

THEOLOGY CLASSES · SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY V: SOTERIOLOGY

Lecture 5: The Atonement: From Ransom to Penal Substitution

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Lecture by C. Michael Patton, Th.M., and Rhome Dyke, Th.M., from The Theology Program, published on their public channel. Study notes below from Medina Community Church.

BEFORE YOU WATCH

Everything in Christianity rests on one preposition: Christ died for us, but what does for mean? This long session walks the church's answers in order, and it opens with a story you may have heard preached, a boy, a birdcage full of trapped birds, and a preacher who buys them their freedom. It sounds like the gospel. The teachers read it precisely so you can hear, by the end of the evening, what is wrong with it. Listen for the question that decides every theory: who, exactly, must be satisfied?

THE LECTURE, SECTION BY SECTION

1. The foundation and the preposition

Every structure is only as good as its foundation, and the foundation of Christianity, for all people of all time, before the cross and after it, is the cross of Christ. The whole church has always agreed that Christ died for us; the struggle of the centuries has been over that little preposition. The method of the session is the program's method: set aside what you learned in Sunday school, enter the struggle of the church as it happened, and let the contrast between the theories bring clarity. A review fixes the starting point: the recapitulation theory answered why Christ came, to live the life we could not live, but had no answer for what his death accomplished. None of the theories doubts the history of the cross; the question is always its meaning.

2. The birdcage story

Patton reads a story that has circulated for years: a preacher carries a rusty birdcage into the pulpit and tells of buying three trapped wild birds from a boy who meant to torment them and feed them to his cats, then setting them free; then he retells it as a conversation in which Satan gloats over the world of people he has trapped, means to abuse them and kill them, and names his price to Jesus, all your tears and all your blood, and Jesus says, done. It sounds powerful; it sounds like the gospel. The teachers read it because it is a fourth-century theory of the atonement preached in the present tense, and by evening's end the class will be able to say precisely what is wrong with it.

3. The ransom to Satan theory

The next step after recapitulation: by Adam's sin, humanity was sold into bondage to Satan, who thereby gained legal rights over the race, and Christ's death was a payment made to Satan to buy them back. Origen and Gregory of Nyssa held it, and Eastern Orthodoxy has largely kept it, blended with recapitulation. The early picture was vivid: Satan swallowed Christ in death and was caught on the fishhook of his hidden deity, unable to hold the sinless Son, and the resurrection proclaimed his defeat. And it was built from Scripture: Jesus calls Satan the ruler of this world in John 12; John 8 says the unbelieving are of their father the devil; the parable of the weeds makes the weeds the sons of the evil one; 1 John 3 says the Son appeared to destroy the devil's works; 1 Corinthians 6 says you were bought with a price; Acts 20 speaks of the church purchased with blood; and Mark 10:45 calls Christ's life a ransom for many. If a payment was made, the reasoning ran, someone was paid, and how could God be paying himself?

4. Why the ransom theory fails

The strengths are real: people truly are described as in the devil's grip, and this theory, unlike recapitulation, sees that the death itself was a payment. But the payment was not made to Satan. Satan has no legal claim on God and no power to demand anything; were it otherwise, God could simply have destroyed him. The one to whom God is bound is himself: his own character, his own righteousness, demands that sin be paid for. We are not finally in bondage to Satan but to our own sin, alienated from a God whose wrath, as Romans 1 says, is revealed against unrighteousness, and God cannot relax his righteousness and forgive baselessly. The theory's cosmic dualism, a fifteen-round fight between near-equals, is Gnostic residue; its God is under obligation to his enemy; and it turns rescue into the whole story, minimizing forgiveness. Take the wrath and righteousness of God out of the equation, the teachers warn, and you lose the gospel. That is what is wrong with the birdcage.

5. How doctrine develops: an aside worth the detour

A student's question, what did ordinary churches believe meanwhile, draws out one of the richest asides of the course. Revelation is complete and progressive understanding continues: we understand some things better than the Galatians did, not because we are better, but because the church has had centuries to systematize what the apostles wrote. Doctrine developed through struggle, parish by parish, council by council, creed by creed, seven great ecumenical councils each looking back and nailing down what the church had come to see; the East and West did not formally divide until 1054, and before Trent much that we think of as Roman Catholic was not yet fixed. So how were people saved before the satisfaction theory articulated the atonement? They knew Christ died for them and trusted God to save them on that basis, without being able to articulate how. Christians can have very bad theology and still be Christ's. The history of the church, the teachers say plainly, is truth mixed with error, difficulty, and development, and we are in the middle of our own confusions today.

6. The satisfaction theory

Around the twelfth century Anselm changed the doctrine's direction. Man's sin has wounded God's honor; God, of necessity, restored his honor by sending Christ, both God and man, whose death satisfied that honor and earned a reward Christ himself did not need, a treasury of merits now offered to man. The great advance, the turn the whole Western church took: God, not Satan, is the offended party who must be satisfied, and sin becomes desperately serious. This is called the Latin view; the West built on it while the East kept its older theories. But watch the machinery, the teachers say: merits earned and stored, needing distribution, became the backbone of the later Roman system, with the church standing in the middle as dispenser, a development Anselm did not intend but his framework made possible. The weaknesses: the atonement becomes necessary for God's honor rather than grounded squarely in his breached righteousness, and honor is not yet wrath borne in our place.

7. The moral example theory

Abelard answered Anselm with what the teachers call a knee-jerk reaction: why would God need to be satisfied at all? The greatest virtue is to forgive without any basis but love; God requires us to forgive freely, so he forgives freely. Christ came not to make payment, his death has no atoning value, but to show us how to live and to melt hard hearts, so that beholding such love we turn to a God always ready to forgive. It was never accepted by the church as a whole, but its influence never died, and the teachers call it the working theology of most uninformed people today, and uncomfortably close to the wording of some gospel tracts: recognize God's love and turn to him, with the cross's necessity nowhere in view. The strengths are real, Christ's life and death truly are our example and motivation. But it undermines the seriousness of sin, sacrifices God's righteousness on the altar of his love, ignores the Bible's insistence that without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness, and leaves the cross with no objective value at all: nothing actually happened there until we respond, which is why it is called the subjectivist view. And our own forgiving is not baseless either: we forgive because we have been forgiven; we love because he first loved us.

8. The governmental theory

Associated with Grotius and held by most Arminians: Christ's death was a nominal, token substitute for the penalty of sin, which God graciously chose to accept in order to uphold his moral government. God could have simply forgiven, but unpunished sin would breed anarchy, so he displayed his justice by punishing Christ. Its argument against an exact substitution is serious and the teachers let it land: sinners are punished in hell forever, and millions of them; Christ suffered for hours; how can that be the exact penalty? And if Christ actually paid for every sin of every person, all are objectively forgiven and God could demand nothing further, so the payment must have been a token. The theory upholds God's moral law, but at a price: the atonement becomes optional, one way among others God might have chosen, and no one's sins are actually carried.

9. Gethsemane closes the loophole

Was there another way? The teachers answer from the garden. My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; yet not my will but yours. Christ himself asked for another way, and the cup did not pass. If any other road to redemption existed, that prayer would have found it. The Father's silence in Gethsemane is the Bible's clearest word that the cross was not one option among several but the only way for God to remain righteous and forgive; his righteousness required exactly this. The governmental theory's optional atonement cannot survive that prayer.

10. The penal substitution theory

The view of Luther, Calvin, and the Reformed tradition, and of this course: the atonement was made on the cross when Christ vicariously bore the exact penalty of his people, placating the wrath of God and satisfying his righteousness. Every word is load-bearing: vicarious, in our place; exact, our actual sins, not a token; wrath placated; righteousness satisfied. Romans, the fullest presentation of the gospel, opens not with the love of God but with his wrath, and uses the word righteousness more than any other New Testament book, because the gospel cannot be understood until God's righteousness is. Three key terms: propitiation, the act by which God's righteous wrath is satisfied by the atonement of Christ; imputation, the transfer of our sin to Christ on the cross, he who knew no sin made sin on our behalf; redemption, purchase, and the price paid to God himself. The lecture names the great imputations so far: Adam's sin to the race, and man's sin to Christ, with more to come when the course reaches justification.

11. The courtroom, and God's dilemma

The case-study presentation every student must learn runs through the justice of God. All have sinned; God's righteousness is eternal and unchanging, his eyes too pure to approve evil, and like a judge he must punish the offender, for the wages of sin is death. Imagine a judge facing a defendant whose guilt is certain, witnesses, tape, confession, who says, I forgive you, go free. No one would call him righteous, and not even the defendant's sincere sorrow and promise never to do it again could change that, because righteousness does not bend to remorse. God can no more set aside his righteousness than cease to be God. So God has a dilemma: his righteousness must punish sinners, and he loves them and is patient, not wishing any to perish. Our dilemma matches it: our sin must be punished, and by works of the law no flesh will be justified. The cross is where both dilemmas die: God sent his Son, who came to give his life as a ransom for many, and the Lord laid on him the iniquity of us all. The cross was the only way for God to remain righteous and yet forgive, the perfect demonstration of love and justice together, and it does not apply automatically: it must be received by trusting in Christ. Two options remain for every person: bear your own punishment, or let Christ bear it.

12. Why not eternal suffering, and the folk theology of hell

The governmental objection gets a direct answer. First, which is worse, intensity of suffering or length? Christ's suffering was immense, but the horror of hell is not chiefly the intensity of pain; it is the endlessness of separation. Second, the folk idea that one sin sends a person to hell for eternity appears nowhere in Scripture. People are in hell eternally because they are eternally unbelieving; their sin continues to mount there, and as the teachers put it with a phrase they borrow from C. S. Lewis, the doors are locked from the inside. The sin of perpetual unbelief was never transferred to Christ, because those he paid for do not perpetually disbelieve. He bore the cumulative, exact sins of his people, and those sins do not require eternal punishment of him, for it is ongoing unbelief, not any single sin, that keeps hell eternal.

13. The verdict of Scripture and of the survey

The Old Testament prefigures exact substitution everywhere: the Passover lamb, perfect and without blemish, dying so death would pass over; the whole sacrificial system; above all Isaiah 53, the best defense of substitution in the Bible, all we like sheep have gone astray, and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all. The New Testament states it: a ransom for many, Mark 10; cursed for us, Galatians 3; righteousness demonstrated at the cross, Romans 3; made sin on our behalf, 2 Corinthians 5; offered once to bear the sins of many, Hebrews 9; he himself bore our sins in his body, 1 Peter 2; the propitiation for our sins, 1 John 2. The final chart sorts the theories by their direction: satisfaction, governmental, and substitution are Godward; moral example is manward; ransom is Satanward; and only substitution shows an objective price actually paid. The survey's verdict: each theory holds a truth, Christ did undo Adam's failure, Satan was defeated, God's honor was satisfied, Christ is our example, God's government is upheld, but the atonement itself, when it comes down to it, is a vicarious penal substitution, necessary to redeem mankind, accomplished on the cross.

SCRIPTURE IN THIS LECTURE

1 Corinthians 6 · 1 John 2 · 1 John 3 · 1 Peter 2 · 2 Corinthians 5 · Acts 20 · Exodus 12 · Galatians 3 · Hebrews 9 · Isaiah 53 · John 12 · John 8 · Mark 10 · Matthew 26 · Romans 3

KEY TERMS

Ransom to Satan theory

The early theory of Origen and Gregory of Nyssa, alive in Eastern Orthodoxy: Adam's sin sold humanity into Satan's legal possession, and Christ's death paid Satan the ransom. Its fatal flaw: the payment was owed to God's righteousness, not to Satan, who can demand nothing of God.

Satisfaction theory

Anselm's twelfth-century turn: sin wounded God's honor, and Christ, God and man, restored it, earning merits offered to us. The great advance: God, not Satan, must be satisfied. The weakness: honor is not yet the breached righteousness the Bible presses.

Moral example theory

Abelard's reaction: God forgives freely out of love, and the cross has no atoning value but melts hard hearts by example. Called the subjectivist view, since nothing objective happened at the cross; the teachers name it the working theology of the uninformed today.

Governmental theory

Grotius and most Arminians: Christ's death was a token substitute God accepted to uphold his moral government. It makes the atonement optional and carries no one's actual sins; Gethsemane, the teachers argue, closes its central claim.

Penal substitution

The course's view: on the cross Christ vicariously bore the exact penalty of his people, placating the wrath of God and satisfying his righteousness. Vicarious, exact, wrath, righteousness: every word load-bearing.

Propitiation

The act whereby God's righteous wrath is satisfied by the atonement of Christ. The wrath is real and it is God's own; propitiation is why forgiveness is not baseless.

Imputation

Transfer to another's account: here, the placing of our actual sins on Christ at the cross, he who knew no sin made sin on our behalf. The lecture counts the great imputations begun in Adam and continued at the cross.

Redemption

Purchase: God paid the price for man's salvation, redeeming us from sin, and the price was paid to God himself, whose righteousness could otherwise have been satisfied by our destruction.

The Latin view

The name for Anselm's satisfaction framework as the Western church's inheritance, which the West developed toward the Reformation while the East kept recapitulation and ransom.

COMPREHENSION CHECK

Eighteen questions from the lecture. Circle your answers, then check them against the key at the bottom.

1. What does the whole church agree on, and where does the struggle lie?

- A. All agree on the meaning of the cross; the struggle is over its history
- B. All agree that Christ died for us; the centuries have struggled over what for means
- C. All agree on the extent of the atonement
- D. There has never been agreement on anything about the cross

2. Why do the teachers read the birdcage story?
 - A. Because it is the best illustration of the gospel available
 - B. Because it was written by a church father
 - C. Because it preaches a fourth-century ransom-to-Satan theology in the present tense, and the class should learn to hear what is wrong with it
 - D. Because it disproves the resurrection
3. What did the ransom to Satan theory claim?
 - A. That Christ's perfect life alone saves
 - B. That the cross satisfied God's honor
 - C. That Christ died only as an example
 - D. That Adam's sin gave Satan legal rights over humanity, and Christ's death paid Satan to buy them back
4. What was the fishhook in the early picture of the atonement?
 - A. Christ's hidden deity, which caught Satan when he swallowed the sinless Son in death and could not hold him
 - B. The law of Moses
 - C. The Roman empire
 - D. The serpent in the wilderness
5. Who, according to the teachers, actually had to be satisfied, and why?
 - A. Satan, because his rights were real
 - B. No one; forgiveness needs no basis
 - C. The demands of the law of Moses apart from God
 - D. God himself: his own righteousness and wrath demand payment, for he cannot relax his righteousness and forgive baselessly
6. How were people saved before the atonement was rightly articulated?
 - A. They were not saved
 - B. Through the sacramental system alone
 - C. They knew Christ died for them and trusted God to save them on that basis, without being able to articulate how; bad theology does not unmake a Christian
 - D. By keeping the law of Moses
7. How do the teachers describe the history of the church?
 - A. A pure unbroken line of correct doctrine
 - B. Truth mixed with error, difficulty, and development, with our own confusions still in progress today
 - C. Error until the Reformation, truth afterward
 - D. A story with no doctrinal development at all
8. What was Anselm's great advance, and what grew out of his framework?
 - A. He proved the ransom was paid to Satan; monasticism grew from it
 - B. He denied the atonement; the crusades grew from it
 - C. He made the cross optional; revivalism grew from it
 - D. He made God the offended party who must be satisfied; his treasury of merits, needing distribution, became the backbone of the later Roman system

9. Why is the moral example theory called the subjectivist view?
- A. Because nothing objective happened at the cross; its effect exists only in our response to the display of love
 - B. Because it was held only by one man
 - C. Because it concerns the emotions of Christ
 - D. Because it denies that Jesus lived
10. How do the teachers answer the claim that we forgive baselessly, so God should too?
- A. They agree God forgives baselessly
 - B. They deny that Christians should forgive
 - C. Our forgiving is not baseless either: we forgive because we have been forgiven, and love because he first loved us
 - D. They say only God may forgive
11. What two arguments does the governmental theory press against exact substitution?
- A. That Christ never suffered, and that hell is empty
 - B. Sinners suffer eternally and Christ suffered hours, so the penalty cannot be exact; and if every sin were actually paid, all would be objectively forgiven
 - C. That the Old Testament knows no sacrifices, and that Paul contradicts Jesus
 - D. That God has no wrath, and that sin is not serious
12. How does Gethsemane answer whether there was another way?
- A. It shows Christ found another way at the last moment
 - B. It shows the disciples chose the cross
 - C. It is silent on the question
 - D. Christ himself asked that the cup pass if it were possible, and it did not pass; if any other road existed, that prayer would have found it
13. Why does Romans open with the wrath of God?
- A. Because the gospel cannot be understood until God's righteousness is; Romans uses righteousness more than any other New Testament book
 - B. Because Paul was writing to persecutors
 - C. Because wrath is God's only attribute
 - D. Because the letter was censored
14. In the courtroom illustration, why can the judge not free the guilty defendant who is truly sorry?
- A. Because the law forbids mercy in every form
 - B. Because sorrow can never be sincere
 - C. Because righteousness does not bend to remorse; a judge who freed the guilty would not be righteous, and God can no more set aside his righteousness than cease to be God
 - D. Because the witnesses would object
15. What is God's dilemma, and where does it die?
- A. He cannot know the future he decreed; it dies at Pentecost
 - B. His righteousness must punish sinners and his love wishes none to perish; both meet and are resolved at the cross, received by trusting in Christ
 - C. He must choose between Israel and the nations; it dies at the exile
 - D. He cannot create and sustain at once; it dies at creation

16. Why is Christ not required to suffer eternally if the substitution is exact?
- A. Because his sufferings were infinite in duration
 - B. Because the substitution was only a token after all
 - C. Because hell is temporary
 - D. Because what keeps hell eternal is perpetual unbelief with sin still mounting, and that sin was never transferred to him, since those he paid for do not perpetually disbelieve
17. What does the final chart show about the direction of the theories?
- A. All the theories are Godward
 - B. Satisfaction, governmental, and substitution are Godward; moral example is manward; ransom is Satanward; and only substitution shows an objective price actually paid
 - C. All the theories deny an objective payment
 - D. The chart ranks the theories by age alone
18. What is the survey's closing verdict?
- A. Each theory holds a truth, but the atonement itself is a vicarious penal substitution, necessary to redeem mankind, accomplished on the cross
 - B. The theories are equally adequate accounts
 - C. The question must remain forever open
 - D. Recapitulation alone survives scrutiny

Answer key (fold under before you begin): 1 B · 2 C · 3 D · 4 A · 5 D · 6 C · 7 B · 8 D · 9 A · 10 C · 11 B · 12 D · 13 A · 14 C · 15 B · 16 D · 17 B · 18 A

TALK IT OVER

1. The birdcage story moves people to tears, and its theology makes Satan the one who must be paid. Where else have you heard the gospel told with the wrong party satisfied? Practice retelling that story so the righteousness of God, not the appetite of Satan, sets the price.
2. Walk the courtroom illustration with someone this week, the teachers assign it as the heart of the case study. Where does your listener push back, at the judge who cannot simply forgive, or at the substitute who steps in? What does each pushback reveal?
3. Christ prayed for another way and the cup did not pass. When you are next tempted to think the cross was one option among many, or that God might have just forgiven, what does Gethsemane say to you personally about the cost of your forgiveness?

ONE VERSE TO CARRY

Isaiah 53 gives the substitution its oldest and clearest words: all of us, like sheep, have gone astray, each turning to his own way, and the Lord has caused the iniquity of us all to fall on him.

GO FURTHER

The lecture's own assignment stands at the center of the course: the first case study, presenting the vicarious substitutionary view to a real person, using the courtroom walkthrough and the two dilemmas, and opening Isaiah 53, which the teachers call the best defense of substitution in all of Scripture. The next session asks the question this view makes unavoidable: if the substitution was exact, for whom exactly did Christ die?