

Beholding Christ at the Lord's Table: Substitution in the Old Testament

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*And can it be, that I should gain an interest in the Savior's blood?
Died he for me, who caused his pain? For me, who him to death pursued?
Amazing love! How can it be that thou, my God, shouldst die for me!
Amazing love! How can it be that thou, my God, shouldst die for me!
-- Charles Wesley, "And Can It Be That I Should Gain" --*

Substitution stands at the heart of cross---the innocent dying in place of the guilty, the righteous for the unrighteous, the sinless for the sinful. English hymnody is filled with this truth, because the Bible repeats the emphasis---Jesus Christ, sinless son of God, laid down his life in the place of his beloved. Thus, when we come to the Lord's Table we remember his death *in our place*.

In recent years, there has been no little debate about this truth. More than a few books have been penned arguing against this idea. Negatively, some have said "penal substitution" (the more technical term) smacks of divine retribution and posits an angry, blood-thirsty God. Other, more constructively, argue that Christ's death came to defeat the powers and principalities (Christus Victor) and give a moral example of love. To the latter, we can wholeheartedly affirm-Jesus did come to defeat the devil (1 John 3:8) and provide an example of holy love (1 Peter 2:21). But he did so by nailing his people's sin to the cross, disarming the devil (Colossians 2:13-15) and providing an atonement for those who would follow him (read the context of 1 Peter 2:21, esp. v. 24).

Therefore, to pit penal substitution against any other aspect of the cross obscures the necessity and beauty of Christ's death *in our place*. In fact, it is by remembering Christ's substitution that we rightly understand God's love (1 John 4:8-10), and how a holy, triune God reconciles sinners to himself. Therefore, as we approach the Lord's Table this Sunday, let us consider three Old Testament passages teach penal substitution and which prepare our hearts to worship the Son of God who gladly took our sin on his shoulders and died in our place.

Three Old Testament Precursors

Genesis 22

Substitution goes back to the book of Genesis. When God demanded the life of Isaac, God also (at the right time) provided a substitute. In an event that would inform the sacrificial system

and location of the temple (see 2 Chronicle 3:1), God demonstrated the way in which substitution would be needed for his people to enjoy his blessings.

In the case of Abraham and Isaac, the patriarch was promised cosmic blessings through the heritage of his son. Yet, as the Scripture makes abundantly clear, no sinner can abide in the blessings of God *without atonement*. Until Genesis 22 none of Abraham's sins had been punished or paid for through a substitutionary atonement. Yes, Abraham's faith was credited to him as righteousness (Genesis 15:6), but justification by faith cannot make sin disappear--not without atonement. And hence the story of Isaac's rescue by the ram caught in the thicket provides a temporary solution to that problem.

In Genesis God provided a substitute for Abraham's beloved son. The blameless lamb is caught in the thicket and sacrificed on Mount Moriah. Accordingly, Isaac is spared, the promise of blessing is preserved and even strengthened by God's oath. This event introduces substitution into the Old Testament and shed light backwards on the sacrifices by God (with the animal skins, 3:21), by Abel, and by Noah. It also shines light forward to the sacrificial system, codified in Leviticus.

Leviticus 1-7, 16

After the tabernacle is constructed (Exodus 25-40), the system of sacrifice is explained (Leviticus 1-7). And here in repeated fashion the pattern of sacrifice is taught. Israelites, in need of forgiveness and cleansing, would bring their sacrifice as an offering to be slaughtered in their place. Substitution is seen in the ways that Israelites would place their hands on the animal's head. The symbolism is that of transference---the sinner imputed his guilt to the spotless animal; the animal in turn took the place of man and his family. This repeats in Leviticus 1-7 and finds its crescendo in Leviticus 16, the Day of Atonement.

On this holy day, the priest would take the place of all Israel and enter the holy of holies. He would sprinkle the mercy seat with blood to cleanse God's dwelling place from the pollution Israel's sin has caused during the previous year. The blood came from a lamb who was substituted for the people; the meaning of this death is further explained in that a second lamb ("a scapegoat") was sent into the wilderness, indicating the removal of guilt provided by the other lamb. In short, substitution stood at the heart of the sacrificial system.

Isaiah 53

Finally, building on this pattern of substitution, Isaiah 53 uses graphic language to depict the substitution of God's Suffering Servant. Set in a context where the benevolent service of Cyrus (Isaiah 45:1) failed to bring spiritual renewal to Israel, this greater servant would bring *shalom* by dying in the place of his new covenant people. As the New Testament indicates, the blood of bulls and goats was never intended to take away the sins of the people. It was meant to foreshadow the Lord Jesus Christ who would die in the place of his people.

Bridging the gap between the Old Testament sacrifices and God's Son is Isaiah 53, the most explicit passage on penal substitution in all the Bible. Connecting with Leviticus, Isaiah 53:10 speaks of the Servant as "an offering for guilt" (i.e., a guilt offering). And looking forward to the New Testament, most scholars see Jesus's words in Matthew 20:28 and Mark 10:45 ("I have not come to be served, but to serve and to give my life as a ransom for many") as an intentional echo of Isaiah 53:11: "by his knowledge shall the righteous one, my servant, make many to be accounted righteous, and he shall bear their iniquities."

Still, it is Isaiah 53:4-6 which most explicitly describes the substitution of the righteous servant dying in the place of God's sinful people.

Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned—every one—to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.

The drumbeat of traded pronouns in this passage highlights the centrality of substitution. By *his* crushing, *his* chastisement, *his* wounding, and *his* death, we have been forgiven, healed, and given peace from all of *our* guilt, *our* grief, and *our* sorrow. Indeed, because Isaiah 53 stands behind so much of the New Testament's understanding of the cross, we find in this passage the key teaching about substitution—it pleased the Father to bruise the son, so that by the death of 'his seed,' the Son might receive a boundless posterity. At the same time, pleased to do his Father's will, Jesus Christ gladly laid down his life to pay the penalty for his people.

Substitution in the Lord's Table

I don't think it's too much to say that at the Lord's Table, we are also watching substitution at work. Visually, when the bread is broken and the cup is poured, we are watching elements which represent the body and blood of Jesus. It was his life that was broken, his life-blood poured out in our place. What punishment we merited through our sins, he accepted in our place. As the sacrificial system taught, sinners were deserving of death. Those who broke covenant with God, deserved to have their blood poured out. Yet, by means of a gracious provision, the Lord preserved and protected his people.

In the Old Testament, these types and shadows pointed forward to the cross of Christ. Now in the bread and wine, we find a retrospective type symbolizing the same. Christ is the substitute who died in our place, and we who have life by his death, honor his sacrifice by eating and drinking the food he provided. On the cross, he thirsted so that we would not have to. Instead, by his substitutionary death we are promised milk (Isaiah 55:1-3) and wine (Amos 9:11-15) in the age to come. Now, in anticipation of that, we eat.

The Lord's table looks back to his substitutionary provision and looks forward to the accomplishment of that same substitution. It is a meal that reminds us of our sin before a holy God, and that same God's gracious provision of his Son. The Lord's Table proclaims to us the death of Christ, and interpreted with our eyes to the Scripture, we are reminded of Christ's precious substitution.

As you prepare for the Lord's table this Sunday, consider this wonderful fact, the sinless son of God gave his life in our place to forgive us our sins and bring us to the Father. This is what penal substitution teaches, and among other things what the Lord's Supper proclaims.

Soli Deo Gloria, ds