude of worshippers, the Father sent the Son, empowered by the Spirit to be a penal substitutionary sacrifice, enduring the wrath of God so that those worshippers would not only see the glory of the Father in the face of Christ, but would experience the Father’s love in the Son by the indwelling Spirit. Further, the Father hates sin but cannot hate his Son, and so was greatly pleased that the Son laid down his life and took it up again, accomplishing redemption and propitiation and reconciliation as the perfect sacrifice for sin. For only as a substitute can he actually pay for sins, bring real forgiveness and make peace.

18. D. A. Carson, *The Difficult Doctrine of the Love of God* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2000), 72.