

Pierced for Our Transgressions: The Efficacy and Particularity of Substitution

Selected Scriptures

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Introduction

Well, we return again this morning to our series on the atonement of Christ, which I've been calling, *O Perfect Redemption!*, in which we've been seeking an answer to that controversial question, "For whom did Christ die?" And after an introductory message that oriented us to the discussion, we had two sermons on God's **design** for the atonement. In the first of those, we paid special attention to the unity of the persons of the Trinity. We said that, because they share an identical nature, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit share an identical will. And that means the persons of the Trinity have the exact same intention for the atonement. We can't have the Father aiming to save some, the Son aiming to save others, and the Spirit aiming to save still another group. The Father has chosen some, and not all; the Spirit regenerates some, and not all; and therefore the Son atones for those same some, and not all. The persons of the Trinity are perfectly united in their intention for the atonement.

In the second sermon on **design**, we looked into what that intention was. For what **purpose** has the Father sent the Son into the world? What does Scripture say Christ has come into the world to do? And we found that the answer was: Scripture consistently and uniformly identifies the Trinity's unified intention for the atonement as *exclusively salvific*. First Timothy 1:15: "It is a trustworthy statement, deserving full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to *save* sinners." Not to make sinners savable. Not to make salvation possible, or available. Not to make provision for salvation. But actually to *save* sinners! And so we concluded: if (a) God's intentions must certainly come to pass, and if (b) His intention for the atonement is not to make provisions or possibilities but actually to save, then (c) all those for whom Christ died must certainly be saved. And since not all are saved, Christ's atonement is particular, and not universal. The extent of the atonement is a function of the intent of the atonement.

But then, we moved past the **design** of the atonement and into the **nature** of the atonement—into what Scripture says Christ actually accomplished by His death on the cross. And we found that Scripture speaks of Christ's death according to at least **four themes**, or **motifs**—each of which correspond precisely to the various ways our sin has broken the relationship between us and God. And we had a sermon on each of those motifs: Christ's atonement was a sacrifice, that took away our sin and guilt; it was a propitiation, which satisfied the wrath of God that burned against us because of our sin; it was a work of reconciliation, because it destroyed the ground of the enmity

and hostility between God and men because of our sin; and it was a work of redemption, by which we who were enslaved to sin and death were released from our bondage through the payment of the ransom price of Christ's own blood.

And the argument has been, Scripture presents each of these motifs as inherently **efficacious** and **particular**. In every way that the Bible talks about Christ's atonement, it insists on the fact that it perfectly accomplishes everything it set out to do, and that it was accomplished on behalf of particular individuals whom God has chosen to save, and not on behalf of all without exception. And that only makes sense when one considers the sobering reality that not all without exception are saved. As an expiatory sacrifice, Jesus' death actually takes away sin and guilt. But if not all without exception have their sin and guilt taken away, it's self-evident that Jesus did not offer Himself as an expiatory sacrifice for all without exception. As a propitiation, the atonement actually satisfies God's wrath. But if there are some people who suffer under God's wrath for eternity as the just punishment for their sins, it's plain that Jesus was not the propitiation for those people's sins. The **efficacy** of the atonement implies the **particularity** of the atonement.

And we've seen how, if you deny that the atonement is particular, you inevitably deny that the atonement is efficacious. If Christ redeemed all without exception from the curse of the law, but a great portion of those redeemed remain in bondage under the curse of the law for eternity, then Christ's redemption does not really redeem us from the curse of the law. And before you know it, this perfect redemption begins to look like a paltry redemption. Instead of accomplishing glorious achievements, it merely provides possibilities and opportunities. But the result of that is that the decisive, determinative cause of salvation is taken off of the strong shoulders of the Savior, and thrust back as a burden upon the sinner. As we read from J. I. Packer last week, the atonement gets redefined to be not that by which God saves us, but that by which God enables us to save ourselves. When we universalize the extent of the atonement, without universalizing the extent of salvation itself and saying that it brings everybody to heaven, we empty it of its power to save. When you universalize the extent of the atonement, you necessarily undermine the efficacy of the atonement.

And so a *perfect* redemption must be a *particular* redemption. If the atonement is an expiatory sacrifice, it must actually take sins away! If it is a propitiation, it must *actually* extinguish God's wrath! If it is a reconciliation, it must actually accomplish peace between God and men! And if it is a redemption, it must actually release the sinner from his bondage to sin!

And we said it when we began to dig in to the **nature** of the atonement, but each of those motifs illustrates that Christ's atoning work was, most fundamentally, a work of **penal substitution**. That means that, on the cross, Jesus suffered the penalty for the sins of His people as a substitute for us. And in today's message, I want to dig into the atonement as a substitution. It's not quite that "substitution" is another motif alongside the other four. It's that expiation, propitiation,

reconciliation, and redemption, are all fundamentally substitutionary categories. And that fact has much bearing on the question of the extent of the atonement.

And so our sermon this morning will have three parts. First, we'll examine **the atonement as penal substitution**. Secondly, we'll consider the inherent **efficacy of penal substitution**. And then thirdly, we'll answer a significant **objection** against conceiving of the atonement as a truly efficacious substitution.

I. The Atonement as Penal Substitution

Well, in the first place, then, let us consider Scripture's teaching of the **atonement as penal substitution**. And like I said, all of the four previous motifs that we've studied have just been iterations or instantiations or examples of penal substitution.

Christ's sacrifice frees sinners from guilt because He bore that guilt in our place! In Isaiah 53:4, Isaiah characterizes the Suffering Servant as the one who "has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows." He has grief that was not His, but was ours. He has sorrows that He should not have experienced, but experiences because *we* deserve them. In verse 12, he calls Him the One who "bore the sin of many." He had sins, but not His own. He bore the sins of others. And in verse 6 he says, "The LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all," and so, verse 11, "he shall bear their iniquities." Bore our griefs, carried our sorrows, bore the sin of many, the iniquity of us all has been laid on Him, and He bears our iniquity. This is the language of a **substitute** suffering the **penalty** of a people in their place. In 1 Peter 2:24, Peter says, "He Himself bore our sins in His body on the cross, so that we might die to sin and live to righteousness." Then, quoting Isaiah's account of the Suffering Servant, he adds, "for by His wounds you were healed." *He* has to be wounded for *your* healing. The Lord Jesus Christ bore the punishment of the sins of His people and thereby brought them blessing. Isaiah 53:5: "*He* was pierced for *our* transgressions; *he* was crushed for *our* iniquities; upon *him* was the chastisement that brought *us* peace" (ESV). So we see it clearly: substitutionary sacrifice.

Christ's blood effects the propitiation of God's wrath against sinners because He bore that wrath in our place. In Galatians 3:13, Paul says, "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the Law, having become a curse for us." The curse of the law which we were under because of our sin was borne by Christ who became a curse *for* us, in our place, so that we do not have to bear that curse.

The death of Christ reconciles God to man by virtue of His own alienation and abandonment. It is because the Son was forsaken as if He were a rebel, that I who am a rebel can be received as a Son! It is because He cries, "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?" that we may cry out, "Abba, Father!" It is because He is abandoned to suffer outside the camp, Hebrews 13:12, that we can be brought into the fellowship of God's own dwelling place.

And Christ's atonement redeems sinners from the bondage of our sin by submitting Himself, for a time, to the bondage of the death that is the wages of sin. Hebrews 2:14 says that it is *through death* that He renders powerless the devil who had the power of death, and *frees* those who through fear of death were subject to *slavery* all their lives.

Jesus *saves* His people from the **penalty** of our sins by becoming a **substitute** for us—paying that penalty in our place and on our behalf! The very heart of the Gospel is the cross! And the very heart of the cross is penal substitutionary atonement!

And so the New Testament is simply shot through with testimony to the penal substitutionary atonement of Christ—that Christ has suffered in place of His people, so that we may go free. And often, that substitution is indicated by prepositions—tiny little words that are often overlooked, but which are mightily important. The Greek preposition *anti* is a strong indicator of substitution. It literally means “in place of.” You see that most clearly in places like Matthew 2:22, where it speaks of “Archelaus . . . reigning over Judea in place of [*anti*] his father Herod.” Matthew 5:38 also uses *anti* to translate the *lex talionis*—“An eye for [*anti*] an eye and a tooth for [*anti*] a tooth”—which mandated that an offender be deprived of his eye or tooth *in place of* the eye or tooth of which he deprived someone else. Jesus uses this phrase with respect to His own death when He says in Matthew 20:28, “For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many,” *anti pollōn*, in the place of many. That is to say, while sinners deserved to die because of their sin, Jesus laid down His life as the ransom price in the place of the lives of His people, so that they might go free.

And while *anti* has the strongest connotations of substitution, the preposition *huper* is a close second. It means “on behalf of,” and it is by far the most common preposition to signify the substitutionary relationship between Christ and His people. It's often wrapped up in the term *for*. The body of Christ is “given *for* you,” Luke 22:19; that is, *in your place*. In John 6:51, Jesus says He gives His body “*for* the life of the world.” In Mark 14:24, the blood of the new covenant is poured out “*for* many.” In Luke 22:20, it's poured out “*for* you.” That is to say, Christ's body and blood are given on behalf of sinners as a substitutionary sacrifice that averts wrath and punishment from them. As the Good Shepherd, Jesus lays down His life *for*, or on behalf of, the sheep: John 10:11 and 15—which means that He died so that they don't have to. He died *on behalf of* us, the ungodly, Romans 5:6 and 8. He gave Himself *for* His bride, the church, Ephesians 5:25, which Paul describes both collectively—“for us,” in Ephesians 5:2—and personally—“for me,” in Galatians 2:20. “On our behalf” He was made to be sin, 2 Corinthians 5:21. “For us” He became a curse, Galatians 3:13. First Peter 3:18: the righteous One suffered the penalty of sin *on behalf of* the unrighteous: the righteous for the unrighteous—so that He might bring us to God.

It is just unmistakable! The air you breathe in Scripture is the doctrine of the vicarious suffering of the Lord Jesus Christ on behalf of His people! Penal substitutionary atonement is woven into the very fabric of God's revelation from beginning to end, because it *is* the very heart of the Gospel message. It is, as one author put it, "the *essence* of the atonement" (Packer, 25). "Bearing shame and scoffing rude, *In my place condemned He stood*, Sealed my pardon with His blood; Hallelujah! What a Savior!"

II. The Efficacy of Penal Substitution

Well, so much, then, for Scripture's teaching on the atonement as penal substitution. In the **second** place, let us consider **the efficacy of penal substitution**. Just like with the four motifs of the atonement that illustrate and describe this penal substitutionary atonement, the **efficacious** nature of substitution itself has great bearing on the extent of that substitutionary atonement.

What do I mean by that? Well, to say that Christ died in the place of, in the stead of, or as the substitute for sinners is to say that He accomplished everything that divine justice required to save us. The guilt, the wrath, the alienation, and the bondage that we would have had to endure for eternity, the Father gathered them all together, and poured them into the cup—which Revelation 14:10 calls "the wine of the wrath of God, which is mixed in full strength in the cup of His anger"; which Revelation 16:19 calls "the cup of the wine of His fierce wrath"—and He handed that cup to His Beloved Son. And in Gethsemane, the Son as it were held that dreadful cup in His hands, and He looked into that cup, and He saw what it would mean to drink it. And just the thought of it bowed Him to the dust in the garden. And He begged His Father, "My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from Me." "Oh Father, if there's any other way!" And He heard silence. And He prayed a second time and a third time, and He heard nothing. And so He resolved, "My Father, if this cannot pass away unless I drink it, Your will be done." And then He got up, marched to Golgotha, and drank every last drop of that cup, filled with all the bitterness of hell itself, until all was accomplished! Until He cried out in victory: "It is finished!" We've quoted it before, but it's too good not to repeat: "Death and the curse were in our cup, / O Christ, 'twas full for Thee, / But Thou hast drained the last dark drop, / 'Tis *empty* now for me!"

And that is the point of **substitution**! Jesus drains the cup of God's wrath to its very dregs, so there is no condemnation to drink for those who are in Christ Jesus. J. I. Packer, in his famous article from the 1970s defending penal substitution, "What Did the Cross Achieve?" puts it this way. He says, This means that "no such suffering—no God-forsakenness, no dereliction—should remain for us. . . . what Christ bore on the cross was the God-forsakenness of penal judgment, which we shall *never* have to bear because he accepted it in our place" (87). Praise God for penal substitutionary atonement!

Those for whom Christ died can never experience the punishment which He bore in our place. As Owen puts it, “For no other reason in the world can be assigned why Christ should undergo any thing in another’s stead, but that that other might be freed from undergoing that which he underwent for him” (*Death of Death*, 246). This just what substitution means! The substitute suffers so that the ones He’s substituting for don’t have to. But what implications does that have for the extent of the atonement? If Christ’s death is truly an **efficacious substitution**, as Scripture plainly teaches that it is, then no one for whom He died can ever undergo the punishment that Christ bore in their place. But because many do undergo that punishment—indeed, because there were many who were undergoing that very punishment as Christ was undergoing His on the cross—we cannot say that Jesus died as a substitutionary atonement for all without exception.

And yet inexplicably, this is precisely what those who deny particular redemption say happened. Bruce Ware writes, “Those in hell, who never put their faith in Christ and so were never saved, are under the just judgment of God for their sin, even though *Christ has paid the penalty for their sin*” (*FHHC*, 648–49). But this simply cannot happen. It is to equivocate on the meaning of substitution to suggest that both the Substitute and those He dies for experience death. As one writer put it, “A man may die in the hope of helping others, but he is not their substitute if they die the death he had hoped to save them from” (Wells, 84). If Jesus endured the wrath of God in the place of those who will eventually suffer it themselves, then He was not their substitute; He was their fellow-sufferer. A substitute acts in order to relieve another man of his obligation. It is not a substitution if the so-called substitute acts and the other man’s obligation remains (Niemi, 50–51).

A friend of mine gives a helpful illustration in the context in which we most often think of substitution today, namely, sports. He says, “If a player on a sports team enters the field of play for a particular position, and the player already on the field in that position leaves the field of play, a substitution has been made. But if both players are on the field for the same position at the same time, that is not a substitution” (Niemi, 51). If on the cross, Jesus is suffering the wrath of God against the sins of Esau, or Jezebel, who were in hell at that moment, suffering the wrath of God for the very same sins, that’s not substitution! It’s parallel punishment! And not only is it not substitution, it’s double jeopardy! How could God be just in punishing the same sins twice in the suffering of two different people? How could His holiness be satisfied with the offering of His Son as a substitutionary punishment, on the one hand, and on the other hand execute upon the sinner the very punishment Christ is said to have discharged? Friends, it simply cannot be.

Back to J. I. Packer: “Any who take this position [of universal atonement] must redefine substitution in imprecise terms, if indeed they do not drop the term altogether, for they are committing themselves to deny that Christ’s vicarious sacrifice ensures anyone’s salvation. . . . If we are going to affirm penal substitution for all without exception we must either infer universal

salvation or else, to evade this inference, deny the saving efficacy of the substitution for anyone; and if we are going to affirm penal substitution as an effective, saving act of God we must either infer universal salvation or else, to evade this inference, restrict the scope of the substitution, making it a substitution for some, not all” (91). If the nature of Christ’s atonement was a penal substitutionary sacrifice, then the extent of Christ’s atonement is limited to those who do not experience the punishment for which Christ offered Himself as substitute. Can I put it plainly? You can have either (a) penal substitutionary atonement or (b) universal atonement. You cannot have both. And since Scripture is just saturated with the doctrine of penal substitution, we are shut up to conclude that Jesus’ penal substitutionary atonement was a particular atonement. The heart of the Gospel is the cross, and the heart of the cross is penal substitution. And for the atonement to be a genuinely penal substitution, it must be a particular substitution.

III. Objection: Saved before Believing?

Now, in response to that sort of argumentation, the advocates of universal atonement raise an **objection**. They say, “Look, you particularists like to make a big deal out of what you call the efficacy of the atonement—that the cross actually saves and doesn’t just provide the potential for salvation. But you don’t really believe that the cross actually saves sinners, because you acknowledge that even the elect who were ‘saved’ by Christ’s cross work are born into the world as sinners. You say that if Jesus’ death is a genuine propitiation, then God’s wrath is perfectly satisfied on behalf of those for whom Jesus died when He died. But you agree with what Paul says in Ephesians 2:1–3, that even the elect—on whose behalf Jesus ‘efficaciously satisfied the wrath of God’ in the first century—even the elect come into this world ‘dead in their trespasses and sins,’ and are ‘by nature children of wrath.’ Jesus says in John 3:36 that ‘the wrath of God abides’ on the one who doesn’t obediently confess faith in Him. But the elect don’t come into the world believing in Jesus. And so you say that Jesus efficaciously satisfied the wrath of God on their behalf, but Jesus says the wrath of God abides on them. See, you particularists *say* you believe in an efficacious atonement. But you believe the atonement is ineffectual until a person believes, just like we do. Otherwise, you would be saying that people can be saved without faith.”

Now, that’s an objection that needs a response, and there are several things to say in response to it. The first thing to say is: yes, it’s true that particularists do believe that all people—even the elect—come into the world dead in their trespasses and sins and under the threat of the wrath of God. We do not believe that the elect are regenerated, justified, or adopted on the cross, before they ever existed, and before they even committed the sins from which they need to be saved. We do not believe that people can be saved without faith. And so there is agreement there.

A. Scripture Says the Cross Saves of Itself

However, we do need to grapple with the fact that Scripture does say that the cross actually saves, and not just that it makes us savable until we have faith, which is when we're really saved. All of the motifs of penal substitution are said to be accomplished by Christ's death. Sacrifice: Hebrews 9:26 says Christ "put away sin by the sacrifice of Himself." Sin is actually put away by Christ's sacrificial death, which happened 2,000 years ago—not when each sinner believes. Propitiation: Romans 3:25 says that God displayed Christ "as a propitiation *by his blood*." Christ satisfies the wrath of God by shedding His blood in His death. Yes, that propitiation is "received by faith," as the next phrase says. But it is *accomplished* by blood. Reconciliation: Romans 5:10 says "we were reconciled to God *through the death* of His Son." Again, yes, we "receive the reconciliation," Romans 5:11, through faith. But it's Christ's death that reconciles us. Redemption: Hebrews 9:15: "A *death* has taken place for the redemption of transgressions." First Peter 1:18–19: we "were...redeemed...with precious *blood*, ... the blood of Christ." Galatians 3:13: Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law, having become a curse for us. And when did He become a curse for us? Not every moment a new sinner exercises saving faith, but when He died once for all on the cross.

The point is: Scripture says that the elect are redeemed when Christ died, not merely when they "appropriate" the so-called "provisions" of His death by faith. And so I understand the difficulty: "How can you say wrath is satisfied on the cross, but wrath still abides when they enter the world? How can you say the slave is freed from bondage on the cross, but he comes into the world a slave to sin?" But the first response is to say: Look, however we explain it, this *is* how Scripture speaks.

Scripture does not speak about the cross the way proponents of universal atonement speak about it. Listen to some of these frightening comments from those making this objection. William Shedd says, "Atonement, in and by itself, separate from faith, saves no soul. Christ might have died precisely as he did, but if no one believed in him he would have died in vain. . . . It is only when the death of Christ has been actually confided [believed] in as atonement, that it is completely 'set forth' as God's propitiation for sin" (*Dogmatic Theology*, 747). Not only is that a frightening thing to say, it's expressly contrary to what Paul says in Romans 3:25—namely, that propitiation consists in the shedding of Christ's blood, not in the sinner's faith in that blood, and that God set forth Christ as a propitiation on the cross, not repeatedly at the conversion of each individual sinner. Moïse Amyraut, the 17th-century theologian from which "Amyraldianism" derives its name, writes, "This will to render the grace of salvation universal and common to all human beings is so conditional that without the fulfillment of the condition it is entirely inefficacious" (*Brief Traitté*, 90). Arminian theologian Robert Picirilli says he objects to the notion that "propitiation...or reconciliation were actually finished on the cross" (94). *Faith* finishes propitiation and reconciliation! Southern Baptist professor of theology, John Hammett, asserts that "propitiation, and all Christ did on the cross, though provided to all, remains of no value, ineffectual, useless, until subjectively appropriated" (164–65). And Bruce Ware asks with

exasperation, “How can it be said of the death of Christ in itself that by his death alone he saved those for whom he died? ... We cannot speak correctly of Christ’s death actually and certainly *saving* the elect. No, even here, the payment...renders their salvation *possible*, while [it] becomes actual only upon their exercising saving faith” (5).

“How can we say that Christ’s death in itself saves those for whom He died?” Because that’s what Scripture says! Repeatedly and consistently! It locates the saving efficacy of the atonement in the death of Christ itself, and not in the sinner’s faith! But aren’t those startling comments? When your interpretation of any given passage or set of passages starts requiring you to say things like the cross was useless and saves no one, you need to change course. Is this not precisely what Packer said would happen? That in order to universalize the extent of the atonement we have to “deprecate” the atonement “we were previously extolling,” and say that our *faith* is the determinative cause of our salvation? Herman Bavinck put it this way. He said, “The center of gravity has been shifted from Christ and located in the Christian. Faith is the true reconciliation with God” (*Reformed Dogmatics*, 3:469).

B. Accomplished vs. Applied

But how do we solve the difficulty? How can Scripture say the cross efficaciously saves the elect, but that the elect come into the world unsaved and aren’t saved until they believe? Well, it’s because Scripture speaks of being “saved” in different senses. We must recognize the distinction between *redemption accomplished* and *redemption applied*. Redemption was *accomplished* on the cross. It is finished. Everything that was required for our salvation was finished by Christ on the cross. But all of the saving blessings that the death of Christ accomplished on the cross, are nevertheless not *applied* to the sinner until God regenerates him and grants him repentance and faith. There is a distinction between redemption accomplished and redemption applied—between having the *right* to the saving blessings that have been secured for you, and actually coming into *possession* of those saving blessings.

This is so crucial to understand. The cross actually accomplished the satisfaction of God’s wrath; again, propitiation is said to have been made in Christ’s blood, Romans 3:25, which was spilled once for all in the first century. And a result, every person for whom Christ died obtained the *right* to have the wrath of God removed from Him. It is removed in principle. The atonement secured—it made infallibly certain and definite—that everyone for whom Christ died would come into possession of every blessing that Christ purchased for them. However, God in His wisdom has decreed that His people do not come into *possession* of what is their right immediately upon its being secured. And I think we understand that. A grandfather bequeaths a classic sports car to his grandson upon the grandfather’s death, but leaves it in a trust until the boy turns 21. When the grandfather dies, the car is his grandson’s. But he doesn’t come into possession of it until he turns 21. He has the legal right to it; and if anyone were to attempt to

take it from him they would be prosecuted for theft. But though he has the right to it, he doesn't come into possession of it immediately.

So: the cross secures the elect's absolute right to expiation, propitiation, reconciliation, and redemption, even though it does not put them into *possession* of those benefits until they are applied. But listen carefully: the delay of time between the accomplishment and the application does not render the accomplishment ineffectual or its application the less inevitable. Application *always* follows accomplishment.

The time-gap between the grandfather's death and the grandson's 21st birthday does not make the car any less his by right. Nor does it introduce any uncertainty, or possibility, or provisionality about whether he actually will come into possession of it. Listen to John Owen explain this. He says, "[Christ] did actually, or *ipso facto*, deliver us from the curse, by being made a curse for us [Galatians 3:13]; and the handwriting that was against us, even the whole obligation, was taken out of the way and nailed to his cross [Colossians 2:14]. It is true, all for whom he did this do not instantly...apprehend and perceive it, which is impossible: but yet that hinders not but that they have all the fruits of his death in actual right, though not in actual possession, which last they cannot have until at least it be made known to them. As, if a man pay a ransom for a prisoner detained in a foreign country, the very day of the payment and acceptance of it the prisoner hath right to his liberty, although he cannot enjoy it until such time as tidings of it are brought unto him, and a warrant produced for his delivery" (*Death of Death*, 268).

And consider that illustration. Imagine there's a prisoner whose death sentence had been carried out on a willing substitute a week earlier, all in strict accordance with the law. The Governor, having received word of a sufficient payment on the prisoner's behalf, signs his name to the paperwork ordering the man's release. The Governor is the chief executive officer in the state. The moment he signs that form, the prisoner is freed. His freedom has been absolutely secured. There's nothing conditional, provisional, or potential about it. But it takes time for the paperwork to be processed. The Governor's envoy has to take that signed pardon-slip from the Governor's mansion to the prison; he has to go from the entrance up to the warden; the warden has to sign off; officers have to travel down to the man's cell; they have to escort him from the prison grounds to the outside. Then, and only then, can we say that the man has come into possession of his freedom. But the gap of time between the Governor's accomplishment of his freedom by signing that paper, and the application of the man's freedom by his exiting of the prison, does not make the Governor's signature any less effectual. It doesn't mean that the Governor only provided the prisoner's freedom. It doesn't mean that the prisoner's release was merely provisional. His release was not merely provided for or made possible; it was rendered certain, even though it was not applied immediately. In the same way, the cross has purchased the right of our redemption, though we do not enjoy the possession of it until it is applied through the regenerating work of the Spirit. But Scripture still calls the purchasing of the right of redemption:

redemption. It calls the securing of propitiation: *propitiation*. And that means we need to submit our thinking and our language to Scripture, rather than embrace errant doctrines based on our erroneous deductions.

C. Sentence vs. Execution

You say, “So an elect person has had the wrath of God satisfied on His behalf on the cross, but until he comes to faith ‘the wrath of God abides on him,’ as Jesus says in John 3:36. How does that work?” Well, in light of what we’ve just spoken about, we have to distinguish between the divine *sentence* of wrath, on the one hand, and the actual enduring of the *execution* of that sentence. When Jesus says that the wrath of God presently abides on unbelievers, He doesn’t mean that there is no distinction between the way God’s wrath abides on them versus the way God’s wrath is being poured out on those presently in hell. The only sense in which unbelievers are under divine wrath before they perish in their sins is that that wrath will certainly come upon them if they do not trust in Christ alone for salvation before they die. But in the case of the elect, that’s an impossibility, because the Father’s election and the Son’s atonement ensure that the Holy Spirit will regenerate them and grant them saving faith. On the other hand, those who are already suffering for their sins in hell are under divine wrath in an entirely different sense. In the former case, wrath is threatened; in this case it has become a reality.

If we returned to our death-row prisoner illustration, the execution of his death sentence was carried out upon a willing substitute, and the Governor’s pardon made it certain that that sentence could never be executed upon him. But in the intervening time between the execution of his substitute and the hour of his release, the prisoner remained on death row, under the sentence of the death penalty. Even during that intervening period, we could have said, “The sentence of death abides upon him,” even though its execution had already been carried out upon the substitute (Piper, *FHHC*, 650–51). Similarly, the execution of our death sentence has already been carried out upon our Substitute, the Lord Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God. But the gap of time between the accomplishment of that redemption and its application to us doesn’t make it any less proper to refer to our bondage in sin as genuine bondage. Nor does it mean that our redemption was any more provisional or any less certain.

We see something of a biblical illustration of this reality in Paul’s comments concerning Israel in Romans 11:28–29. He tells the believers in the church of Rome, “From the standpoint of the gospel they [Israel] are enemies for your sake, but from the standpoint of God’s choice they are beloved for the sake of the fathers; for the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable.” He’s saying that because the unbelieving nation of Israel currently rejects the Gospel, they’re considered the enemies of the followers of Christ. Nevertheless, because God has chosen them—“from the standpoint of God’s *choice*”—they are nevertheless beloved. God’s wrath abides on them, in the sense that it threatens to break upon them if they fail to repent. And yet love abides

on them as well! These on whom the wrath of God abides are His beloved, even before they have come to faith in Christ. And the point is, again: this does not make God’s choice of them any less effectual unto their salvation. There’s simply a time delay between the election that renders their salvation certain and their possession of that salvation.

And so none of this makes saving faith unnecessary. Yes, the death of Christ efficaciously accomplishes the salvation of the elect. It makes our possession of the salvation Christ won for us certain, even if it does not make it immediate. But the ministry of the Holy Spirit in regeneration—whereby the elect are granted repentance and faith in Christ and thus lay hold of all the benefits of salvation in union with Him—that ministry is entirely necessary. It’s not made an ounce less necessary. In fact, it is the very means by which that accomplishment will be applied! And still further, not only does Christ’s death not make faith unnecessary; it makes faith *certain*, because the death of Christ purchases saving faith for the ones the Father has chosen.

Conclusion

The essence of the atonement is penal substitution. And inherent to the doctrine of substitution is that it is efficacious. Christ has actually—not potentially, provisionally, or hypothetically—accomplished the salvation of His people by dying in our place. The Servant Song of Isaiah 53, which prophesies of the Messiah’s substitutionary atonement, actually begins in Isaiah 52:13. The Father speaks of the Son, who will come and accomplish atonement, and He says, “Behold, My servant will prosper.” And “prosper” translates the Hebrew word *sakal*, which, when used in the Hiphil stem as it is here, means “to succeed in battle” (Motyer, 251n5; *HALOT*, 3:1328). It’s the same term used in Joshua 1:7–8, where God charges Joshua to be strong and courageous, and to obey the law that Moses gave, “so that you may *have success* wherever you go.” And so the New English Translation rightly translates Isaiah 52:13, “My servant will *succeed!*” That’s the beginning of the story. If we look at the end, we come to John 19:30, which we’ve spoken of already, and we find Christ’s own announcement of success: “It is finished.” Old Testament scholar Alec Motyer says of these bookends, if “the work of Christ only made salvation possible rather than actually secured salvation,” then “‘finished’ only means ‘started’ and ‘succeed’ only means ‘maybe, at some future date, and contingent on the contribution of others.’ ‘Finished’ is no longer ‘finished’ and ‘success’ is no longer a guaranteed result. This is far from both the impression and the actual terms of Isaiah’s forecast” (*FHHC*, 251–52).

And yet back in Isaiah 53 itself, those who failed to esteem the Messiah for who He was in verses 3 and 4 were healed based on nothing but the substitutionary atonement of the Servant, verse 5: “He was pierced through for our transgressions, He was crushed for our iniquities; the chastening for our well-being fell upon Him, and by His scourging we are healed.” He was not potentially pierced or provisionally crushed; His chastening did not bring a potential peace, nor His wounds a provisional healing. No, Christ was actually crushed! He actually “bore our sins in

His body on the cross” (1 Pet 2:24). His wounds did not make us healable. They did not put us into a state in which we *might* be healed if we activated the hypothetically universal scope of Christ’s wounds (Trueman, 42). Rather, by His wounds His people were *healed*. His death actually accomplished the spiritual healing of those for whom He died.

And it is in this **efficacy** that the glory of Christ’s atonement consists. In John 17 and verse 4, in His high priestly prayer to the Father, Christ tells the Father, “I *glorified* You on the earth, *having accomplished* the work which You have given Me to do.” What makes the Son’s work glorifying to the Father is that it was a work of accomplishment, and not mere provision. The cross did not purchase possibilities or create opportunities; it accomplished certainties. It did not make sinners savable; it saved His people. The glory of the atonement is the glory of its perfect efficacy! As Packer says, “Christ did not win a hypothetical salvation for hypothetical believers, a mere possibility of salvation for any who might possibly believe, but a real salvation for his own chosen people. His precious blood really does ‘save us all;’ the intended effects of his self-offering do in fact follow, just because the cross was what it was. Its saving power does not depend on faith being added to it; its saving power is such that faith flows from it. The cross secured the full salvation for all for whom Christ died” (“Saved by His Precious Blood,” 123). “*O Perfect Redemption!*”

And let me close with the words of Charles Spurgeon, which are just too good to leave out. He said, “Some say that all men are Christ’s by purchase. But, beloved, you and I do not believe in a sham redemption which does not redeem. We do not believe in a universal redemption which extends even to those who were in hell before the Savior died, and which includes the fallen angels as well as unrepentant men.” Elsewhere he says, “Not one drop of Jesus’ blood-bought ones was ever lost yet. Howl, howl, O hell, but howl you cannot over the damnation of a redeemed soul. Out with the horrid doctrine that men are bought with blood and yet are damned! It is too diabolical for me to believe. What! Did Christ at one tremendous draft of love drink my damnation dry? & shall I be damned after that? God forbid! What! shall God be unrighteous to forget the Redeemer’s work for us, and let the Savior’s blood be shed in vain? Not hell itself has ever indulged the thought.” And then one more: “Unless God can undeify Himself, every soul that Christ died for He will have. Every soul for which He stood as substitute and surety, He demands to have, and each of those souls He must have, for the covenant stands fast.”