

PROBLEMS WITH THE RETRIBUTIVE SATISFACTION ATONEMENT VIEW

By Jesse Morrell

(Excerpt from the booklet "The Vicarious Atonement")

The atonement is not the exact and literal punishment that we deserve; blood shed is not the exact and literal payment of our debt. Nowhere in the Bible is it said that Jesus took the eternal punishment that we deserve, or paid the eternal debt that we owed, but the Bible says everywhere that the Savior suffered for our sins (Luke 9:22; 17:25; Acts 3:18; 26:23; 2 Tim. 3:12; 1 Pet. 1:11; 2:21; 3:18; 4:1, 13; 5:1). The atonement is a substitute for the punishment that we deserve; the atonement is a substitute for the debt that we owe. If Christ were to literally serve our prison sentence, He would have had to suffer in hell for all of eternity.

This is a dialog I had with a friend:

"What is the punishment that we deserve for our sin?"

"Hell."

"Did Jesus suffer in eternal hell?"

"No."

"So did Jesus take our punishment?"

"That's a good question."

The atonement consisted in wounding and bruising (Isa. 53:5), the agony of His soul (Isa. 53:10-12; Matt. 26:38; Mk. 14:34) and the shedding of His blood (Lev. 17:11; Heb. 9:22). But our punishment was eternal torment in hell fire (Matt. 25:46; 2 Thes. 1:9; 2 Pet. 2:9, 3:7; Jude 1:7). The suffering of Christ was a substitute for the punishment of our sin, the atonement of Calvary is a substitute for the torments of hell. This substitution is four fold: Christ is a substitute for sinners, the cross is a substitute for hell fire, Calvary is a substitute for the lake of fire, and six hours is a substitute for eternity.

"And these shall go away into everlasting punishment..." (Matt. 25:46). "Who shall be punished with everlasting destruction..." (2 Thes. 1:9). "Everlasting" means perpetual and without end. Our punishment was eternal. Christ suffered for six hours. Therefore Jesus did not take our exact and literal punishment. The suffering of Jesus was a substitute for our punishment. If Jesus took our exact and literal punishment, it would have been an "everlasting punishment". An eternal debt can never be paid; it is eternally unsatisfied because it is eternal. An eternal prison sentence never ends because it is eternal. Sinners will not be released from hell because their debt is eternal, their debt cannot be paid because their debt is eternally unsatisfied. The suffering of the atonement was a substitute for the suffering of our punishment, the price of His blood was a substitute for the payment of our debt. Christ suffered for six hours for our sins so that we don't have to be punished all eternity for our sins. The cross of Calvary substitutes the fires of hell.

Retributive justice would not be satisfied by punishing the innocent for the sins of the guilty. Retributive justice strictly requires the punishment of the guilty (Eze. 18:4; 18:20). But the atonement upholds public justice; the suffering of the innocent can substitute the punishment of the guilty, so that the atonement makes an adequate satisfaction for sin, a satisfaction to public justice, not retributive justice. Public justice is the reason for retributive justice, so when atonement is made that fulfills the reason of retributive justice, retributive justice can be set aside.

Christ did in fact drink a cup of suffering (Matt. 20:22, 26:42; Jn. 18:11), He tasted death for every man (Heb. 2:9). This cup could not be the cup of God's wrath (Ps. 11:6; Isa. 51:17, 51:22) since the cup of God's wrath was still full after the atonement (Rev. 14:10, 16:19), and because the disciples of Jesus would drink the same cup Jesus drank (Matt. 20:22-23; Mk. 10:38-39). But both Jesus and His disciples drank from a cup of suffering on behalf of others, they drank a cup of death. Jesus shed his blood in atonement for the whole world, and his disciples shed their blood in martyrdom to spread the gospel to the whole world.

So let it be understood that Christ did not pay our debt or serve our sentence, but Christ died to substitute the payment of our debt, Christ died to substitute the sentence we deserve. Blood shed is the price which substitutes the payment of our debt. The cross of Calvary substitutes our eternal sentence in the lake of fire. If Jesus were to literally pay our debt, take our punishment, or serve our sentence, Jesus would have had to suffer for all of eternity. But Jesus didn't suffer for all of eternity. Therefore Jesus didn't literally pay our debt, take our punishment, or serve our sentence.

A theologian named Anselm invented the "Retributive Satisfaction Theory" of the atonement about 1,000 years ago. This doctrine is only about 1,000 years. And there are very serious problems with the view that the atonement is our exact and literal punishment, as opposed to the atonement being a substitute for our penalty. The problems of the retributive satisfaction view must not go unnoticed or unmentioned.

A. One logical conclusion of Christ taking our punishment, or the retributive satisfaction view, would be universalism, limited atonement, or double punishment. If Christ paid the debt of all, nobody has a debt to pay, if Christ satisfied God's wrath for everyone, God has wrath left over for no one (Universalism). But if some will have to pay their debt, Christ must not have paid their debt, if some will still face God's wrath, Jesus must not have satisfied God's wrath for them (Limited Atonement). Or, if Christ paid the debt of all, but not all will be saved, God punishes the same sins twice (double punishment). The double punishment view makes no sense. If justice has been satisfied, justice can demand no more. A "double punishment" is a contradiction in terms. And the Bible says that Jesus died for all (Isa. 1:18, 45:22, 53:6, 55:1; Eze. 18:30-32; Matt. 23:37; Mk. 16:15-16; Lk. 2:10-11; Jn. 1:29, 3:16-17; Rom. 2:11; 2 Cor. 5:14-15; 1 Tim. 2:3-6; Tit. 2:11; Heb. 2:9; 1 Jn. 2:2; Rev. 3:20), because God wants everyone to be saved (Eze. 33:11; Acts 17:30-31; 2 Pet. 3:9; Rev. 22:17), yet we know that not all will be saved (Gen. 6:5-8; Isa. 53:1; Matt. 7:13, 21:10; Lk. 13:23-24, 23:21; Jn. 5:40, 6:60, 6:67, 7:7, 16:33; Acts 8:1, 14:22; 1 Cor. 4:13). Therefore the atonement was not the eternal

punishment that we deserve. The atonement was not the eternal payment of our eternal debt.

B. Another logical conclusion of the retributive view is what is known as “Once Saved, Always Saved.” If our debt has been paid, there is no debt left for us to pay. If our sentence has been served, there is no sentence for us to serve. We would be eternally secure without any fear of falling into condemnation no matter how much or how often we sin and openly rebel against God. The “Once Saved, Always Saved” doctrine is damnable heresy, it is utterly false (2 Pet. 2:1; Jude 1:4-5).

This antinomian eternal security is contrary to the entire Bible which repeatedly and abundantly teaches the doctrine of probation or conditional security for believers (Eze. 3:20-21, 18:18-31, 33:12-20; Matt. 6:14-15, 10:22, 24:13, 24:48-51, 25:1-13; Mk. 4:16-19, 13:13; Jn. 6:66, 15:6; Acts 1:25, 11:23, 13:43, 14:22; Rom. 8:13, 11:20-23; 1 Cor. 3:16-17, 6:9-10, 9:27, 10:5-13; 15:1-2; Gal. 5:4-9, 5:19-21, 6:7-9; Col. 1:21-23; 1 Thes. 3:5, 3:8; 2 Thes. 2:3; 1 Tim. 1:5-6; 1:18-20, 3:6, 4:1, 4:16, 5:15; 2 Tim. 2:12, 4:9-10; Heb. 2:1, 2:3, 3:6, 3:8-15, 3:18-19, 4:1, 4:11, 4:14, 6:1, 6:8, 6:11-12, 6:15, 10:23, 10:26-31, 10:35-39, 12:14-15, 12:25; Jas. 1:13-16, 5:19-20; 2 Pet. 1:9, 2:20-22, 3:17; Rev. 2:4-7, 2:10-11, 2:17, 2:25-26, 3:2-5, 3:10-12, 3:16, 3:19, 3:20, 21:8, 22:15).

We have the example of the unforgiving servant who was forgiven of his unpaid debt, but then later had his debt reinstated because of his immoral conduct (Matt. 18:23-35). This parable clearly shows how the Lord can graciously pardon an individual and then later execute the punishment that they deserve. We also see the example of the Apostle Judas. Jesus told Judas that He was shedding His blood for him (Lk. 22:14-20), and previously told Judas that His name was written in the Lambs book of life (Lk. 10:20). But then later, after having his name written in Heaven, we see that Judas became a devil (Jn. 6:70), and therefore it would have been better for him to have never been born (Mk. 14:21). Judas fell from his Apostleship by his transgression (Acts 1:25) and his name was blotted out of the book of life (Ex. 23:33; Rev. 3:5). So we can see that the atonement does not automatically or unconditionally save anyone. Many of those for whom Christ died will ultimately perish for their sin because they choose to continue in their sin (Heb. 10:26-31) instead of sinning no more. It's possible to deny the Lord that bought us and thereby fall into condemnation (2 Pet. 2:1). The wrath of God is impartial (Deut. 10:17; Col. 3:26; 2 Pet. 1:17), so anyone who willingly and knowingly sins is under condemnation (Rom. 1:18, 2:6-11) because God must uphold and enforce His Laws as long as He is loving and caring, as long as He hates sin because He's benevolent.

C. Another logical problem with the retributive satisfaction view is that there is no grace, mercy, forgiveness, remission, or pardon in it at all. If God punishes all sin, God forgives no sin. If God executes all penalties, God remits no penalties. If God requires payment for all debts, God pardons no debts. But the Bible says that God does forgive our actual sin (Matt. 9:6; Mk. 2:10; Lk. 5:24; Acts 5:31, 13:38, 26:18; Eph. 1:7, Col. 1:14; 1 Jn. 1:9), God does remit our actual deserved penalties (Matt. 26:28; Mk. 1:4; Lk. 1:77, 3:3, 24:47; Acts 2:38, 10:43; Rom. 3:25; Heb. 9:22, Heb. 10:18), God does pardon our actual debts (Matt. 6:12, 18:27; Lk. 7:42, 11:4). But to say that the atonement

was the punishment of our sin, that the atonement was the penalty of our sin, or that it was the payment of our debt, is to take forgiveness, remission, and pardon completely out of the gospel.

The scripture Hebrews 9:22, for example, would make absolutely no sense at all if the nature of the atonement was our punishment. It tells us that without the shedding of blood, there is no remission of sins. That is, when there is an offering of blood, God can remit the penalty of our sins. But if the retributive view were correct, Hebrews 9:22 would be saying, “Without executing the punishment of sin, the punishment of sin cannot be set aside”. This is such a contradiction that no further reasoning or explanation is even necessary, the contradiction is plain enough.

The scriptures explicitly say that Jesus Christ died so that God could grant us forgiveness, remission, or pardon (Matt. 26:28; Rom. 3:25; Heb. 9:22; Eph. 1:7; Col. 1:14). The atonement of blood makes it possible for God to graciously pardon our crimes and set aside our punishment, thus forgiving our actual sins and pardoning our actual debt.

D. Another problem with the retributive satisfaction view is that it makes salvation by justice, the payment of a debt, rather than by grace, the pardon of a debt. If God releases us from obligation to pay our debt because someone else has paid our debt, this releasing is on the grounds of justice rather than grace. There is no grace in releasing someone from obligation to pay a debt that has already been paid. Justice requires such a release. Grace and mercy is when God pardons our unpaid debt, when God releases us from paying our eternal debt of hell. And it is only because Christ has shed His blood as a substitute for our punishment, thus declaring the righteousness of God and the value of the violated Law, is God able pardon us of our eternal debt without abrogating His Laws or destroying His Government.

E. Another issue with the retributive satisfaction view is that it presents a very confused view of the penalty of the Law. They reason that since Jesus took our punishment, yet Jesus didn't go to hell, therefore hell is not our punishment.

Some who hold to this view have represented physical death as the penalty of the Law. But if this were true there are some serious problems. First, it would mean that all men could simply physically die and go to Heaven and therefore Christ was not necessary. Second, it would mean that Christ did not really save us from the penalty of the Law because both sinners and Christians will physically die one day. Third, it would mean that our sins are punished twice because Christ physically died and we physically die.

Others have represented spiritual separation from God as the penalty of our sin. But sinners are already spiritually separated from God (Isa. 59:2, Rom. 7:9, Col. 2:13). And sinners want to be separated from God because they hate God. Punishment is supposed to be something that is dreaded, something that men will want to avoid. But sinners intentionally and purposely run away from God!

In essence, this group says that “physical death is the punishment of sin, spiritual death is the punishment of sin, but eternal death in hell is merely the consequence of sin.” But this is entirely backwards. Physical death is the consequence of Adam’s sin (Gen. 3:22; 1 Cor. 15:21-22), spiritual death (no relationship, spiritual separation) is the consequence of our own sin (Isa. 59:2, Rom. 7:9, Col. 2:13), while eternal death or hell fire is the eternal punishment of sin (Matt. 2:46; 2 Thes. 1:9; 2 Pet. 2:9; Jude 1:7; Rev. 21:8).

F. Another objection to the retributive satisfaction view is that it gives a distorted view of justice. It represents justice as being satisfied with the punishment of the innocent instead of the guilty, when strict justice requires that only the guilty be punished (Eze. 18:4; 18:20). This view overlooks the very reason for retributive justice (letter of the Law), which reason is public justice (spirit of the Law). This view gives no satisfactory answer as to why the exact and literal punishment needed to be executed, as to why God is not capable of forgiving our sin, pardoning our debt, and remitting the penalty.

G. Another objection to the retributive satisfaction view is that it gives a distorted image of the Father. After hearing a sermon on the atonement as a new convert, the individual that I attended Church with that day said to me afterwards, “The picture that I had in my mind was that of a family. A young child made a mistake and the Father became very angry that he was going to beat the child. But just as the Father was about to beat the child, the older brother stepped in and said, ‘no Father, beat me instead’.”

Even as a new convert I knew that this view of the Father, Son, and sinner was not at all accurate. It represented the Father as if He were just so angry, without any self-control or grace that He just absolutely had to beat someone; he just absolutely had to take out His rage and anger on either the innocent or the guilty. And this scenario is some how passed off as justice? And what a distorted and twisted view of our gracious and merciful Father!

It must be understood that the Father was just as loving and forgiving as the Son was. It was the grace and love of the Father which sent the Son in the first place (Jn. 3:16; Rom. 5:8)! The problems that needed to be overcome in the exercise of forgiveness were obstacles for the government of God, not hindrances rooted in the person of God.

H. Another problem with the retributive satisfaction view is that it poses great difficulty in preaching the gospel. Preaching to sinners would amount to this, “You have a debt to pay for your sin, but Jesus Christ has paid your debt, but if you don’t come to Jesus Christ you will have to pay your own debt.” Warning sinners (the world or the elect) to flee from the wrath that is to come would be nonsense if Jesus Christ has entirely satisfied the wrath of God. There would then be no such thing as wrath that is to come upon them.

I. Another problem with the retributive satisfaction view is that if it were a matter of debt, merely a commercial transaction, there is no necessity for preaching since the debt

would be paid whether the debtor hears about it or not, whether they believe it or not. And there is absolutely no reason why repentance and faith are necessary conditions at all, since the debt is paid whether they believe is not or not, and whether they repent or not. But the Bible says that a person must repent or perish (Lk. 3:13) and that men must believe in order to be saved (Jn. 3:16-18). And there is an absolute necessity for public proclamation of the gospel for the salvation of souls (Rom. 10:13-15). But if it were just a matter of debt, a commercial transaction, repentance and faith cannot be conditions of salvation and preaching the gospel has no necessity.

J. And lastly, a problem with the retributive satisfaction view is that those for whom Christ died (the world or the elect) would have been saved for the past two thousand years. If their debt was paid two thousand years ago, it follows that they haven't had a debt for the past two thousand years. If God's wrath was satisfied for them two thousand years ago, they have not been under God's wrath for the past two thousand years. Yet the Bible says, prior to conversion, we were in fact under God's wrath (Jn. 3:36; Lk. 13:3; Rom. 1:18, 2:5; Eph. 2:3).

This also gives us a serious problem in regards to preaching the gospel and the conversion of souls. When we preach the gospel we are warning sinners that they are in fact under the wrath of God, while at the same time that Jesus Christ has shed His blood for them. And in order to be converted we ourselves needed to recognize that we were under the wrath of God. But if God's wrath was satisfied two thousand years ago, we were very mistaken when we thought of ourselves as under God's wrath. But if we were not under the wrath of God, we didn't really flee from the wrath that is to come (Matt. 3:7; Lk. 3:7).

If the retributive satisfaction view were true, warning sinners to flee from God's wrath would be absurd, and fleeing from the wrath of God would be impossible. The logical conclusion of this perspective is that preaching the gospel is pointless and conversion is impossible, since without recognizing that we were under God's wrath, it would be impossible for us to be converted.

In essence, Jesus Christ did not take our exact and literal punishment. The blood of Jesus Christ is a governmental substitute for the punishment that we deserve, which allows God to set aside our punishment by forgiving our sin or pardoning our debt. The Law required either our punishment of eternal hell for or a blood atonement of pure blood. And once a blood offering is made which sustains and supports the Government of God, which declares the value of the violated Law and thereby vindicating it, and which publicly declares the righteousness of God, mercy and grace can be extended to sinners by setting aside their eternal punishment, by pardoning their rebellious selfish crimes against God and humanity.

QUOTES REGARDING THE PROBLEMS WITH THE RETRIBUTIVE SATISFACTION ATONEMENT VIEW

LIMITED ATONEMENT, UNIVERSALISM, OR DOUBLE PUNISHMENT

“Two persons cannot be held responsible for the same offense. If a debt has been paid by a friend, it cannot be demanded of him who originally contracted it. If one could be substituted in the place of another in a penitentiary, and serve out the term of punishment assigned to the original offender, the offender could not be again imprisoned for the crime.” Albert Barnes (The Atonement, page 298. Published by Bethany Fellowship)

“No man can be held accountable for a debt that has already been paid for on his behalf to the satisfaction of the offended party. But a double jeopardy, a duplication of indebtedness, is indeed involved if the non-elect are to be punished for sins which the Lord Jesus Christ has already endured punishment.” Culance (Sovereignty of Grace, page 156)

“For God to have laid the sins of all men on Christ would mean that as regards to the lost He would be punishing their sins twice, once in Christ, and then again in them.” Boettner (The Reformed Faith, page 98)

“Reformed people argue that if Christ’s death actually paid for the sins of every person who ever lived, then there is no penalty left for anyone to pay, and it necessarily follows that all people will be saved, without exception. For God could not condemn to eternal punishment anyone whose sins are already paid for: that would be demanding double payment, and it would therefore be unjust.” Wayne Grudem (Systematic Theology, page 595)

“If Christ died for everyone, everyone would be saved.” Joshua Williamson (Open Air Outreach message board, Doctrine and Theology section)

“That if, as their substitute, Christ suffered for them the full amount deserved by them, then justice has no claim upon them, since their debt is fully paid by the surety, and of course the principal is, in justice, discharged. And since it is undeniable that the atonement was made for the whole posterity of Adam, it must follow that the salvation of all men is secured upon the ground of "exact justice." This, as has been said, is the conclusion to which Huntington and his followers came. This doctrine of literal imputation, is one of the strongholds of universalism, and while this view of atonement and justification is held they cannot be driven from it.” Charles Finney (Lectures on Systematic Theology, 1851, Lecture on Justification)

AUTOMATIC AND UNCONDITIONAL SALVATION

“Every elect vessel, *from the first instance of his being*, is as pure in the eyes of God from the charge of sin as he shall be in glory. Though such persons do act rebellion, yet the loathsomeness and hatefulnes of his rebellion is laid on the back of Christ; he bears the sin, as well as the blame and shame: and God can dwell with persons that act the thing, because all the filthiness of it is translated from them upon the back of Christ.” Dr. Crisp [one who held to the automatic and unconditional salvation view] (Checks to Antinomianism by John Fletcher, pg 116. Published by Carlton & Porter)

“With equal clearness it would follow that they [those for whom Christ died] could not be required to repent of the sin which they had committed [if the atonement was payment of a debt]. If the whole matter is transferred and cancelled, then it is clear that there can be no reason why they should repent, or, indeed, why there should be any repentance in the case.” Albert Barnes (The Atonement, page 299. Published by Bethany Fellowship)

“If a third person pay a debt, there would be no grace exercised by the creditor in the discharging of the debtor; yet when a third person atones for a crime, by suffering in the stead of a criminal, there is entire grace in the discharge of the criminal, and *retributive justice still allows him to be punished in his own person.*” Jonathon Edwards (Grace Consistent with Atonement, page 7)

“Forgiveness of sins is not automatic in the Christian life but requires repentance, confession, and the exercise of a humbled faith in the atoning death of Christ... before forgiveness and cleansing can take place.” Gordon Olson (The Truth Shall Make You Free, page 160. Published by Bible Research Corp)

"If A owes B \$100, and C pays B \$100 in behalf of A, then A owes B nothing." Gordon C. Olson (The Truth Shall Make You Free, page 93. Published by Bible Research Corp)

SALVATION BY LAW AND JUSTICE RATHER THAN GRACE AND MERCY

“When a debt is paid, there is no forgiveness; when a penalty is endured, there is no mercy.” Albert Barnes (The Atonement, page 231. Published by Bethany Fellowship)

“If our forgiveness be purchased, and the price of it be already paid, it seems to be a matter of debt, and not of grace.” Jonathon Edwards (The Necessity of the Atonement, page 1)

“If the atonement of Christ be considered as the payment of a debt, the release of the sinner seems not to be an act of grace, although the payment be made by Christ, and not by the sinner personally. Suppose any one of you, my auditors, owes a certain sum; he goes and pays the full sum himself personally. Doubtless all will agree, that the creditor, in this case, when he gives up the obligation, performs a mere act of justice, in which there is no grace at all....this...places the whole grace of the gospel in providing

the Savior, not in the pardon of sin.” Jonathon Edwards (Grace Consistent with Atonement, page 2)

“If Christ have, in the proper sense of the words, paid the debt which we owed to God, whether by a delegation from us or not; there can be no more grace in our discharge, than if we had paid it ourselves. But the fact is, that Christ has not, in the literal and proper sense, paid the debt for us...Payment of debt equally precludes grace, when made by a third person, as when made by the debtor himself...Grace is ever so opposed to justice, that they mutually limit each other. Wherever grace begins, justice ends; and wherever justice begins, grace ends.” Jonathon Edwards (Grace Consistent with Atonement, page 3-4, 6)

"If, in the obligation of an absolute retributive justice the Father must inflict merited punishment upon sin and if in the atonement he inflicted such punishment upon his Son as the substitute for sinners-then he does not remit the penalty. No dialectics can identify such an infliction with remission. And where there is no remission of penalty there can be no grace of forgiveness. Hence, the doctrine of Satisfaction does not admit the grace of the Father in forgiveness; which fact of grace, however, is clearly given in the Scriptures." John Miley (Theory and Scripture Interpretation, page 6)

ANTINOMIANISM OR LAWLESSNESS ONCE SAVED, ALWAYS SAVED

“There is as much ground to be confident of the pardon of sin to a believer, *as soon as he committed it*, as to believe it after he has performed all the humiliation in the world. A believer may be assured of pardon as soon as he commits any sin, even adultery and murder...God does no longer stand displeased though a believer do sin often. There is no sin that ever believer commit that can possibly do them any harm. Therefore, as their sins cannot hurt them, so there is no cause of fear in their sins committed. Sins are but scarecrows and bugbears to fright ignorant children.” Dr Crisp [A teacher of antinomianism] (Checks to Antinomianism by John Fletcher, pg 116. Published by Carlton & Porter)

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