

I don't have enough **FAITH**
to be an **ATHEIST**

with Dr. Frank Turek **PODCAST**

Cosmic Child Abuse? Answering Moral Objections to the Atonement

(February 8, 2020)

Welcome to, I Don't Have Enough Faith to Be an Atheist, with Frank Turek. I'm Alisa Childers, filling in for Frank today. I want to ask you a question. This may seem like a question you take for granted. Maybe you haven't given it all that much thought, but the question is this. Why did Jesus die on the cross? My bet is that, if you ask the average Christian on the street, you're probably going to get a similar answer. Something like, "Jesus died for my sins. I'm a sinner in need of a Savior, that Jesus took the punishment of my sin upon himself, that he paid the price for my sins and He reconciled me to God."

And of course, this is a belief that has united Christians throughout the ages. It has spanned cultures and continents. It's the story scripture tells, from the fall of Eden in Genesis, to its restoration in Revelation. But in modern times, this particular belief is under attack. Now, you might expect it to be under attack and rejected by atheists. But there is a growing number of people who claim the name of Christ, who are rethinking this view of the cross. In their view, the idea that God the Father would require the sacrifice of his only son, as payment for the sins of mankind, makes them into some kind of divine child abuser. Or, as one popular progressive writer put it, "Who originated the cross? If God did, then we worship a cosmic abuser, who in Divine Wisdom created a means to torture human beings in the most painful and abhorrent manner. The alternative is that the cross originated with us human beings. That Gods submitted to it. And how would we religious people interpret this sacrifice? We would declare that it was God who killed Jesus, slaughtering him as a necessary appeasement for his bloodthirsty need for justice".

So, according to progressive wisdom, not only did the sacrificial system originate with humans, and not God, but the belief that Christ sacrificed himself on our behalf is dangerous, because it somehow distorts our view of the Father. I'm going to read some quotes from progressive authors. First is this one. "God didn't need the blood of sacrifices, people did. God didn't need to kill someone to be happy with humanity. What kind of God would that be? Awful. Horrific". Another writer said, "The only thing God will call justice is setting the world right, not punishing

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an innocent substitute for the petty sake of appeasement". Yet another progressive writer adds, "The simple truth is that if God does not relate to his only son as a perfect father, neither can we relate to him as such". Another progressive leader wrote, "I believe that Jesus' death on the cross is a revelation of the infinite and participatory love of God, not some bloody payment required by God's offended justice to rectify the problem of sin. Such a storyline is way too small and problem oriented". Elsewhere, this same writer wrote, "Jesus came to change the mind of humanity about God. There was no transaction necessary. There was not a blood sacrifice necessary".

Now remember, these are writers who claim the name of Christ. These are not atheists or unbelievers. Finally, another writer says, "The cross is not a picture of payment. The cross is a picture of forgiveness. The cross is not where God finds a whipping boy to vent his rage upon. The cross is God saves the world through self-sacrificing-love. The sacrifice of Jesus was necessary to convince us to quit producing sacrificial victims. But it was not necessary to convince God to forgive".

So, are these progressive writers correct that the typical Christian view of the cross reduces it to a mere transaction? Does it make God an abusive father? Is their alternative view right, that Jesus died on the cross to model forgiveness that? That somehow, he defeated the power of death by showing us a better way forward. Did he simply die at the hands of an angry mob who wanted their pound of flesh? Did God not require the sacrifice of Jesus to pay for sin?

So, that's the question we're going to be tackling today. After the break, we'll talk with pastor, and apologist, Mike Winger, to help us answer some of these moral objections to the atonement. But first, let's lay the foundation by defining the historic Christian view, because in some of these progressive quotes we see some strawmen, right. We see some mischaracterizations of the historic Christian view. So, if we go to the Bible, we're going to find lots of different metaphors and descriptive language to illustrate what Jesus' death on the cross accomplished. Mark 10:45 describes Christ as our ransom. This is language that goes all the way back to the Old Testament sacrificial system. First Corinthians 15:54-57 tells us that, "Jesus defeated the powers of sin and death giving us victory". This is called the Jesus victor model. Philippians 3 presents Jesus as a moral example to follow, inviting the Christian to be like him in

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his death and to partake in the sufferings of Christ. Galatians 4 explains that Jesus redeemed us from the law so that we could be received by God as adopted sons and daughters.

And so, none of this is in dispute. These are all true statements about the cross-facets of the same beautiful diamond. But there's a very clear and consistent theme in Scripture that is under attack today. And that's the idea that Jesus' death paid for our sins. And so, if we want to understand how the earliest Christians understood the atonement, there's no better place to look than the earliest Christians. And many Christians are unaware of that our New Testament contains dozens of creeds that are hundreds of years older than more famous creeds, like the Nicene Creed, or the Apostles Creed. And so, creeds, for the earliest Christians, were an easy way to summarize and memorize their essential beliefs.

The earliest creed in the history of Christianity is probably the one that's found in First Corinthians 15:3-5. Most scholars, even the most liberal, the most skeptical ones, will tell you that this creed first began circulating as early as two years after Jesus' resurrection. Paul records this creed for us in First Corinthians 15:3-5. And it says this. "For I delivered to you, as of first importance, what I also received. That Christ died for our sins, in accordance with the scriptures. That he was buried, that he was raised on the third day, in accordance with the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the 12.

Right here among the earliest Christians, we have Paul saying that this is the most important thing. This is a core essential of what defines Christianity. And among that is the fact that Jesus died for our sins. He didn't just die at the hands of an angry mob for speaking truth to power. He died in our place for our sins. And so, when you lay on top of that, the many passages of Scripture that describe that substitution, making payment, you get a deeper understanding of why we call this substitutionary atonement. And when you lay that on top, we get what's called, penal substitutionary atonement, because the word penal has to do with punishment. There was a debt that was owed, and Jesus paid it. He took our punishment.

We see this all over scripture. First Corinthians 6:20 says, "You were bought with a price." Galatians 3:13 says, "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us." And then in First Peter 1:18-19, Peter says, "Knowing that you were ransomed from the feudal ways inherited from your forefathers, not with perishable things, such as silver or gold, but with

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the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot." In the next chapter, Peter says, "He Himself bore our sins in his body, on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds, you have been healed."

And when Peter says, "By His wounds, you've been healed", he's referencing a prophecy from Isaiah that comes from Isaiah 53, about the coming Messiah. It's very long, I'm just going to read a little bit of it, but it says this. "The Lord has laid on him", and that's the coming Messiah, "the iniquity of us all. Yet it was the will of the Lord to crush him. He has put him grief. By his knowledge shall the Righteous One, my servant, make many to be accounted righteous. He shall bear their iniquities." That means his rights justness would be credited to their account. In other words, it would be paid for.

So, with these passages in mind, let's go back to the night before Jesus died. He instituted the New Covenant saying, "This is my body which is given for you. This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood." Jesus compared, right then and there, his death with what the sacrificial system in the Old Testament accomplished. He was instituting the New Covenant. Later that same night Jesus quoted directly from that Isaiah 53 prophecy, saying this. "For I tell you that this scripture must be fulfilled in me. That he was numbered with transgressors. For what is written about me has its fulfillment."

Jesus couldn't be any clearer. The prophecy about the Messiah, that spoke of God [unintelligible] was about him. We're going to talk more in just a moment. We'll be right back.

You're listening to, I Don't Have Enough Faith to Be an Atheist. Alisa Childers here, filling in for Frank Turek today. We're talking about the atonement. If we believe God required the death of Jesus as a sacrifice for sin, to die the death we deserve, in our place, as our substitute, does this somehow implicate the character of God by turning him into some kind of cosmic child abuser?

Of course, this is a claim you might expect to come from an unbeliever or an internet atheist. But this is actually an accusation being made by a growing number of people who claim the name of Christ. I have a special guest here to talk about some of these things. We've got Mike Winger on the line, a pastor and apologist. So, Mike, welcome to the show. How are you?

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Mike:

I'm doing great. It's really good to be here with you. Thanks for having me on.

Alisa:

Well, in a moment, we're going to talk about some of the moral objections to the doctrine of penal substitutionary atonement, which we talked about in the first segment. But one of the claims I see very often is that, this doctrine actually doesn't go back to the earliest Christians but was invented by Anselm in the 11th century. So, let's tackle that one first. When we see this claim that this really wasn't a view of the earliest Christians, what do we have to answer that? Was this a late invention or was it actually the view of historic Christianity?

Mike:

Yeah, well, first, I want to acknowledge, like, what's actually happening here. Because I think what some people do when they go to church history to try to change your theology, what they're actually doing is, they're moving away from scripture that you know, to church fathers that you don't know, so that they can kind of be the new authority on what you should believe, by just sort of dodging scripture. And I just think we should, kind of, be aware when people are avoiding the text and getting us to try to change what we believe about things.

But I've heard this a lot from people. Brian Zon said it was only 500 years old. It was a product of modernity. And he talks that it came from Calvin's [unintelligible]. A lot of other people just say it's about 1000 years old. But actually, the right way to approach the church fathers is to realize, first we're not looking for a carefully, you know, drawn out penal substitutionary theory of the atonement in every aspect. We're really just looking for aspects of penalty and substitution in the church fathers. And that we find in space.

Yeah, so let me give you some examples of these. The Epistle of Barnabas, which is a very popular letter in the early church, and it was written sometime between 70 and 135, after the death of Christ, right. It says this. "For to this end, the Lord endured to deliver up his flesh to corruption, that we might be sanctified, through the remission of sins, which is affected by his blood of sprinkling." And this ties, of course, Old Testament sacrifice concepts, but the idea is that it's dealing with our sin. Jesus' death is covering our sins and cleansing us from sin. The Epistle of Diognetus in the second century comes up and says, "When our wickedness had

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reached its height, he himself took on him the burden of our iniquities. He gave his own son as a ransom for us, the Holy One for transgressors, the blameless ones for the wicked, the righteous one for the unrighteous." And then he goes on to say that, "The wickedness of many should be hid in a single righteous One, that the righteousness of one should justify many transgressors."

But this epistle is an example of something that stands as a clear example of early belief, that Jesus paid the price for unjust sinners, so that they can be forgiven of their sin. A really popular guy is Origin in the 200s. Now, according to Gustaf Aulén, he's like a real, he really pushes against penal substitution, but he's a scholar who does it. He says that Origin is not a penal substitution guy. He's a Christus Victor guy. Well, I think he's both. And Origin said the following. "That one suffered death for the whole world, and as the whole world was cleansed by this sacrifice, whereas without such a sacrifice, it must perform this parish. Christ only could receive on the cross, the burden of the sins of all. To carry this burden, nothing short of his divine might was required. He took on him our sin and was smitten for our iniquities. The punishment awaiting us fell on him instead."

That's clear punishment language here, right? So, then he goes on and says, "We are healed by the sufferings of his cross. His father delivered him for our misdeeds. He was led to the slaughter for the sins of the people." What, what really shocked me when I read this quote from Origin was that Gustaf Aulén, is like the spearhead of those who say that penal substitution is a new view. He quotes Origin as being a guy who doesn't do this sort of thing. And so, what you find is this secondary literature, like modern people talking about the church fathers, is often very distorted. It's often really, kind of, off base.

One of my favorite quotes is Eusebius. And I know you've quoted this before in your podcast, as well. And Eusebius of Caesarea said, "Thus the Lamb of God that taketh away the sins of the world became a curse on our behalf. And the Lamb of God, not only did this, but was chastised on our behalf, and suffered a penalty he did not owe, but which we owed, because of the multitude of our sin. And so, he became the cause of the forgiveness of our sins, because he received death threats, and transferred to himself the scourging, the insults, and the dishonor which were due to us, and drew down upon himself the appointed curse, being made a curse for us."

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I could just go like, on and on. This whole show could just be quotes from the early church fathers that support penal substitutionary atonement. Joseph Mitros. He's a scholar who did a survey of the church fathers. And he wrote the following in an article that was published in a peer review journal thought from Fordham University quarterly. He said, "By way of summary, one may say that the sacrificial theory of salvation, combined with the idea of penal substitution, constituted the mainstream of thinking in the fourth century." In other words, something really fishy is going on here. You know, these people who are saying, this is a new doctrine, they're doing like a two-step move on Christians. One, they're getting you to move away from scripture to establish your doctrine on this topic. And two, they're totally misrepresenting what the early church actually believed on these issues. This is pretty significant stuff.

Alisa:

And you made another good point that I want to come back around to. And that's that, just because there wasn't an official theological term for the doctrine until a certain point in history, doesn't mean that the idea that it's conveying is not biblical, or is not true. A great example of this would be the Trinity. You know, the earliest Christians, they were under a lot of persecution. They didn't really have time to sit down and flesh out their doctrine of the Trinity. But that's part of what was going on at the Council of Nicea. It's not that they were like, "Okay, well, let's sit down and figure out what we think about the nature of God." They were having to do that because people were coming along that were challenging the historic view, and they're like, "Well, wait a second. We got to flesh this out a little better", to refute the false ideas that were coming in. So, as the doctrine of atonement gets more refined throughout history, it doesn't mean that because there wasn't an official term, that the idea didn't exist or that it wasn't true.

That's a great point, because when I think about, you mentioned that some people will say, "Well, this church father believed in the Christus Victor model and not penal substitution. Often that's a bait-and-switch as well, because as we, sort of established in the first segment, yes, there are lots of different ways the Bible talks about what Jesus' death accomplished. And believing that penal substitution is one of them doesn't mean that the other ones are false. And as you've pointed out on your YouTube channel, for Christus Victor to even be true, for us to

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say that Jesus is the victor, that he defeated the power of sin and death, that's not even really going to be possible unless penal substitution is true.

Mike:

Yeah. Yeah, I think those are really important points. And I think for the average Christian, what happens is, when people start saying these things, you're like, this is new territory for me. I don't need the church fathers. And I haven't even heard the term, theory of the atonement, I just thought Jesus died for my sins. And so, they feel really, you know, caught off guard. And then based kind of on someone's cloud, the way that they're talking, they become willing to sacrifice the clear teaching of Scripture. And that's something else I'd love to point out is, when I read these quotes, those familiar with the Bible would be like, wait a minute, you said he was just quoting Isaiah. Wait a minute. You know, these guys are quoting Galatians. They're just quoting scripture and affirming what it says. And that just shows you that these guys didn't think they were the authority. They know scripture was the authority. So, they were formulating their understanding of the cross based upon what the Bible told them.

Alisa:

That's a great point. And when I went through my own crisis of faith, many people might have heard the term deconstruction. I went through a time of doubt, where my beliefs were essentially deconstructed. And of course, I didn't know it was called that back then. But when I was trying to figure out what Christianity is, I wanted to know what the earliest Christians believed. And you know, interestingly, I was kind of like, I don't know if I'm going to find these beliefs, I grew up with in the church fathers, or in this, and going back and reading Augustine's confessions. It was just like drinking a cold glass of water, because the way he talked about God, and his devotion to Christ, and even substitutionary atonement. It just felt so familiar that if I was a good enough writer, I would have said it the same way. And here's a quote from confessions. Now remember, this is the fifth century. He says, "Jesus, your only Son, in whom all hordes of knowledge and wisdom are hidden away, bought me back at the price of his blood." That's fifth century Augustin. And just like you mentioned, this is such an important point. sometimes this claim to history is it is a bait-and-switch to get Christians away from the biblical texts, because ultimately, the Bible is our authority.

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And even these early creeds and the rule of faith that came about in the second century. It wasn't that these Christians were coming around saying this is what we think Christianity is. They were actually putting together their best understanding of the teaching of the apostles. They didn't see themselves as, in this way, like, we're the ones who are identifying it. They were saying, No, the apostles do that. And this is our best summary of what they believed. And so, I think you make some really good points. First of all, even if history had been wrong, we as Christians go to the Bible for our doctrine. And so, that a great point about that.

I want to get into this idea of cosmic child abuse. If Jesus took the punishment of our sins upon himself, if he died in our place, if this sacrifice was required by God, does this make God nothing more than an abusive father? Mike, we got about a minute or two. Get us started with answering this. This is a moral objection to the doctrine.

Mike:

It is. And I would actually say it's not even an objection to the doctrine, it really is creating a fake version of the doctrine and objecting to that. So, the picture is that Jesus is like this little child. Is sort of innocent, against his own free will, being just sort of thrown in front of an angry God. And so, it misses several things. It thinks of the anger of God, not as proper wrath against him, but as sort of like a bad temper. It thinks of Jesus as a child, instead of as God the Son, offering himself freely. And it also thinks of Jesus as a random substitute, instead of someone who is the representative of all humanity. Like he's the rightful one representing us. And so, Adam represents us all in the garden. Jesus. represent us all on the cross. And we see him as our rightful representative, who of his own free will, God Himself taking upon himself the penalty of our sin. This whole objection just completely disappears because it's an objection to a weird pagan notion. It's not Christian.

Alisa:

And it's often compared to pagan deities. Yes, because it's often compared like, the gods are angry, they needed to be appeased. And so, often when this claim is brought forth, it will be compared to a more pagan view of a deity that's just angry all the time. Who's petulant. Who's capricious. Who's a bully. In fact, famously, Richard Dawkins describes the God of the Bible that way, with some of that language. And so, when we return, we're going to talk more about this, but I'm even thinking about the idea of the whipping boy. You know, there's always this this

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notion that God needed to get some innocent person, this hapless victim waiting off in the distance, and he had to bring this victim and beat him. And then all of a sudden everything's better. And in a moment, we're going to continue talking about cosmic child abuse, but we're also going to talk about, like, if I could just forget somebody, why couldn't God. I don't feel like I need to go get whipping boy when I'm upset with somebody. I can just forgive them. And isn't God more superior to me? So, we'll talk about that when we get back.

Alisa Childers here, filling in for Frank Turek today. We're talking with pastor and apologist, Mike Winger, about moral objections to the atonement. So, Mike, we've covered the historic view of Christians, surrounding the atonement, that Jesus died for our sins, that he took the punishment for our sins upon himself, essentially paying the debt we owe. And we call this penal substitutionary atonement. Of course, penal, meaning punishment. Substitutionary, meaning in our place. So, Jesus took the punishment for our sins in our place, died the death we deserve. And some are claiming that if this is something that God did, if this is something God required, then it doesn't make him any different than the pagan deities who required child sacrifice and blood payment to appease their anger. So, let's press in this question a little bit. What's the difference between, let's say, what a pagan deity would require, according to ancient mythology in religions? What's the difference between that, and what we're saying as Christians, that God required the sacrifice of his only son?

Mike:

Yeah, and I think there are some significant differences. And I would actually say, what these differences give us is, they show us that those who are objecting to the cross in this fashion, what they're really doing is they're objecting to paganism. But they're trying to paint the cross as if that's what it is. I don't know that they're all aware they're doing this. A lot of them are repeating things they've heard. They all tend to say the same thing in the same language. So, I'm not saying it's intentional, but that's what the effect is. But yeah, one of the differences is the difference between justice versus just pure, either anger or bloodlust. And so, oftentimes God is couched as being angry, and having a bloodlust, as though God is just...and this is obviously a non-Christian view of God. So, it would make the cross incompatible with God, if it's anger and bloodlust.

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But instead, if the cross is a just thing, if what happens to Jesus is about exacting justice against sin, and this will be a retributive kind of justice, at least most understanding of penal substitution involved retributive justice, then that changes the scenario entirely. Because it would be like, acting like a judge who sentences a man to prison, is doing so because he just delights in people being in prison. And to do that, you could literally destroy the whole court system of every country. Your whole court system is based on judges that just like sending people into prison and delighting in their being separate from their family. You know, they have a prison lust. Something like that. And that's obviously not what's happening here. This is such a distortion.

This is why when Christians get a question like this, they feel like they have to defend this idea that God just wants to kill. And then they don't want to say that God wants to kill. So, it just gets confusing. What we have to do is challenge the assumption that what's happening on the cross is a blood lust thing and not a justice thing. It's clearly justice. All the scriptures seem to affirm that.

Alisa:

They really do. And I wonder, too, if it has to do with a lowered view of sin. Right? It's like not really viewing God as holy, because, of course, God's holiness, meaning he can't have unity with sin, He cannot abide sin. But of course, tracing the Christian story all the way back to the Garden of Eden, we chose to rebel against God. We chose to introduce sin into the world. And so, now we have a problem, right. We have a problem with being in relationship with God because He is holy. And His Holiness, by the way, is a good thing. You know, a lot of people think, "Well, why can't he just forgive?" But God is a holy God. He can't abide sin. And so, you know, there's this whole undercurrent with the true doctrine that has so much to do with our sinfulness and God's holiness.

But I think you made such a great point that, often when people are coming against, or challenging the historic view of the cross, they're really fighting against the fake version, or a straw man, as it's called. And so, when I'm looking at some of the language that these writers are using, I'm seeing words like hostile, torture, petty, abuser, abhorrent, bloodthirsty. Whereas if you look throughout Scripture, God is described as father, creator, supplier, provider, healer, shepherd. You know, phrases like whipping boy, and child sacrifice, are used to describe Jesus

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and His fate. But that's really just rhetorical and manipulative language that helps construct a logical fallacy. And so, you know, it is much easier to kick down that fake version than it is to deal with the true version, which is that God is this holy God. We're sinners, we want to be reconciled with him, and this was a gift. The cross was a gift for Jesus to take our sins upon himself and pay that price so that we could be reconciled to God, that when God looks at us, he would see the righteousness of God. It's really just such a beautiful picture.

But I think one of the moral objections that gets brought out is that...so I think of it this way, Mike. When I think about people who have wronged me, or sinned against me, particularly my children, right. If one of my kids is rebellious, and just totally disobeyed me, I typically have no problem just forgiving them. I don't feel the need to go find a whipping boy to drag into my house and beat and punish so that my sense of justice can be satisfied. And so, this is a particular moral objection to the atonement that is brought into the conversation. And so, the question is this. If I can just forgive, why can't God? Isn't God morally superior to me? Why can't God just forgive without requiring payment or punishment? So, let's talk about that for a minute.

Mike:

Yeah, and this is a really important issue to talk about. I think we grow a lot in our understanding of God as we press on these issues. It's actually healthy to ask these questions in the right fashion. So, the first thought is just that, you know, substitutionary atonement, you know, the idea that Jesus died for my sins, it doesn't require that God cannot, like he's not able to simply forgive, just because he chooses to. It only requires that God doesn't do that. So, for instance, let me give you an example. God can make a nation of blue giants who live on the moon. But that alone doesn't mean he does that. Like, just because he can, doesn't mean He will. And so, all I really need is to ask, what will God do? In Ezekiel 7:27 God says, "I will do to them according to their way, and according to what they deserve, I will judge them".

So, this was actually the angle Hugo Grotius took. He, you know, tried to do a lot of theology stuff. He said, "Hey, God could just forgive if He wants, but he has good reasons why he's going to exact justice that demonstrates his righteousness, it shows his purity and holiness to the world, it reconciles, you know, sins issues and all that". Now, I would, however, say, I do think God can't just forgive. I would add on to that, I would affirm God will not, cannot, just forgive

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because His justice is part of his holy nature. It's part of God's very goodness. God is holy. This is how Abraham would appeal to God's. "Will not the judge of all the earth do right.?" Like, it's just, it's who you are. Of course, you'll do what's right.

So, it's the same reason I can't lie. It's like a restraint of God's character. It's not that he has any type of power to do something, it's his character is teaching good at all times. So, if God's just he must punish sin. This would be kind of like, imagine, a parent forgives their kids. I get this, and I should. But imagine if the police in your neighborhood just forgave all the criminals. And you realize suddenly that there's different types of relationships in life. A father/child or mother/child relationship, but then there's also a court or government versus perpetrator relationship. And that's a whole different kind of deal.

So, we often see that those who are opposed to penal substitution, they see God as the offended party. And they go, "Why can't He as the offended party just forgive? Why isn't it that easy?" And they don't see God also, as the judge of all the earth. Now the scripture affirms that God is both of these things. So, he's willing to just forgive, however, because he's the judge of the earth, because he's holy, because he has the moral rule of all the universe, he will exact punishment. If he didn't, it would be just as wrong as if your court system shut down and your police went home and said, "We just forgive from now on". It would be an evil society. We would live in an evil universe if God didn't punish them.

Alisa:

Yeah. And often the prodigal son is trotted out in in this type of discussion where they'll say, you look at the parable of the prodigal son where the prodigal gets his inheritance. He goes and he blows it all. And he comes home and what does the father do? The father just runs to greet him and doesn't make him pay the money back. He doesn't go get a whipping boy to satisfy justice. He just forgives. And so often, that's an example that is used to say, Well, of course God can just forgive. Look at this parable Jesus told. But if we really look carefully at that parable, what you see is a father who, yes, he does forgive. But a payment is still made, if you really think about it. Because he had the money. The son took the inheritance and he squandered it. So, the money is gone. And so, I think the parable of the prodigal son is a great metaphor for the cross in a certain way, because it's essentially saying, the one who paid the price was

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actually the father in that in that scenario. Because the money is gone. He's lost that money. He took that hit. He absorbed that debt.

And so, in a way, that's exactly what Jesus did on the cross. You have God becoming man, and saying, I'll pay it. I'm not going to make you pay it. And so, I don't think that that is the best example that is used often to come against this penal substitutionary atonement, because you still have a payment being made. In this case, it was the father, because he is out that money now. He absorbed that debt into himself.

Mike:

Yeah, yeah. It's interesting that I see another tactic I want to point out, because I agree with you totally. We even see, by the way, there is the killing of the fatted calf. And we know, because of the symbolism of the Old Testament, this may actually be layering some symbolism into the prodigal son, about the sacrifice that that happened upon the return. But there's another issue here, which is this. Those who want to use one parable to establish the theology of the cross, sometimes they're doing so as a way of avoiding all the clear teaching passages on the topic. And yeah, it's kind of like a bait-and-switch move that I think we should just recognize.

Alisa:

And there seems to be a real disconnect between the Old Testament and the New Testament. The Old Testament is sort of brushed aside as this kind of archaic, pagan, they didn't have to be doing those sacrifices, the prophets weren't really speaking for God. This was just the best way the Israelites could relate with God with what they knew at the time, with the information they had about God, they were doing their absolute best. But they didn't have to be doing those sacrifices. I've heard this in progressive sermons and in literature all over the place. But if you read the New Testament, and you read it in a plain manner, Jesus saw himself as the ultimate sacrificial lamb, by declaring that he was who Isaiah 53 was talking about. The writer of Hebrews confirms this. Hebrews 9:12 says, "He entered once for all into the holy places, not by means of the blood of goats and calves but by means of his own blood, thus securing an eternal redemption". Hebrews 9:26 says, "He has appeared once and for all, at the end of the ages, to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself". That's what the writers of Hebrews is saying and relating the death of Jesus with that Old Testament sacrificial system that God set up for them.

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In Revelation, Jesus is called the lamb several times. This again is a reference to the Old Testament. Angels and elders are singing to Jesus. In Revelation 5:9, "With your blood you purchased for God persons from every tribe and language and people and nation." Revelation 5:12 continues, "Worthy is the Lamb who was slain". To call on Jesus, the lamb, is a reference back to the Old Testament sacrificial system. We're going to talk in a moment about the wrath of God and how this plays into this whole discussion. We'll be right back.

You're listening to, I Don't Have Enough Faith to Be an Atheist. I'm Alisa Childers and I'm talking with Mike Winger about moral objections to the atonement. We talked about the idea of cosmic child abuse. Is God requiring the sacrifice of his only son abusive in nature? We talked about, why can't God just forgive? If I can just forgive, why can't God? But I think that there's an element of penal substitutionary atonement we haven't really touched on and that is how this all relates with God's wrath. So, the Bible teaches that Jesus' death satisfied the wrath of God. And again, this is a consistent theme that runs from the Old Testament to the New Testament. One quick example is, Colossians 3:6 lists a bunch of sinful things and then says, "Because of these things, the wrath of God is coming on the sons of disobedience." So, Mike, I'll bring you back in here for another moral objection to penal substitutionary atonement. Why does God have wrath? How does that play into this doctrine? How can wrath be a good thing? Is it possible that, in objecting to God's wrath, some people might not really be understanding what it is?

Mike:

Yeah, I think so. And it's actually especially confusing in the circles where they're trying to sort of re-interpret the cross. They re-imagined the meaning of wrath. And they actually try to interpret God's wrath as a new word. When the Bible says wrath, what it really means is the natural consequences of sin. But God's not doing that to you like you just did it to yourself. But there's a problem here. And the Bible, it's the Bible consistently shows God's wrath as, not only being sort of that poetic justice where, you know, you dig a pit you fall into it. But rather also things like Sodom and Gomorrah, or God causing the destruction of Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar, or you know, you name it. There's a lot of examples of God's wrath being poured out.

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So, here's the thing. There are two reasons to have wrath, that I can think of, at least top of my head. One of them is because I'm a jerk. The other one is because you're a jerk, to put it bluntly. I can have wrath because I'm wrong, because I'm overreacting, or reacting wrongly in a situation. I can also have wrath, because the situation is wicked. When I think of sex-trafficking, and someone kidnapping a 12 year old girl, and pumping her full of drugs, and then putting her up for the abuse and sale that goes on during sex-trafficking, I have proper wrath against the guys that do that. That's proper wrath. And so, I think we understand it in some perspective. There's a proper wrath against sin, but we just don't acknowledge how sinful we actually are. It's like, yeah God, go get the sex traffickers. But you know, but I'm not that bad really.

What you mentioned last segment about minimizing. Scripture maximizes the issues of sin. When Jesus was talking about this issue, he used the demonstration of an event that had recently happened, the Tower of Siloam. This tower had fallen and killed people, almost like randomly people dying. In their culture, they seem to think that these people must have been worse sinners than the rest of people. And Jesus says, "Do you think those people were the worst offenders? Is that why they died? They died because they were the worst sinners?" I mean, now, our culture would say, it was purely accident. They didn't do anything wrong. They're innocent. Jesus does the opposite. He actually says, unless you repent, you will die. And so, he's saying, there's a death sentence on mankind because of mankind's wickedness. Now either, God is mean, or man is actually very sinful. I think, God is mean, is logically impossible. I think it's theologically impossible. I think what we're seeing is that mankind is just not recognizing how simple we actually are. God's wrath is proper. It's a good wrath. It's the wrath of the hero against the villain.

Alisa:

Yeah. And I think it's understandable why a lot of Christians are confused about God's wrath. I remember speaking at a church once and a young girl came up to me in tears. And it was about something I had said when I was presenting the gospel, or something like that, at this women's event. And she said, "It's so hard for me to hear words like that, because my dad was very abusive, and he would say things like that". And I in that moment, I thought, Oh, my goodness, I totally understand why that would be so hard to hear something like the phrase, God's wrath. And then immediately, it conjures up memories of an angry father flying into a drunken rage over nothing. I'm sure for others it stirs up childhood feelings of fear and dread over the school

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bully or an abusive teacher. And then even, you know, our human examples of wrath become our understanding of God's wrath, which is an entirely different kind of wrath. I mean, we are told in Colossians 3:8 that human wrath is a sin. It says, "Now you must put them all away; anger, wrath, malice, slander, and obscene talk from your mouth".

But across all the New Testaments, scripture gives us this this metaphor, I think that really helped me understand God's wrath, when I when I started studying this. And so, we go to the scene where the disciples, James and John, were asking Jesus to seat them on his right and left hand in his glory. You know, super humble request there, from James and John. And Jesus responded by telling them they didn't know what they were asking. He said, "Are you able to drink the cup that I drink?" This is in Mark 10. So, just not skipping a beat, they reply, "Oh yeah, we can definitely drink that cup." But clearly, they didn't understand what Jesus was saying. And with no outside context, it might be tough to figure out what Jesus meant by cup.

But you know, as we so often find in the Bible, there's hints all through Old Testament, and later in the New Testament, that gives us clues to what Jesus was talking about. And if we go to the prophet Isaiah, he wrote that, "the people of Jerusalem had drunk from the hand of the Lord the cup of his wrath." And that's Isaiah 51. Jeremiah echoes a similar sentiment there when he says, "Thus the Lord, the God of Israel, said to me, take from my hand this cup of the wine of wrath and make all the nations to whom I send you drink it." during this in Jeremiah 25. And then later in Revelation, we find out that, "Anyone who receives the mark of the beast, will also drink the wine of God's wrath, poured full strength into the cup of his anger." And that's Revelation 14:10. And so, Jesus mentions this cup when he's praying in the Garden of Gethsemane, the night before he faces the cross. He says, "My father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me. Nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will." And that's from Matthew 26.

So, with this biblical understanding of the cup, we can better understand Jesus' anguish in the garden, because he wasn't just asking about the physical suffering he was about to endure. He was getting ready to drink the cup of God's wrath. And this is the cup that God had patiently waited to pour out on his son. And so, when we have it within that context, and like you mentioned, sex-trafficking and things, it's easier for us to imagine wrath for that. But we need to understand that biblically, the wrath of God is not a divine temper tantrum. It's not triggered by these erratic feelings of offense, or by hatred. The wrath of God isn't petty. It's not spiteful.

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It's actually controlled. It's the controlled and righteous judgment of anything that opposes the Lord's perfect nature and his perfect love.

And I've often thought about this, that we should actually be really thankful for the wrath of God, because the wrath of God means that there will be justice for the victims of sex-trafficking. It means that there will be justice for the victims of the Holocaust. The wrath of God means that ISIS won't get away with it. It means that one day, all evil, all sin will be quarantined away, and those who have put their trust in Jesus will be entirely separated from wickedness, and completely safe from suffering and corruption forever. And so, in that way, we can see that God's wrath exists because he is love.

And there was a Croatian theologian that made this point so well. This is quoted a lot, but I'm just going to quote it here because it makes such a good point. This is Miroslav Volf. And he wrote this after witnessing the horrors of the Bosnian War. And so, he said this. He said, "I used to think that wrath was unworthy of God. Isn't God love? Shouldn't divine love be beyond wrath? God is love, and God loves every person and every creature. That's exactly why God is wrathful against some of them. My last resistance to the idea of God's wrath was a casualty of the war in the former Yugoslavia, the region from which I come. According to some estimates, 200,000 people were killed and over 3,000,000 were displaced. My villages and cities were destroyed, my people shelled day in and day out, some of them brutalized beyond imagination, and I could not imagine God not being angry. Or think of Rwanda in the last decade of the past century, where 800,000 people were hacked to death in one hundred days! How did God react to the carnage? By doting on the perpetrators in a grandparently fashion? By refusing to condemn the bloodbath but instead affirming the perpetrators' basic goodness. Wasn't God fiercely angry with them? Though I used to complain about the indecency of the idea of God's wrath, I came to think that I would have to rebel against a God who wasn't wrathful at the sight of the world's evil. God isn't wrathful in spite of being love. God is wrathful because God is love." And so, in that sense, we should be grateful for God's wrath, shouldn't we, Mike?

Mike:

I think absolutely. So, I think the hard part is realizing that that wrath is, in some sense, being stored up for me personally. And some people, like you said, the girl you mentioned, maybe it's feeling like that means God rejects me. Doesn't want me around. But that's exactly the opposite

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of the meaning of the cross. The cross is saying that Jesus bore the wrath of God that we might come to God. God is the one who's on his way to judge his enemies, and he says, "Wait, I won't go yet. Instead, I will send my son to take the punishment for their sin, because I so want to forgive them. Yes, I have proper wrath, but I also have incredible love for them." And so, we see in Jesus, the accomplishment of God's holiness and justice, the fulfillment of even God's wrath against sin, that sinners who maybe feel rejected by God, they find out that they can be accepted by God, through Christ.

This is why Romans 5:9, it says, "Since therefore we've now been justified by His blood, much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath of God." This is God saving us from the rightful consequences of our own sin. He loves us so much. There's two ways to see our sinfulness. We look at our sinfulness and we think, "Oh, woe is me. God must not love me." But then we see the cross. We realized, wow, with me being this wrong, this sinful and deserving God's wrath and him doing that for me, how much must he love me? How much must he care for me? You know, we lose our love for the sex-trafficker. God says, "I can even redeem him. I can even redeem him, and I will make a way." And when we realized this, it blows my mind. The cross is the most beautiful thing I've ever seen.

Alisa:

I totally agree, and a robust theology of the cross is what's going to withstand the storms, the sufferings, the persecutions, and the hardships that Jesus promised would confront those who are his true followers. We're about out of time, but if you want to connect with Mike, check out his website biblethinker.org. We have barely scratched the surface of this topic, so I encourage you to check out all of Mike's video series on penal substitutionary atonement. So much great content on his website and YouTube channel. Connect with me at alisachilders.com, where I blog and have a podcast. We'll see you next time.

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