

February 6, 2022
Sermon Manuscript

Mommy Gets Hurt For Johnny (1 Corinthians 15:3)

There are more than a few verses in the bible that talk about the wrath of God. The good news is that God's wrath has never been aimed at us, but toward (our) sin. He is not a God who inflicted a punishment upon his son that was due to us, but a God who took the consequence of sin upon himself, in order to rescue us from its grip. And our capacity to grasp this (distinction) can have an enormous impact on our own spiritual growth/maturity, as well as how we view others, especially unbelievers.

I have never been into comic strips or comic books, personally. But today I guess I am. On your bulletin insert this morning, I've included a comic strip of sorts that is artistically terrible, but it tells a parable, written by New Testament scholar, Kenneth Bailey.¹ *It's about the mother of a young boy named Johnny. And one day she was preparing to host a social gathering for some of her friends. So she spread out a tablecloth over her dining table and placed a large glass pitcher of lemonade on top of it. And she told her son, Johnny, "Don't pull on the table cloth because if you do, the pitcher will fall on you, and you will get hurt."*

But as soon as her back was turned, what did Johnny do, but grab the tablecloth and start pulling. And, as the mother looked over her shoulder, she sees the pitcher of lemonade about to crash down on Johnny's unprotected head. Immediately, the mom experienced a flash of deep disappointment and anger as she said to herself, "If Johnny had only listened to me, we wouldn't have this problem."

But this story has three possible endings...

In ending 1, Mom is mad. Her anger drives her to rush across the room, grab the pitcher of lemonade and say: "Johnny, I told you not to pull on the table cloth. Now you take this." (And she dumps the lemonade on Johnny's head).

But in ending 2: A third actor in the drama is introduced. This third actor is Billy, Johnny's older brother. Billy is in the next room working on his homework. Mom is again mad. She rushes across the room, grabs the pitcher, and in anger, says to Johnny, "Johnny, I should dump this on you because you deserve it for disobeying. But if I do, you will catch a cold."

In a loud voice, she calls Billy into the room. And the mother dumps the lemonade on Billy and then says to Johnny, "See what you made me do?" Feeling very guilty, Johnny crawls under the table and starts crying.

Now, these first and second endings represent the story many have been presented to explain God's work of salvation in Jesus on the cross. We have all sinned, and God could've responded in the way of ending #1, but he (graciously?) responded according to ending #2 instead. This is the way many Church communities explain salvation, and Anglicanism is not immune, but particularly in the Evangelical and Reformed traditions. It's how they explain **why Jesus had to die?** And the fancy word for this is Atonement. Theories of Atonement attempt to explain why Jesus had to die. And I have even listed

¹ Bailey, Kenneth. *Paul Through Mediterranean Eyes: Cultural Studies in 1 Corinthians*. 2011. Chapter 5.1.

some of the more popular ones on the back side of your insert.² But in many parts of Western Church, the Penal Substitution theory has become the *dominant* explanation for why Jesus had to die.³

Penal Substitution contends that God is holy and that humans are sinful. And because God is holy, he must be true to his own holiness and can't simply ignore human sin. So there must be a just punishment (hence, penal (penalty)). But Jesus Christ, the God-Man, stood in the sinner's place, absorbing God's just punishment on sinners (hence, substitution) - with a special emphasis on his not just dying for us, but his suffering.⁴

One could argue that Penal Substitution is woven into the very fabric of American society, because the Puritans - who fled the Church of England on the Mayflower and started this country - were adherents of the Penal Substitution Theory through and through. Thus, one might say that Penal Substitution is as American as Apple Pie and Thanksgiving, such that most Christians - including myself - can't help but assume the accuracy of its central tenets.

Even if we've never thought or heard of atonement theories, the penal substitution theory represents a view of God that may feel most intuitive or natural to many of us, particularly if our life experience of parents or authority figures has been closer to the Mom of endings #1 & 2 than ending #3, which we'll get to in a bit.⁵

But evidence that Penal Substitution has become the dominant view in much of Western Christianity can be found very readily. It is all over contemporary Christian music, but also in some of the hymns that we sing. For example, in the hymn "How Deep the Father's Love", we sing,

"How deep the Father's love for us, how vast beyond all measure that He should give His only Son to make a wretch His treasure. How great the pain of searing loss. The Father turns His face away as wounds which mar the Chosen One bring many sons to glory."

It is the theory underlying the way many tend to present the faith evangelistically, emphasizing how because of sin we deserve God's punishment, but Jesus took it upon himself.⁶



² **Ransom / Christus Victor / Fishhook Theory:** God offered his son as a ransom, a bargain that the evil one eagerly accepted. When, however, Satan got Christ down into hell he found that he could not hold him. On the third day Christ rose triumphant and left Satan without either his original prisoners or the ransom he had accepted in their stead.

Moral Influence Theory: When we look at the cross we see the greatness of God's love. This delivers us from fear and compels us to respond with love and no longer live in selfishness and sin. (Note: this theory is insufficient on its own)

Penal Substitution Theory (PSA): (defined later in manuscript)

Medical Healing Theory: Sin is akin to a disease. God wants to make us partners with Him in His anger toward sin, like a surgeon loves the patient and hates the cancer in the patient's body. Jesus was never the object of the Father's anger. In Jesus, God first killed the corruption in his own human nature, in order to battle it in us by the Spirit, with our human partnership. Our mortality (and natural death) became one of God's surgical tools, not a retribution by a God who wanted to "get even."

³ T.R. Schreiner argues that "the theory of penal substitution is the heart and soul of an evangelical view of atonement" [Hydinger, Sandage, Jankowski, and Rambo, "Penal Substitutionary Atonement and Concern for Suffering: An Empirical Study", *Journal of Psychology and Theology*, March 2017, Vol 45, No 1, 33-45.]

⁴ Quoted from Scot McKnight in Hydinger, p 33.

⁵ Most of us have a tendency to project our experiences of authority figures onto God.

⁶ For example, the "bridge illustration" <https://i.ytimg.com/vi/SCMpeLNEA30/hqdefault.jpg>

And there is general consensus that the penal theory is what comes through the most in Mel Gibson's film *The Passion of the Christ* and what motivated Gibson to emphasize the gory nature of Jesus' crucifixion.

But the good news is that God's wrath has never been aimed at us, but toward (our) sin. He is not a God who inflicted a punishment upon his son that was due to us, but a God who took the consequence of sin upon himself, in order to rescue us from its grip.

One of the problems with Penal Substitution Theory's dominance is that it is actually **unbiblical**. This morning, in our passage from First Corinthians 15, Paul writes in verse 3 "that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures." But the problem isn't so much the substitution part (that Jesus died a death that our sin destined us for), but the "penal" part - the element of punishment: the idea(s) that God's wrath and anger are in fact directed at us - as persons - rather than at our sin (like Mom #1), and that God the Father killed Jesus (like Mom #2).⁷

As scholar Mako Nagasawa observes, "To anyone raised in a Penal Substitution-soaked church culture, the New Testament witness is remarkable because (in it, we find) the Father did not afflict Jesus with suffering before his death; we as humans did." We, in our sin, killed Jesus, God the father didn't. Humanity - and specifically the Jews representing what all of us would've done in their position - humanity killed Jesus, not God the Father.

One of the primary verses cited in support of God the Father punishing Jesus is when Jesus cries out "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"⁸ on the cross, from Psalm 22. But as Nagasawa points out: in that Psalm David, "was lamenting being 'forsaken' to the Gentiles, "Just as Jesus was in his Passion, but David "did not believe God had abandoned him in an absolute sense." And so, to conclude Jesus felt that God the Father abandoned him completely does not come from sound biblical interpretation.⁹ And yet, we sing, "I'm forgiven, because you were forsaken"¹⁰ or "The Father turned his face away."¹¹

So where did this idea of penal substitution come from? Well, most believe its origins can be traced to St Anselm in the 11th Century.¹² Although, Anselm was only concerned with the idea of

⁷ Nagasawa, Mako. "Atonement Theories & Anger, Part 5: Why Penal Substitution Stunts People's Emotional Development." Feb10, 2021 https://newhumanityinstitute.wordpress.com/2021/02/10/atonement-theories-anger-part-5-why-penal-substitution-stunts-peoples-emotional-development/#_ftn13

⁸ Matthew 27:46 - *About three in the afternoon Jesus cried out in a loud voice, "Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?" (which means "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?").* [NIV]

⁹ Nag: ""My God, my God, why have you forsaken me" (Matthew 27:46). Penal Substitution advocates interpret it to say that Jesus experienced divine abandonment in some way, and that God uses abandonment as a tool of anger in some way.

"Let me give a brief assessment of Jesus' utterance from the standpoint of biblical exegesis before moving onto the emotional implications. There is a methodological problem with this Penal Substitution interpretation of Jesus' quotation of Psalm 22. The problem is that biblical intertextuality – how and why a later biblical writer quotes from an earlier, older one – simply does not work that way. Throughout his earthly ministry, Jesus claimed to be the heir of David who was the greater David, who was retelling David's story. I have explored this in detail elsewhere,[7] but here are some highlights which have a bearing on how we interpret Psalm 22. Like David knew he was anointed by the Holy Spirit "from that day forward" (1 Samuel 16:13) to be enthroned as king, so also Jesus knew that when he was anointed by the Holy Spirit to be enthroned as king (Matthew 3:13 – 17). Like David faced Israel's enemy Goliath in the wilderness (1 Samuel 17), Jesus faced humanity's enemy, the devil, in the wilderness (Matthew 4:1 – 11). Like David was persecuted by Jewish leaders, prior to his enthronement (e.g. 1 Samuel 21), so also Jesus was persecuted by Jewish leaders, prior to his enthronement (e.g. Matthew 12:1 – 4 quotes 1 Samuel 21:3). Like David was forced out into the hands of Gentile enemies (e.g. 1 Samuel 22), Jesus was forced out into the hands of Gentile enemies.

Quoting Psalm 22 was part of Jesus' engagement with the Davidic plot arc and parallel. **When David composed Psalm 22, he was lamenting being "forsaken" to the Gentiles. He did not believe God had abandoned him in an absolute sense.**"

¹⁰ Lyrics from the song "Amazing Love"

¹¹ Lyrics from the song "How Deep The Father's Love For Us"

¹² "The earlier ransom and *Christus Victor*(which can technically be split into two) theories of the atonement emphasize that god overcame the powers of Satan and evil to liberate humanity. Concerned that ransom theories attributed too much power to Satan, Anselm of Canterbury (1033-1109) developed a theory of atonement that directed the drama of redemption around an offense to God, depicted as a feudal lord, and human beings, depicted as servants. The conundrum of atonement, as Anselm presented it, was how the offense against God could be satisfied (i.e. restored). Anselm argued that God could not forgive sinners simply out of mercy, so Jesus' innocent death as atonement was necessary to satisfy God's justice. This restores the honor to God that was defiled by human sin." (Hydinger, 34)

satisfying God's justice.¹³ It was really John Calvin, in the 16th century, who (with some inspiration from Martin Luther) codified the penal substitution theory as we know it.¹⁴ So, for more than 1,000 years of church history, no one understood Jesus' sacrifice on the cross in this penal way.¹⁵ And the Eastern Orthodox *still* will have nothing to do with it (to their credit).

So for those first thousand years, *how* did the Church understand what happened at the cross? With scriptural images like the good shepherd laying down life for sheep (John 10) or the father in the Parable of Prodigal Son humiliating himself as he ran down the street to meet his wayward son (Luke 15).¹⁶ There was no third party of God the Son doing this; it was God himself in the son, becoming human and (God himself) dying for our sakes.¹⁷ And this is what we see in ending #3 to our parable.

In it, Mom notices that the pitcher of lemonade is about to fall on Johnny's head, but her anger at his disobedience does not lessen the intensity of her love for him. She rushes across the room¹⁸. Just as she reaches the table, the pitcher begins to fall, and she quickly knocks it aside. The pitcher shatters, and mother sustains a deep cut in her arm. Her arm begins to bleed profusely. She quickly grabs the towel that is across her shoulder and winds it tightly around her arm. Blood continues to soak through the towel and drip onto the floor.

Johnny is crying because he sees his mother getting hurt for him, and he knows it is his fault. In this third ending, there is no Billy in the next room (God is one - God in Jesus has sacrificed himself). Mom reaches out to the frightened child and says quietly, "It's all right, Johnny. I love you anyway, and I forgive you. It's okay. In three days, I will be able to take off this ugly bandage, and my arm will heal."

In Mom's all-encompassing embrace, and with the sound of Mom's words of forgiveness penetrating his consciousness, Johnny's guilt melts away and with it his will to disobey her. He knows that Mom got hurt for him, and she still loves him.

The good news is that God's wrath has never been aimed at us, but toward (our) sin. He is not a God who inflicted a punishment upon his son that was due to us, but a God who took the consequence of sin upon himself, in order to rescue us from its grip.

But at this point, we should probably expect the Penal view of God will continue to reign in the Western Church and society. But I want to take a few minutes to explain why that's a problem, and why we should do what we can to break loose from its chains and to extricate it from our own hearts -

¹³ "Concerned that ransom theories attributed too much power to Satan, Anselm of Canterbury (1033-1109) developed a theory of atonement that directed the drama of redemption around an offense to God, depicted as a feudal lord, and human beings, depicted as servants. The conundrum of atonement, as Anselm presented it, was how the offense against God could be satisfied (i.e. restored). Anselm argued that God could not forgive sinners simply out of mercy, so Jesus' innocent death as atonement was necessary to satisfy God's justice...**Anselm does not present a wrathful God punishing Christ in our place; rather, Christ satisfies, or pays, a debt we owe**". (Hydinger, 34-5)

¹⁴ Nagasawa: "Formally speaking, Penal Substitutionary Atonement was developed by John Calvin (1509 – 1564), with some inspiration from Martin Luther (1483 – 1546).

Hydinger, et al.: "Green and Baker (2000) understand Anselm in his development of atonement as actually focusing on satisfaction of human indebtedness toward God. This contrasts with **Calvin's account of a God with a vengeance**.... John Calvin (1509— 1564), trained as a lawyer, developed the Penal Substitution theory further using legal and forensic metaphors related to punishment and shifted the focus from satisfaction to substitution. Jesus takes the place of humans (i.e., the elect) in submitting to the punishment humans deserved. Calvin also emphasizes God's anger and wrath, which is propitiated by the blood of Christ. The physical and spiritual agony of the punishment Jesus suffered also has a central place in this theory of the atonement, which thematizes God' anger, violence, and redemption through submission to suffering.

Nagasawa notes that Arminius, whose system was a response to Calvin, didn't really remedy the problems caused by penal substitution, foremost that it makes God ultimately the author of evil. According to Nagasawa, Arminius just shifts the responsibility from God the Father to God the Holy Spirit, whom Arminianism renders as quite lazy.

¹⁵ Although a few scholars argue that Penal Substitution was taught by the Christian leaders of the first few centuries, most acknowledge that it was not, and Nagasawa has done considerable work to confirm that (in Mako A. Nagasawa, Penal Substitution vs. Medical-Ontological Substitution: A Historical Comparison, found here: www.anastasiscenter.org/atonement-sources-patristic)

¹⁶ Bailey 5.1

¹⁷ Note: if there is a third party, it is not the Son, but Satan, which Penal Substitution omits. Hydinger: "The Penal Substitution view can thus be understood as a Father-Son story that basically removes Satan as an actor altogether in the drama leading to atonement."

¹⁸ And, according to Bailey, reprocesses her anger into grace.

whether we're subscribing to the penal substitution theory or if we just think of God as having a punishing streak - the fruit of this view is all pretty bad.¹⁹ And let me explain why.

The first way penal substitution can produce bad fruit is by having a stunting effect on our spiritual growth and maturity. And this is because it depicts God as ultimately having a narcissistic character.

Just think about the Mom in endings 1 & 2. She's put out because her son pulling the lemonade pitcher off the table has inconvenienced her. It's all about her. And then she makes a bad situation worse by getting vengeance: by taking out her wrath on Johnny or Billy.²⁰ And this is what Penal Substitution teaches us that God is like.

Well, if we think God is this way, and yet the whole path to spiritual growth is for us to draw nearer to God, to be more vulnerable with him about all of our fears and failures, this puts us in a bind. Because subconsciously we're not going to want to do any of that with a God who is a narcissist. Think about Johnny: if he has a mom who behaves like endings 1 & 2, do you think he's going to be vulnerable with her and share when he makes mistakes. Of course not!²¹ His inclination is going to be to keep his head down, afraid of doing anything that might incur more of her wrath.

So the first bad fruit of the penal view of God is it stunts our spiritual growth. We'll accept the forgiveness he offers, but partnering with Him for self-examination and repentance? No thanks. [[Perhaps this is why Evangelicalism and contemporary Christian music tends to all be about God forgiving us and largely ignores God changing our character to be more loving like his.]]

The second bad fruit of believing that God being wrathful toward his creatures is central to his character is that it can lead us to be more wrathful toward others. You see, Penal Substitution teaches us that God cares more about his own satisfaction than our well-being.²² And what we intuit from this is

¹⁹ Mako Nagasawa explains that Penal Substitution (PSA) "encourages people to read the Old Testament looking for God's retributive justice on the one hand, and God's mercy on the other, and therefore "flattens" the journey God took with human partners.

Here is how Mako Nagasawa explains God's wrath in the Old Testament from the Medical Healing view of atonement:

"We might read the Old Testament in such a way that we think God treated those who attacked Israel the objects of His anger. But there is a back story to that surface reading of the Old Testament. Jesus offered himself to those who died before he died (1 Peter 3:18 – 20; 4:6). That means that God was protecting Israel. Ultimately, God did not treat Israel's enemies (both outside and inside Israel) as objects of His anger. Instead, He treated them like He treats everyone else, fundamentally: He was still targeting the corruption of sin in each person's human nature, and calling for their participation in Christ. The sole difference is that they jeopardized Israel's existence, and therefore Jesus' genuine human experience, so God held them in stasis until Jesus could awaken all the dead and present himself to them so they could choose him as healer over the disease of sin as well. The same was true of Moses, who God caused to die before he could enter the promised land (Numbers 20:12; Deuteronomy 34:4 – 8). But God certainly did not consign Moses to condemnation and hell, effectively.

"This is one demonstration that whether people before Jesus died of "natural causes" or some act of God, there was no fundamental difference. The question is not how people died, but why death was important at all. And that leads us all the way back to God's exiling of human beings from the tree of life: Death was one of God's surgical tools. Death served God's purpose of preventing people from immediately making their sinfulness immortal without at least being confronted by Jesus as healer. The back story provided by the New Testament on what was called by the early Christians as Jesus' "descent to the dead" means that God treated all those who died before Jesus the same as us – that is, we who have a chance to choose Jesus during our lifetimes.[7]

In the meantime, God needed an Israel in order to give birth to, and nurture, Jesus in his real humanity, including Jesus' very real helpless infancy and childhood development. On a deeper level, therefore, God was always drawing Israel to partner with His anger, because His anger served His covenant love. This is why the great hope of the Hebrew prophets was not that God would vent His anger somewhere besides Israel, but that God would help Israel to overcome their inward enemy and defeat the worst version of itself.

²⁰ Nagasawa: "narcissistic parents... make their children feel guilt and shame for simply existing and making the parent feel inconvenienced.

²¹ His comfort is going to be about knowing that mom is not upset with him.

²² Nagasawa "emotionally, a problem registers on us. On a human level, what kind of parent would say, 'It doesn't matter if you obey or disobey me, because either way, I will "satisfy" myself?... "If God's wrath needs to be satisfied by putting it on someone, then God is placing "His own well-being – His own "feelings," as it were – above our well-being.

"If God's goal in atonement is to "satisfy" Himself, and if God can "satisfy" Himself by either punishing us in anger, or punishing Jesus in anger instead, then logically, God would have to be fine with doing either. That is a strange conclusion, but logic demands it. If "self-satisfaction" is central to who God is, then God will satisfy Himself no matter what...

"Sadly, "satisfaction" theory means that God does, in fact, will the spiritual torment of quite a few people, and take delight in it. Otherwise, we would not call God "satisfied." And this would mean, remarkably, that a Christian cannot logically say to a non-Christian loved one, "I know Jesus died for you." Quite possibly, you might love your non-Christian friends even more than God does.

"On a human level, it is hard to navigate deeply fractured friendships, where you love two people while those two people have an active distaste for each other. When we transpose that relational dynamic onto ourselves, God, and others in a Penal Substitution framework, we feel the same dilemma."

that our feelings don't matter to God. Well, some suggest that this sense teaches us that it's okay to **disregard other people's emotions. The logic goes: "If God doesn't care about our feelings, why should we care about others?"**²³ In 2017, a study showed that Christians who hold to the penal substitution view and to gender complementarianism (the view that some spiritual roles can only be fulfilled by men²⁴) have a lower sense of responsibility for reducing pain and suffering in the world.²⁵

But this doesn't just impact our capacity for empathy in our personal relationships. Much has been written on Penal Substitution producing the "undersevering other" or "bad outsider" phenomena, where Christians tend to not just lack empathy but even relish punishment for those who are not Christians or part of our tribe.

And knowing that American history has been soaked in Penal Substitution, from its beginnings, this begins to make some sense of many penal elements in American culture and history. We all know the Southern roots of racism and slavery were justified by a distorted Christianity that viewed black people as sub-human and therefore deserving of enslavement (viewing black people as outsider others),²⁶ as the most incarcerated country in the world, America's penal system and death penalty - which gets the most support from evangelical Christians - is based upon principles of penalizing or getting rid of the other who has shown themselves so undeserving, rather than rehabilitating them.²⁷ Since 9/11, the 'undeserving other' phenomenon has manifested in attitudes toward Muslims after 9/11,²⁸ and I could go on.²⁹ If Penal Substitution says that God was angry at us and counted us worthless when we were apart from Christ and in our sin, then it makes sense that Penal Substitution trains Christians to view non-Christians as bad outsiders, worthy of love not wrath.

But a final bad fruit of Penal Substitution, in addition to deadening our desire to draw near to God and reducing our capacity for empathy, is the effect it has on those who have experienced significant trauma in their own lives. Nagasawa explains how when a traumatized person is taught the Penal Substitution view of God, it is likely to cause them to fight or flee the faith,³⁰ or freeze in their spiritual growth, which we already talked about.³¹

In fact, pastors who hold the Penal Substitution view are prone to use fear and anger as motivators in their preaching - fire & brimstone sermons. But what they fail to grasp is that it is only love that changes hearts. As Bishop William Temple wrote: "Fear of punishment might deter me from sinful

²³ "John Piper's approach to John 11 illustrates my concern about men setting aside other people's emotions, in the reading of Scripture and in general. The high federal Calvinist system - anchored by Penal Substitution - encourages them to do so. In John 11, Piper relates Jesus' anger, for all practical purposes, to his divinity; that is, Jesus acted like God..."

"Christian men might ignore the emotions of a woman and focus on who is being "believed" and whether God is "receiving glory," because "spectacular actions" give glory to God more than "emotions." White American evangelicals might pity themselves for not being "believed" and losing the "culture war," while they ignore other people who have pains of their own, like Mary grieving for Lazarus.

²⁴ For a sermon on why gender complementarianism is unbiblical, see <https://youtu.be/9fw2b7lxBKE?t=988> for my homily from 2/24/21: EP Homily - "Scripture On The Role of Women: More Than Meets The Eye?" (1 Tim 2:8-15)

²⁵ Hydinger, Sandage, Jankowski, and Rambo, "Penal Substitutionary Atonement and Concern for Suffering: An Empirical Study", Journal of Psychology and Theology, March 2017, Vol 45, No 1, 33-45.

²⁶ "Anger towards the "undeserving" is found in the abidingly low levels of public investment in Southern States, for example, which still tends to fall along racial lines.

²⁷ "Anger towards the "undeserving" drives investing more money in "law and order" policing and prisons rather than parental leave, higher wages, housing, education, and health.

²⁸ After 9/11, Southern Baptist anger against non-Christians - in this case, Muslims - could be seen in their enthusiasm for Bush's War on Iraq, which was very unusual compared to other Christian groups and religious groups.

²⁹ Nagasawa suggests that "Anger towards the 'undeserving' drives the 'you're on your own,' 'pull yourself up by your bootstraps' style of economics where health care and social safety nets are minimized. Also, along with Culture wars "Ends justify the means" justifications for war, so popular in our empire of late.

³⁰ See the excerpt printed at the end titled "Those Who Fight and Those Who Flee - Roberta Bondi"

³¹ This is similar to when we are caregivers to children who have not grown up with healthy attachments (e.g. common in foster children) show anger toward the child, it will probably set them off into fight or flight.

action, but it cannot change my sinful desires.” Only love can.³² And we see that with Johnny in ending #3.

“Johnny now realizes that mom's initial admonition to leave the tablecloth alone was not an arbitrary exercise of will. There was no ‘you do what I say because I say so!’ Mom's will was an exercise of love for Johnny. Given the realities of glass pitchers, tables, little boys, and the force of gravity, mom's law was an expression of her love. Johnny only discovers the depth of that love when he sees Mom knock the pitcher aside and sustain a cut in her arm for him. Witnessing that costly love changes Johnny.

When we come to recognize that God’s anger was at sin, not at us, and that he expressed that anger by going to the cross to ransom and heal us from sin’s effects, this invites us to give up hating sinners and learn to hate only sin. The cross invites us to express our own anger at sin/unbelief not by inflicting suffering on the sinner but by being willing to endure suffering ourselves, like Jesus did.

Today we can celebrate the good news that God’s wrath has never been aimed at us, but toward (our) sin. He is not a God who inflicted a punishment upon his son that was due to us, but a God who took the consequence of sin upon himself, in order to rescue us from its grip.

So how is the Holy Spirit moving on your heart in all of this? Perhaps for far too long our hearts have held onto the view that God has a punishing streak, and today we can just speak this good news to our hearts that this isn’t part of the gospel!

- Maybe if some of us are honest, we haven’t been inclined to draw too near to God, because we don’t actually feel safe around him; we don’t actually believe there is no condemnation waiting for us in Him.
- Might some of us be willing to admit today - to ourselves or, gasp, another- that we feel anger toward God? Well, even though that anger may be rooted in a distorted view of God, it is nonetheless real.
- Or maybe today is the day that we repent of demonizing other human beings. And we begin asking God to help us love them, and only hate the sin, but to give us enough love to choose to love them sacrificially in ways that might illumine Christ’s love for them through us; that our hearts might continue learning that love is the answer.
- Whatever it is, will you join me in a short prayer of just admitting where we’re at to God, and asking him to heal our broken hearts?

Let’s Pray: Heavenly Father, We ask that you would take from our hearts any vision of you or impression of you that is not true to your character. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

“Those Who Fight and Those Who Flee — Roberta Bondi” from Mako Nagasawa

Here is how some people fight and/or flee Penal Substitutionary Atonement. Methodist minister and theologian Roberta Bondi is an example of someone who fought PSA and fled it. In her memoir, she recounts her early impressions of God in a PSA framework. Her great-uncle would regularly pray, “Oh Lord, you know we are all sinners who deserve to die, but you love us and you sent Jesus, your son, to die a terrible death for us instead” (italics hers).[10] This focus on deserving terrible things was and is typical of PSA-informed piety:

“Everything I had heard in church told me that my heavenly Father was a parent even stricter than mine. As a parent, he loved us very much, but in the matter of his power and authority, his anger was more dangerously volatile than that of my human father. Although God loved us, by our sin we had enraged God so much that punishment wasn’t enough. Somebody had to die for it. Jesus was that somebody.”[11]

³² “Bondi describes a God who is no longer concerned about compensating Himself because of how “unworthy” we are. For God to not even be interested about “questions of worthiness or unworthiness” was a dramatic shift, because it meant that sin and death are their own punishment, and God was not the one paying out the consequences on us. Instead, God is concerned – truly and utterly concerned – about our well-being – everyone’s well-being – in connection with Him.

After her parents divorced, the experience of “sacrifice” took on poignant meaning for Bondi, because of what was generally expected of white women in her generation, and what her mother endured in particular. She says:

“The years of my adolescence were difficult years for us all, but they were made unbearable to me by my awareness of the special hardship of my mother’s life. Not only did she wrestle daily with her own devouring grief and anger; as a proud woman for whom the care of her family had always been primary, she had to suffer the fear and judgmentalism of the fifties toward divorced women. But this was only part of it. Without an education and no job experience since her marriage thirteen years earlier, she was also left at the mercy of a world that wouldn’t pay her a living wage for her “women’s work” as a secretary. Later, when I turned fifteen and was allowed to work at Grant’s, I learned that, as hard as Mama’s life was, it was not nearly as hard as the lives of many other women with children or elderly parents to support on their solitary salaries...

“What I knew was that Mother’s life was hard in a way it never would have been if she had not had us children. It was because of us that she had to work so hard.

“In the face of all my mother’s sacrifices I was full only of an overwhelming sense of unworthiness and obligation I could never meet. I could not bear to feel my mother’s suffering. I was the cause of her hurt. I ought to be able to make it up to her by being who she wanted me to be, but I couldn’t. I still hadn’t learned not to want things [which was what white American society expected of women in the 1950s, because women, as wives, sacrificed, and husbands, benefited], and now, when we had no money, it really mattered.

“I knew I was unworthy of my mother’s sacrifices, and the shame and guilt that I carried because of what she was suffering on behalf of my sorry self left me helpless. The whole situation filled me day and night with sullen rage. I did not want to be sacrificed for; I did not want my life in the place of my mother’s. I did not want my mother’s loneliness and anxiety and exhaustion. And most of all I did not want the whole burden of the pressure to be worthy of all my mother’s love and pain.

“Now, I was being told that because of my sin, Jesus had actually gone through with it and died. How on earth could this be good news? I could never survive that cosmic burden of guilt and gratitude and obligation. No matter how many prayer meetings I went to, no matter how much I repented or how many times I asked Jesus to come into my life as my personal Lord and Savior, it never worked; I just couldn’t believe.”[12]

The young Roberta tasted her mother’s sacrifice and what it cost. This was emotionally complicated to the point of being a serious mental health problem. She loved her mother and did not want her to suffer. Being the beneficiary of her mother’s pain gave her gratitude without joy. She felt “sullen rage” that her mother had to suffer this way. Instead of feeling liberated, she felt the unremitting “burden of the pressure to be worthy.” Bondi’s self-loathing intensified. She appreciated her mother even while she pitied her and desired to not become like her. That pull towards and push away from her mother led to a “feedback loop” which led to even more negative feelings about herself.

Not surprisingly, when the young Roberta Bondi considered Jesus’ sacrifice, she felt gratitude without joy, an unremitting “burden” that was now elevated to the cosmic level. Bondi implies that, to the extent that she actually did love Jesus, the more she actually felt a “sullen rage” over why he had to suffer, because of the emotional similarity between her mother’s suffering and Jesus’ suffering. She felt a self-loathing and awareness of her own sin, to be sure. But she also felt that if God the Father was such a cosmic perfectionist that, ultimately, he was the one who made Jesus suffer, knowing him was not “good news.”

Which is not to say that Bondi turned away from Jesus and Christian faith entirely. But she simply could not accept that the crucifixion of Jesus had this particular meaning. She studied theology and church history at Oxford University. Then she made a discovery that freed her heart from this burden:

“It was also then in the great library of Oxford that I first read more widely in the ancient theology of early Eastern Christian writers such as Athanasius and Gregory of Nyssa, and from them my heart began to receive hints of a new way of thinking about the crucifixion of Jesus Christ.”[13]

In other words, in the end, Bondi did not flee Jesus. She fled Penal Substitutionary Atonement. And she rediscovered Jesus in the writings of the early church. Bondi writes:

“Indeed, in the equation “sin + love + sacrifice = salvation” the early church redefined all the terms. They did not see sin as our hopeless badness. Sin was about being blinded and wounded by our own and society’s patterns of seeing, feeling, and acting so that we could not love one another or God. God did not love us sternly in spite of our unworthiness, nor was God or Jesus victimized by God’s love. In fact, God was not even interested in questions of worthiness or unworthiness. For some inexplicable reason, God actually liked us, and Jesus suffered not because suffering in itself is a necessary proof of love. Rather, Jesus chose to suffer in order that the hold death had on us would be loosened and the image of God be restored in us so that we could once again learn how to love.”[14]

Bondi describes a God who is no longer concerned about compensating Himself because of how “unworthy” we are. For God to not even be interested about “questions of worthiness or unworthiness” was a dramatic shift, because it meant that sin and death are their own punishment, and God was not the one paying out the consequences on us. Instead, God is concerned – truly and utterly concerned – about our well-being – everyone’s well-being – in connection with Him. This healed her view of God, encouraged her in her own journey of personal healing, and fueled her passion to contribute to the healing of others.

Now imagine if Roberta Bondi’s mother not only suffered hardship as a divorced white woman in sexist 1950s America, but also complained constantly to young Roberta that the reason why she suffered so much was young Roberta herself. That would be emotional abuse. How would that Roberta Bondi have heard the God described by Penal Substitution? As much as a parent’s silent suffering is a weighty inheritance for children, being told “and you’re the cause” would be an order of magnitude worse. To the extent that I understand Bondi’s portrayal of her mother, I am so thankful that her mom did not speak this way.

[Nagasawa, Mako. “Atonement Theories & Anger, Part 6: Why Penal Substitution Encourages Traumatized People to Fight and Flee.” 3/3/21.

<https://newhumanityinstitute.wordpress.com/2021/03/03/atonement-theories-anger-part-6-why-penal-substitution-encourages-traumatized-people-to-fight-and-flee/>]