

PSA Examined**Article Series:**

**Article #16:
Did God ever
Punish the
Innocent in the
Bible?**



PSA series â?? Did God Ever Punish the Innocent for the Sins of the Wicked in the Bible?

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Welcome to the 16th article in this series investigating PSA (

Penal Substitutionary Atonement), and this time itâ??s a big one. This article will examine exactly what the title says, which just happens to be the 3rd pillar that PSA rests on.

As covered in the [intro article](#), PSAâ??s 3rd pillar is this:

1. It is acceptable for God to punish an innocent substitute instead of the man guilty of sin, provided that all three of the following conditions are met:
 1. The substitute is of the same nature as the guilty. (*which is why animals wonâ??t do*)
 2. The substitute is 100% righteous with no sin whatsoever. (*Otherwise his own sin would need to be punished*)
 3. The substitute is voluntary.

Weâ??ll examine if the core premise is accurate first. If it proves accurate, then weâ??ll examine the three conditions afterward. Obviously if the core premise doesnâ??t prove accurate, we wonâ??t need to examine the three conditions.

Did God Ever Punish the Innocent for the Sins of the Wicked in the Bible?

There are many places in the Bible where PSA supporters will claim that God does do this. **It should be noted that not all PSA supporters will claim this though.** Some do, but many don't. Many will claim that Jesus was a unique and special case and the normal rules don't apply to Him. We'll look at both positions, starting with the examples that some PSA supporters will use to say that God did punish the innocent for the sins of the wicked in scripture. Those who hold this position will then say it establishes the precedent that God could punish Jesus for our sins.

Visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children

This is often the go-to passage for this.

Exodus 20:1-7

1 Then God spoke all these words, saying,

2 I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.

3 You shall have no other gods before Me.

4 You shall not make for yourself an idol, or any likeness of what is in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the water under the earth. 5 You shall not worship them or serve them; for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, visiting the **iniquity (avon) of the fathers on the children, on the third and the fourth generations of those who hate Me**, 6 but showing lovingkindness to thousands, to those who love Me and keep My commandments.

7 You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain, for the LORD will not leave him unpunished who takes His name in vain.

The same sentiment is repeated several times in scripture with the same basic phrasing, at least for the words that matter. Those other places are:

- Deuteronomy 5:9
- Exodus 34:7
- Numbers 14:18
- Jeremiah 32:18

Now, the important word for this discussion is the word translated "iniquity", which is the Hebrew word אָוֹן (avon). We did an extensive study of this word in the article: [How To Do a Word Study of a Greek or Hebrew Word in the Bible](#). You're welcome to read that article for the evidence, but the recap is that it has three primary meanings:

1. Iniquity (*generally, as a synonym for sin*)

2. Guilt from committing iniquity
3. **Consequences of iniquity**

It's that last one that's important.

Notably, **punishment for iniquity** is most definitely not a potential meaning of **avon**. Again, please see the article linked just above for the evidence of that. As a short summary, the biblical usage makes it impossible that **punishment** is part of the meaning of **avon**, even though some will claim that punishment is a part of it. Instead, **Consequences of iniquity** seems to fit the context best.

Here's the verse again with that understanding:

Exodus 20:1-7

1 Then God spoke all these words, saying,

2 "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.

3 "You shall have no other gods before Me.

4 "You shall not make for yourself an idol, or any likeness of what is in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the water under the earth. 5 "You shall not worship them or serve them; for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, visiting the **consequences of iniquity (avon)** of the fathers on the children, on the third and the fourth generations of those who hate Me, 6 but showing lovingkindness to thousands, to those who love Me and keep My commandments.

7 "You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain, for the LORD will not leave him unpunished who takes His name in vain.

For readability's sake, it would be better to translate it this way:

visiting the consequences of the fathers' iniquity on the children.

(That's just as literal because **avon** is in the Hebrew construct state indicating its association with other words in the sentence but I'll skip the Hebrew grammar lesson today.)

Consequences are very different than punishment.

We talked about this at length in [the article on death in this PSA series](#). Here's the example used in that article to illustrate the difference:

- If a father tells his son not to touch the hot stove and the son touches it anyway, he'll be burned. He'll be burned regardless of whether the father knows of him touching it or not because it's the nature of hot things to burn skin. Thus, the son

being burned is a natural consequence of touching a hot stove, not a punishment from the father for touching the hot stove.

- Conversely, if the father tells the son not to go outside to play until all the chores are done, there are no naturally bad consequences if the son disobeys, like there are with the hot stove example. However, if the father sees the son playing outside when the chores aren't done, he might ground the son for the rest of the day as a punishment for disobedience.

When we're looking at cross-generational consequences, the consequences look a bit different. For example, if the father is a drunkard that beats his children, that will affect the children greatly. **That effect on the children does tend to take several generations to shake itself out.** Now, I think that's pretty self-evident so I won't go posting studies in support of it because I think it'll be uncontroversial. *(If you think that a drunken father beating his children doesn't affect the children or grandchildren, please let me know why in the comments.)*

Importantly, this appears to be a warning to the Israelites.

This is merely my understanding, but God appears to be warning the Israelites, effectively saying: *“If you sin by serving other Gods, the consequences of that sin will harm your children.”* We see this being the case all throughout the Old Testament in Israel's history. The fathers turned toward idols, which consequently caused the sons to turn toward idols as well. Thus, the father's sin affected the sons throughout many generations.

Additionally, if someone sinned enough for God to judge that man, that would affect his children for many generations. If a man sinned and God struck him dead, don't you think that would affect his children, grandchildren, and even great grandchildren? Again, the consequences affected the descendants, but the descendants weren't punished.

(Stepping away from pure theology for a moment, this seems like God appealing to the father's hearts. He was telling the Israelites what disobedience would cost them and how it would hurt their children, which will catch the attention of any good father. I could be wrong about that, but it would make perfect sense.)

This distinction of punishment versus consequences will be important moving forward.

Yes, God set up the world in such a way that our father's sins affect us, but that doesn't mean that the effects are a punishment.

Now, we're going to move through these next ones rather quickly because honestly, most of them are reaching so far as to be absurd. A careful reading of the text and a modicum of critical thought is enough to dispel almost all of them; only a few will need deeper study.

The Israelites wandering around the desert for 40 years

You know the story. Israel sent 12 spies into the promised land, but 10 of them panicked and convinced Israel to disobey God by not going into the land. God's response is as follows:

Numbers 14:22-33

22 Surely all the men who have seen My glory and My signs which I performed in Egypt and in the wilderness, yet have put Me to the test these ten times and have not listened to My voice, **23** shall by no means see the land which I swore to their fathers, nor shall any of those who spurned Me see it.

â?!

29 your corpses will fall in this wilderness, even all your numbered men, according to your complete number from twenty years old and upward, who have grumbled against Me. **30** Surely you shall not come into the land in which I swore to settle you, except Caleb the son of Jephunneh and Joshua the son of Nun. **31** Your children, however, whom you said would become a prey I will bring them in, and they will know the land which you have rejected. **32** But as for you, your corpses will fall in this wilderness. **33** Your sons shall be shepherds for forty years in the wilderness, and they will suffer for your unfaithfulness, until your corpses lie in the wilderness.

The argument goes that God punished the sons for the sins of their fathers in verse 33. **I believe the previous section explains this one perfectly.** The fathers sinned, and the consequences of their sin unfortunately fell on the children. (*This is actually a case of God judging by giving the people what they wanted. They didn't want to enter the promised land, so God said they wouldn't.*)

Notice too that the innocent parties, Joshua and Caleb, weren't punished for the rest of Israel's sins. Neither were the children. **The clear thrust of the passage is that the sinners were judged, but the innocent here defined as those under 20 years old, plus Joshua and Caleb won't be judged.** Notice too that women weren't mentioned, likely because they couldn't make decisions for the community and thus had no guilt.

Further, God couldn't bring the children into the promised land immediately. Consider what would've happened if all the men from 20 years and up just suddenly died? The nation of Israel would've died off in short order.

So no, this isn't God punishing the children for the sins of the fathers.

Sodom and Gomorrah

Most of you know the story, so I'll only quote the relevant bit below.

Genesis 18:20-33

20 And the LORD said, The outcry of Sodom and Gomorrah is indeed great, and their sin is exceedingly grave. **21** I will go down now, and see if they have done entirely according to its outcry, which has come to Me; and if not, I will know.â?•

22 Then the men turned away from there and went toward Sodom, while Abraham was still standing before the LORD. **23** Abraham came near and said, "Will You indeed sweep away the righteous with the wicked?" **24** "Suppose there are fifty righteous within the city; will You indeed sweep it away and not spare the place for the sake of the fifty righteous who are in it?" **25** "Far be it from You to do such a thing, to slay the righteous with the wicked, so that the righteous and the wicked are treated alike. Far be it from You! Shall not the Judge of all the earth deal justly?" **26** So the LORD said, "If I find in Sodom fifty righteous within the city, then I will spare the whole place on their account." **27** And Abraham replied, "Now behold, I have ventured to speak to the Lord, although I am but dust and ashes." **28** "Suppose the fifty righteous are lacking five, will You destroy the whole city because of five?" And He said, "I will not destroy it if I find forty-five there." **29** He spoke to Him yet again and said, "Suppose forty are found there?" And He said, "I will not do it on account of the forty." **30** Then he said, "Oh may the Lord not be angry, and I shall speak; suppose thirty are found there?" And He said, "I will not do it if I find thirty there." **31** And he said, "Now behold, I have ventured to speak to the Lord; suppose twenty are found there?" And He said, "I will not destroy it on account of the twenty." **32** Then he said, "Oh may the Lord not be angry, and I shall speak only this once; suppose ten are found there?" And He said, "I will not destroy it on account of the ten." **33** As soon as He had finished speaking to Abraham the LORD departed, and Abraham returned to his place.

Notably, God apparently didn't find 10 righteous people within the city. Also notable, God intentionally extracted the only righteous people in the city — Lot and his family — from the city via angels before destroying the city. Thus, this idea that God destroyed the righteous with the wicked simply isn't supported by the text.

Again, it pays to read the text *carefully*.

Closing the wombs

In Genesis 20, we find the famous "She's my sister" story about Abraham. Abraham worried that someone might kill him to take Sarah because Sarah was apparently gorgeous, so he and Sarah tell everyone that she was his sister. King Abimelech then marries Sarah not knowing she's Abraham's wife. God shows up and tells Abimelech who then makes it right.

That story ends with this:

Genesis 20:17-18

17 Abraham prayed to God, and God healed Abimelech and his wife and his maids, so that they bore children. **18** For the LORD had closed fast all the wombs of the household of Abimelech because of Sarah, Abraham's wife.

The word translated "maids" there is *amah*, and it's used thusly in the very next chapter:

Genesis 21:9-10

9 Now Sarah saw **the son of Hagar** the Egyptian, whom she had borne to Abraham, mocking. **10** Therefore she said to Abraham, **Drive out this maid (amah) and her son, for the son of this maid (amah) shall not be an heir with my son Isaac.**

Hagar was Abraham's concubine (*a wife who was also a slave; see [this article](#) for evidence of that*). That same word is used of some women in Abimelech's household, meaning they were almost certainly his concubines. We can't be 100% sure, but it's very likely.

Remember, everyone in Abimelech's household would've been treating Sarah like Abimelech's wife.

This isn't a case of the wives being punished for the husband's sin because they were treating her like his wife too.

Saul's sons and the Gibeonites

This one actually features in my article: [The Biggest Mistakes Most People Make When Studying the Bible](#). The long-form evidence will be in that article if you want to go read it; I'll only post the short-form evidence here. Spoiler: The trouble is that people don't read the text *carefully*.

2 Samuel 21:1

Now there was a famine in the days of David for three years, year after year; and David sought the presence of the LORD. And **the LORD said, It is for Saul and his bloody house (bayith), because he put the Gibeonites to death.**

To summarize verses 2-5, David goes to the Gibeonites and asks what they want to make it right. They respond:

2 Samuel 21:6

let seven men from his [Saul's] sons be given to us, and we will hang them before the LORD in Gibeah of Saul, the chosen of the LORD. And the king said, **I will give them.**

Now, there are two things that PSA supporters will point to.

1. The famine because of Saul's actions
2. The death of Saul's sons, seemingly because of his father's actions

We'll knock them out quickly. And honestly, a little common sense when reading goes a long way.

The famine because of Saul's actions

Context: During the conquest of Israel in Joshua 9, the Gibeonites realized they were in trouble, dressed like travelers from a distant country, and then tricked the Israelites into the nation of Israel into making a covenant with them so that Israel wouldn't destroy them. **Importantly, one nation made a covenant with another nation.**

A little common sense goes a long way here.

Saul didn't show up and slaughter the Gibeonites by himself because they were a whole nation. Saul would've showed up with Israel's army. Thus, the nation of Israel broke their covenant with the nation of Gibeon not to kill them, so God punished the nation.

Again, a little common sense goes a long way.

The death of Saul's sons, seemingly because of his father's actions

Again, Saul didn't kill a whole nation by himself. He showed up with the army, and we know from Saul's life that he went to battle with his sons. This is confirmed by two things: the Hebrew grammar and the Old Testament context.

The word "house" in the verse above is ([בַּיִת/bayith](#)), which is the same word that's often translated "household". (Again, evidence in [this article](#).) We know from other places that Saul went to war with his sons, so Saul's household including his sons participated in the slaughter of the Gibeonites. Thus, **far from punishing Saul's sons for Saul's sin, Saul's sons were instead being punished because they helped their father attempt to commit genocide.**

That's a little different, isn't it?

For the Hebrew grammar, we'll look at the passage again:

2 Samuel 21:1

Now there was a famine in the days of David for three years, year after year; and David sought the presence of the LORD. And the LORD said, "It is for Saul and his bloody house (bayith), because **he put** the Gibeonites **to death**."

The phrase "he put to death" is a single word in Hebrew. Importantly, it's in the Hiphil form, which we've looked at several times in this series. To recap, the Hebrew Hiphil form signifies "causative action". That is, the person might not have done the action himself, but he did cause the action to happen. If we include that in the verse, we get something like this:

2 Samuel 21:1

Now there was a famine in the days of David for three years, year after year; and David sought the presence of the LORD. And the LORD said, "It is for Saul and his bloody house, because **he caused** the Gibeonites **to be put to death.**"

Again, this indicates that while Saul was the driving force behind the attempted genocide, he wasn't necessarily the one swinging the sword. Israel's army and Saul's sons were swinging swords though. The guilty were punished, not the innocent.

Achan's family

In Joshua 6, right after the conquest of Jericho, Israel attempts to capture the city of Ai. They fail, and ask God why. God replies that Israel broke their covenant by taking things that they shouldn't have taken. When Israel finds out who, this happens:

Joshua 6:19-26

19 Then Joshua said to **Achan**, "My son, I implore you, give glory to the LORD, the God of Israel, and give praise to Him; and tell me now what you have done. Do not hide it from me."
20 So **Achan answered Joshua and said**, "Truly, I have sinned against the LORD, the God of Israel, and this is what I did: **21** when I saw among the spoil a beautiful mantle from Shinar and two hundred shekels of silver and a bar of gold fifty shekels in weight, then I coveted them and took them; and behold, **they are concealed in the earth inside my tent with the silver underneath it.**"

22 So Joshua sent messengers, and they ran to the tent; and behold, it was concealed in his tent with the silver underneath it. **23** They took them from inside the tent and brought them to Joshua and to all the sons of Israel, and they poured them out before the LORD. **24** Then **Joshua and all Israel with him, took Achan** the son of Zerah, the silver, the mantle, the bar of gold, **his sons, his daughters**, his oxen, his donkeys, his sheep, his tent and all that belonged to him; and they brought them up to the valley of Achor. **25** Joshua said, "Why have you troubled us? The LORD will trouble you this day."
And all Israel stoned them with stones; and they burned them with fire after they had stoned them with stones. **26** They raised over him a great heap of stones that stands to this day, and the LORD turned from the fierceness of His anger. Therefore the name of that place has been called the valley of Achor to this day.

The argument goes that Achan's sons and daughters were punished because of Achan's sin. However, a little common sense dispels that completely because the forbidden items were buried in his tent. You can't just up and start digging holes in the earth in your tent without everyone else noticing. Everyone in the tent which is everyone that was stoned knew.

They knew that Achan had broken God's command because they couldn't have missed him digging in the tent to hide the stuff.

Thus, they broke God's command too. Now, you might think the penalty was harsh, but you simply can't say that the other people in the tent didn't know. They did know, and thus they weren't punished for Achan's sins; they were punished for their own sin.

David's census

In 1 Chronicles 21 and 2 Samuel 14, we have the story of how David conducted a census of Israel, which angered God and eventually resulted in a plague on Israel.

1 Chronicles 21:1-8

1 Then Satan stood up against Israel and moved David to number Israel. 2 So David said to Joab and to the princes of the people, "Go, number Israel from Beersheba even to Dan, and bring me word that I may know their number." 3 Joab said, "May the LORD add to His people a hundred times as many as they are! But, my lord the king, are they not all my lord's servants? Why does my lord seek this thing? Why should he be a cause of guilt to Israel?" 4 Nevertheless, the king's word prevailed against Joab. Therefore, Joab departed and went throughout all Israel, and came to Jerusalem. 5 Joab gave the number of the census of all the people to David. And all Israel were 1,100,000 men who drew the sword; and Judah was 470,000 men who drew the sword. 6 But he did not number Levi and Benjamin among them, for the king's command was abhorrent to Joab.

7 God was displeased with this thing, so He struck Israel. 8 David said to God, "I have sinned greatly, in that I have done this thing. But now, please take away the iniquity of Your servant, for I have done very foolishly."

Something to point out: It was obvious that what David was doing was wrong. (*We won't sidetrack in this article to discuss why since it's irrelevant to PSA.*) Joab knew it was wrong, and in verse 3, he specifically says that it will "be a cause of guilt to Israel". Not just David, to Israel.

Now, the PSA argument is that the people were punished for David's sin.

To put it bluntly, that's absurd.

Why?

Because it's a **census**. The people participated **by definition**.

It was clearly known to be wrong, yet David commanded it and Joab even objected, but then did it anyway. The whole nation took part in a census, and so the whole nation was struck. Yes, David incited the census, but the people followed him into doing something they knew was wrong.

So no, this isn't God punishing the innocent for the sins of the guilty.

Illegitimate children can't enter the assembly of the LORD

Here's the verse:

Deuteronomy 23:1-3

1 No one who is emasculated or has his male organ cut off shall enter the assembly of the LORD. 2 No one of illegitimate birth shall enter the assembly of the LORD; none of his descendants, even to the tenth generation, shall enter the assembly of the LORD. 3 No Ammonite or Moabite shall enter the assembly of the LORD; none of their descendants, even to the tenth generation, shall ever enter the assembly of the LORD

The argument goes that the innocent child is being punished for the sin of the parents. However, there's nuance.

First, the phrase "assembly of the Lord" has two uses with no differentiation between them. The first use is to refer to all of Israel, generally the men. This use wouldn't make sense because a foreigner could join Israel. We see this with Ruth, and Jesus mentions it in the New Testament as well.

Matthew 23:15

15 Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, because you travel around on sea and land to make one proselyte; and when he becomes one, you make him twice as much a son of hell as yourselves.

The word translated "proselyte" is *προσelytos* ([proselytos](#)), and here's the relevant short definition from Thayer's lexicon:

2. a proselyte, i. e. **one who has come over from a Gentile religion to Judaism**

Thus, it was certainly possible for a foreigner to become a member of Israel, and thus the "assembly of the Lord".

That makes the second use more likely, that of a council that made decisions for Israel. We see this kind of use in places like:

- Judges 20:2 (*and following*) where it was a council that decided to go to war.
- Judges 21:5 (*and following*) where it decided what to do in the aftermath of the war.
- 1 Kings 12:20 where it chose a king
- Micah 2:5 where it seemingly involved in land distribution. (*It's not perfectly clear*)

Remember that Israel was an ethnic nation at the time. Thus, bloodlines mattered. They didn't want non-Israelites making decisions for Israel. We actually do something similar today in the United States, where someone must be a "natural born Citizen" in order to become President. It wasn't a

punishment then any more than it is now.

David and Bathsheba's son

You know the story. David commits adultery with Bathsheba, then she gets pregnant, then David has her husband murdered, then Nathan the prophet comes to David and calls him out for his sin. There are more consequences than just this one, but it's the one that's relevant for this article.

2 Samuel 12:13-14

13 Then David said to Nathan, "I have sinned against the LORD." And Nathan said to David, "The LORD also has taken away your sin; you shall not die. **14** However, **because by this deed you have given occasion to the enemies of the LORD to blaspheme, the child also that is born to you shall surely die.**"

The argument goes that because David repented, God decided to punish David's child with death instead of punishing David himself. Further, some argue that because David's child was a baby, he was completely innocent, which they say establishes the precedent that God punishes innocent people for wicked people's sins.

However, this verse cannot properly be understood without finishing the story.

Just a few verses later, we get this.

2 Samuel 12:21-23

21 Then his servants said to him, "What is this thing that you have done? While the child was alive, you fasted and wept; but when the child died, you arose and ate food." **22** He said, "While the child was *still* alive, I fasted and wept; for I said, 'Who knows, the LORD may be gracious to me, that the child may live.' **23** **But now he has died; why should I fast? Can I bring him back again? I will go to him, but he will not return to me.**"

If the only thing we look at is this life, then perhaps PSA has a point. However, a careful reading reveals something else. David had been forgiven and the baby was dead. The only sense in which David could "go to him" is that after death, they would be in the same place. Given that David was forgiven and was "a man after God's own heart", we can be sure he was saved and ended up in God's presence after death.

Thus, the same is true of the baby.

The phrase "I will go to him" establishes something very important: the baby went to heaven.

We'll come back to that in a moment.

Equally important is that throughout the entire event, the text never says that the baby was punished. Never. Not even once. It doesn't even hint that that's the case.

Again, we need to read the text *carefully*.

To say that the baby was punished instead of David is reading the PSA position into the text because scripture does tell us why the baby died, and it's not an example of punishment transference.

2 Samuel 12:14 (NKJV)

14 However, **because by this deed you have given great occasion to the enemies of the LORD to blaspheme**, the child also *who is* born to you shall surely die. •

God didn't say: "Your son will bear your punishment," or "Your son will die instead of you", or anything else to indicate substitution. There isn't even a *hint* that the baby is being punished. Also, don't forget that the baby went directly to heaven to be in God's presence. I fail to see how taking a baby directly to heaven to be in God's presence could be a punishment from God.

That's not to say that this isn't a hard event. Honestly, I struggle somewhat with this event and reconciling it with the rest of scripture. Perhaps one day I'll go through it in detail, but that won't be today. **Today, it's sufficient for this series to say that this isn't an example of penal substitution.**

Thus, we'll move on.

Recap

and that's it.

There are, of course, other places that some use to argue that God punishes one person for another person's sins. However, most of them are (1) not God doing it, or (2) relate to national punishments on the whole nation. There are others, but most of them are more obvious than the above and can be solved by a careful reading of the text.

Next, we'll move on to the second group of PSA-believing Christians, the ones who say that Jesus is a special case.

Jesus: Special Case or Special Pleading?

For those of you who aren't familiar with logical fallacies, there is a logical fallacy called "special pleading", and that's what the heading refers to. Here's the definition, and also an example from LogicallyFallacious.com, the **red** emphasis is mine. (*If that wasn't obvious by now.*)

Description: Applying standards, principles, and/or rules to other people or circumstances, while making oneself or certain circumstances exempt from the same critical criteria, **without providing adequate justification**. Special pleading is often a result of strong emotional beliefs that interfere with reason.

Logical Form:

If X then Y, but not when it hurts my position.

[Source.](#)

The website has two examples, but I'll just quote the second for space reasons:

Example #2:

Superstition is a belief or practice resulting from ignorance, fear of the unknown, trust in magic or chance, or a false conception of causation — unless it is astrology.

[Source.](#)

That same page also points out something that will be important for this article:

Exception: **Adequate justification is subjective, and can be argued.**

That leads us back to the question in the heading: Is Jesus a legitimate special case/exception, or is the PSA position engaging in special pleading?

We'll look at that in a minute, but we'll look at the "normal" cases first.

Normal cases

Generally speaking, Christians will agree that one man shouldn't be punished for the sins of another. That's because the Bible condemns this concept many times in many places. What follows is a list of the clearest ones, though there are more that are less clear.

Deuteronomy 24:16

16 Fathers shall not be put to death for *their* sons, nor shall sons be put to death for *their* fathers; everyone shall be put to death for his own sin.

While this isn't universal, it does seem to establish precedent that one man shouldn't be punished for another man's sins. This verse is also referenced in 2 Kings 14:6, where the new king, Amaziah, doesn't put to death the sons of those who had killed his father.

Another example:

Jeremiah 31:27-30

27 Behold, days are coming, declares the LORD, when I will sow the house of Israel and the house of Judah with the seed of man and with the seed of beast. **28** As I have watched over them to pluck up, to break down, to overthrow, to destroy and to bring disaster, so I will watch over them to build and to plant, declares the LORD.

29 In those days they will not say again,
The fathers have eaten sour grapes,
And the children's teeth are set on edge.

30 But everyone will die for his own iniquity; each man who eats the sour grapes, his teeth will be set on edge.

Again, we see God repudiating the idea that sons can be punished for their father's sins. He even devotes a whole chapter to this idea in Ezekiel 18. I recommend that you read the entire chapter which you can do [here](#) but a concise excerpt is below.

Ezekiel 18:19-20 (NKJV)

19 Yet you say, Why should the son not bear the guilt of the father? Because the son has done what is lawful and right, and has kept all My statutes and observed them, he shall surely live. **20** The soul who sins shall die. The son shall not bear the guilt of the father, nor the father bear the guilt of the son. The righteousness of the righteous shall be upon himself, and the wickedness of the wicked shall be upon himself.

Now, that's in the NKJV because it's better translated than my usual NASB 95. For completeness and transparency, here's the NASB 95, which is even more damning to PSA, even though it isn't translated as well.

Ezekiel 18:19-20 (NASB 95)

19 Yet you say, Why should the son not bear the punishment for the father's iniquity? When the son has practiced justice and righteousness and has observed all My statutes and done them, he shall surely live. **20** The person who sins will die. The son will not bear the punishment for the father's iniquity, nor will the father bear the punishment for the son's iniquity; the righteousness of the righteous will be upon himself, and the wickedness of the wicked will be upon himself.

The word that the NASB 95 translates punishment is *avon*, and we looked at it very deeply in [the article on how to do a word study](#). It does not and cannot mean punishment. Even if it could, that just makes the case against PSA stronger.

God then drives home the point that he will not hold a repentant man's sins against him a few verses later:

Ezekiel 18:21-23

21 But if the wicked man turns from all his sins which he has committed and observes all My statutes and practices justice and righteousness, he shall surely live; he shall not die. **22** All his transgressions which he has committed **will not be remembered against him**; because of his righteousness which he has practiced, he will live. **23** Do I have any pleasure in the death of the wicked, declares the Lord GOD, rather than that he should turn from his ways and live?

This is a textbook example of describing forgiveness without using the word "forgiveness". It probably won't surprise you that it was Ezekiel chapter 18 and especially this section that first led me to question PSA. This seems to destroy the entire concept of God needing to punish sins before He can forgive the man. However, we've already covered that in detail in previous articles, so we'll move on.

Seemingly to drive the point home, God clarifies in the following verses.

Ezekiel 18:24-29

24 But when a righteous man turns away from his righteousness, commits iniquity and does according to all the abominations that a wicked man does, will he live? All his righteous deeds which he has done will not be remembered for his treachery which he has committed and his sin which he has committed; for them he will die. **25** Yet you say, The way of the Lord is not right. Hear now, O house of Israel! Is My way not right? Is it not your ways that are not right? **26** When a righteous man turns away from his righteousness, commits iniquity and dies because of it, for his iniquity which he has committed he will die. **27** Again, when a wicked man turns away from his wickedness which he has committed and practices justice and righteousness, he will save his life. **28** Because he considered and turned away from all his transgressions which he had committed, he shall surely live; he shall not die. **29** But the house of Israel says, The way of the Lord is not right. Are My ways not right, O house of Israel? Is it not your ways that are not right?

God appears to need to clarify how forgiveness and punishment work because He also says this in Isaiah.

Isaiah 55:7-9

7 Let the wicked forsake his way
And the unrighteous man his thoughts;
And let him return to the LORD,
And He will have compassion on him,
And to our God,

For He will abundantly pardon.

8 For My thoughts are not your thoughts,
Nor are your ways My ways, declares the LORD.

9 For as the heavens are higher than the earth,
So are My ways higher than your ways
And My thoughts than your thoughts.

Notice, God follows a pronouncement of how he will abundantly pardon by explaining that His ways are higher than our ways, and His thoughts higher than our thoughts. This is also a theme in Ezekiel 18, where God says that it's the way of the Lord to not remember a man's sins against him when that man repents.

Regardless, the whole theme of Ezekiel chapter 18 can be summed up in a single verse.

Importantly, this verse bears directly on our topic:

Ezekiel 18:20 (NKJV)

20 The soul who sins shall die. The son shall not bear the guilt of the father, nor the father bear the guilt of the son. The righteousness of the righteous shall be upon himself, and the wickedness of the wicked shall be upon himself.

Again, I recommend that you [read the entire chapter](#) to get the context, but this verse is an accurate summary of the whole chapter.

This verse is a deathblow to PSA's 3rd pillar, which states that the wickedness of the wicked (us) was upon the righteous!

unless Jesus is an exception.

We'll look at that possibility in the next section. For now, we'll continue looking at the verses that establish the normal way things work. This next one is a doozy for PSA.

Proverbs 17:15

15 He who justifies the wicked and he who condemns the righteous, Both of them alike are an abomination to the LORD.

As we covered in the previous article, scripture is 100% crystal clear that Jesus was without blemish on the cross. (*Hebrews 9:13-14*) Thus, there's absolutely no doubt that He was righteous and not guilty of anything, even vicariously, on the cross. Thus, the act of condemning Him is an abomination to the Lord.

I find it impossible to believe that God would do something that He considers an abomination.

This same idea is repeated elsewhere:

Proverbs 6:16-19

16 There are **six things which the LORD hates,**
Yes, **seven which are an abomination to Him:**

17 Haughty eyes, a lying tongue,
And **hands that shed innocent blood,**

18 A heart that devises wicked plans,
Feet that run rapidly to evil,

19 A false witness *who* utters lies,
And one who spreads strife among brothers.

Again, it seems impossible that God would shed innocent blood (Jesus) if it's an abomination that He hates. Again, there's the argument that Jesus is a special case, which we'll look at in a minute. However, absent some reason to think that Jesus is a special case, God condemning Him and killing Him would be an abomination.

This next verse in Proverbs is also in this vein:

Proverbs 17:26 (NKJV)

26 Also, **to punish the righteous is not good, Nor to strike princes for their uprightness.**

These verses all paint a very clear picture of how God views punishing the innocent/righteous. It's wrong, evil, and an abomination in God's eyes.

Arguments for Jesus being a special case

Obviously the "normal" state of things is that God considers punishing the innocent/righteous an abomination. Thus, many in the PSA camp argue that Jesus is an exception based on a few different arguments. We'll look at those arguments one at a time.

Imputation/Legal Fictions

Here's the definition of a legal fiction from law.cornell.edu:

A legal fiction is an assumption and acceptance of something as fact by a court, although it may not be true, to allow a rule to operate or be applied in a manner that differs from its original purpose while leaving the letter of the law unchanged. Reasons for creating a legal fiction can vary but legal fictions are typically designed to achieve convenience, consistency, equity, or justice.

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Another common legal fiction is legal personhood or corporate personhood in business law. Incorporation of businesses required the creation of the legal fiction of corporate personhood so that corporations could sue and be sued in courts.

[Source.](#)

William Lane Craig, who has emerged as one of the more prominent defenders of PSA, had this to say in an article

Consider first the idea that our wrongful acts were **imputed** to Christ. On this view, although Christ did not himself commit the sins in question, God chooses to treat Christ as *if* he had done those acts. Such language is formulaic for the expression of legal fictions.[23] **The nearly universal understanding of a legal fiction is that it is something that the court consciously knows to be false but treats as if it were true for sake of a particular action.** The use of legal fictions is a long established, widespread, and indispensable feature of systems of law.

Penal substitution theorists have typically been understandably leery of talk of legal fictions in connection with their views, lest our redemption be thought to be something unreal, a mere pretense. But such a fear is misplaced. The claim is not that penal substitution is a fiction, for Christ was really and truly punished on such a view. Nor is his expiation of sin or propitiation of God's wrath a fiction, for his being punished for our sins removed our liability to punishment and satisfied God's justice. All these things are real. **What is fictitious is that Christ himself did the wrongful acts for which he was punished.** Every orthodox Christian believes that Christ did not and could not commit sins, but on the present view **God adopts for the administration of justice the legal fiction that Christ did such deeds.**

[Source.](#)

Please read the last highlighted part of that quote one more time.

William Lane Craig is pretty clear here that according to the Legal Fiction understanding of PSA, God knows that Jesus didn't commit the sins that PSA says Jesus was punished for. However, the Legal Fiction version of the PSA position then says that *God adopts for the administration of justice the legal fiction that Christ did such deeds*. Allow me to reduce that to its simplest form:

According to the Legal Fiction understanding of PSA, God pretends that Jesus sinned even though God knows that's false because Jesus didn't sin.

An important component that advocates of the Legal Fiction version of PSA never seem to address is this: it requires God Himself to create a falsehood and then act on that falsehood. Let me repeat that:

The Legal Fiction understanding of PSA requires that God Himself creates a falsehood/lie, and then God Himself treats that falsehood/lie as true.

If the problems with that aren't immediately obvious, scripture clears this up for us.

Titus 1:1-2

1 Paul, a bond-servant of God and an apostle of Jesus Christ, for the faith of those chosen of God and the knowledge of the truth which is according to godliness, **2** in the hope of eternal life, which **God, who cannot lie**, promised long ages ago

And again, as it's written:

Hebrews 6:17-18

17 In the same way God, desiring even more to show to the heirs of the promise the unchangeableness of His purpose, interposed with an oath, **18** so that by two unchangeable things in which **it is impossible for God to lie**, we who have taken refuge would have strong encouragement to take hold of the hope set before us.

Legal Fictions are something that *the court consciously knows to be false but treats as if it were true*, which is why they're called Legal Fictions. Effectively, the court must *lie* to use a Legal Fiction.

God can't do that.

Further, the Legal Fiction argument in no way explains why the following verse doesn't apply.

Ezekiel 18:20 (NKJV)

20 The soul who sins shall die. The son shall not bear the guilt of the father, nor the father bear the guilt of the son. **The righteousness of the righteous shall be upon himself, and the wickedness of the wicked shall be upon himself.**

In fact, this verse seems to completely nullify the Legal Fiction argument. That's not counting the *God can't lie* verses, which again seem to also completely nullify the Legal Fiction argument.

Additionally, the *imputation* understanding is effectively identical to the Legal Fiction understanding; the only difference is the terms used.

William Lane Craig conflated the terms above, and here is Mike Winger also conflating those two ideas because they are indeed the same idea by two different names:

There's actually a whole category of legal thought called **legal fictions**. You can look at this look at this up on your own, it's also in Craig's book on the atonement, it sounds freaky when you hear legal fictions because **it's like legal making stuff up**. That's not really the concept, but some would consider corporations are; **corporations aren't real people but in court they're treated like people**. In fact, corporations can bear the guilt of the people in the corporation, so here's like an example of like legal fiction allowing the corporation to suffer for the sins of the people in the corporation. There's, that's an interesting way to put it. Also like ships, boats, are considered as persons in legal courts and that is in order to achieve justice they do that; it's a legal fiction. **So an interesting idea here, it's as if Jesus was treated as if he had sinned, so, so here we have our sin imputed unto Christ.**

[Source](#). (Starting at ~13:00)

Again, the idea of a Legal Fiction is identical to the concept of imputation. Thus, all the verses we've already seen apply.

•The Ends justifies the means•

No, I'm not kidding. This is an actual argument that is put forth by some PSA supporters. They like to use different language, but that's what it amounts to. Mike Winger mentions that argument, though he doesn't prefer it.

Okay, another reason why **God could potentially punish the innocent would be that He simply has a proper moral motive for waiving that, that, that policy that you never punished the innocent because it would achieve the salvation of so many souls.**

[Source](#). (At about 9:55)

Here is William Lane Craig explaining the same position, though with more flowery language.

So in the extreme case where one must punish an innocent person or else the world will be totally destroyed, one should punish the person. The penal substitution theorist could similarly claim that God by waiving the *prima facie* demands of negative retributive justice and punishing Christ for our sins has mercifully saved the world from total destruction and was therefore acting compatibly with moral goodness.

[Source](#).

The argument is effectively: *It's immoral to punish the innocent, but you should do it anyway if it will do enough good.*

Yes, I realize that some might object to that phrasing and think it's an oversimplification, but it is an accurate statement of the position in its simplest form. The argument is indeed that you can do something that's immoral/evil if enough good will come from it.

The biggest problem with that argument is that it's literal blasphemy.

Romans 3:3-8

3 What then? If some did not believe, their unbelief will not nullify the faithfulness of God, will it?

4 May it never be! Rather, **let God be found true, though every man be found a liar**, as it is written,
 "THAT YOU MAY BE JUSTIFIED IN YOUR WORDS,
 AND PREVAIL WHEN YOU ARE JUDGED."

5 But if our unrighteousness demonstrates the righteousness of God, what shall we say? The God who inflicts wrath is not unrighteous, is He? (I am speaking in human terms.) **6** May it never be! For otherwise, how will God judge the world? **7** But if through my lie the truth of God abounded to His glory, why am I also still being judged as a sinner? **8** And **why not say (as we are slanderously reported and as some claim that we say), "Let us do evil that good may come?" Their condemnation is just.**

The Greek word translated "slanderously" is [βλασφημία](#) ([blasphēmía](#)), and it means:

987 [βλασφημία](#) (from [βλαβή](#), "sluggish, slow" and [φάμα](#), "reputation, fame") properly, refusing to acknowledge good (worthy of respect, veneration); **hence, to blaspheme** which reverses moral values.

It's the root of our English word "blaspheme", and here's the verse again with that understanding translated in:

Romans 3:8 (modified)

8 And **why not say (as we are blasphemously reported and as some claim that we say), "Let us do evil that good may come?" Their condemnation is just.**

The idea that "Let us do evil that good may come" and/or "The ends justify the means" is blasphemous, and Paul says that the men who say such things are worthy of condemnation.

Now, I do *not* mean in reference to salvation. I'm not saying that at all, nor am I implying that the Christians espousing this idea aren't saved. I'm not saying that. Not at all. I *am* saying that the position is worthy of condemnation, and that someone should confront them on their error. But again, I'm not saying that they aren't Christians because of this, merely that they have a serious error in their theology.

Regardless, the point stands; the idea that *“Let us do evil that good may come”*, which can be phrased as: *“The ends justify the means”* is blasphemous. Therefore, God does not operate that way.

Further, at the risk of sounding like a broken record, it also runs afoul of Ezekiel 18:

Ezekiel 18:20 (NKJV)

20 The soul who sins shall die. The son shall not bear the guilt of the father, nor the father bear the guilt of the son. *The righteousness of the righteous shall be upon himself, and the wickedness of the wicked shall be upon himself.*

Again, everyone agrees that punishing the innocent is wrong, but PSA says that Jesus is an exception. However, that’s a truth claim, and extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence. That evidence might exist, and Jesus might be an exception, but not this way.

Vicarious Liability

Both William Lane Craig and Mike Winger seem to prefer this explanation. However, before we get to their position, you’ll need to know what the legal term *“respondeat superior”* means. (*I certainly did.*)

Here is law.cornell.edu to explain it.

Respondeat superior is a legal doctrine, most commonly used in [wex:tort], that holds an employer or principal legally responsible for the wrongful acts of an employee or agent, if such acts occur within the scope of the employment or agency. Typically when *respondeat superior* is invoked, a plaintiff will look to hold both the employer and the employee liable. As such, a court will generally look to the doctrine of joint and several liability when assigning damages.

Jurisdictional Differences

There is not a national standard for *respondeat superior*. Because states create their own standards for the doctrine, different jurisdictions will use different tests to prove *respondeat superior*. *However, most jurisdictions will use 1 of the following 2 tests:*

1. Benefits Test
 1. When *the employee’s social or recreational pursuits on the employer’s premises after hours are endorsed by the express or implied permission of the employer and are conceivably of some benefit to the employer*, then the employer is liable for harm resulting from the employee’s actions.
2. Characteristics Test

1. If the employee's action is common enough for that job that the action could be fairly deemed to be characteristic of the job, then the employer will be liable for harm resulting from the employee's actions.

Source.

Okay, so that's Cornell's explanation of respondeat superior, and now, here is William Lane Craig's use of that legal principle to explain how it could apply to Christ on the cross. **As you read, please notice how William Lane Craig's explanation differs from Cornell's definition above, especially because it omits the two tests.**

In civil law there are cases involving what is called vicarious liability. In such cases the principle of *respondeat superior* is invoked in order to impute the liability of a subordinate to his superior, for example, a master's being held liable for acts done by his servant. On the contemporary scene this principle has given rise to a widespread and largely uncontroversial principle of vicarious liability of employers. An employer may be held liable for acts done by his employee in his role as employee, even though the employer did not do these acts himself. Cases typically involve employers' being held liable for the illegal sale of items by employees but may also include torts like assault and battery, fraud, manslaughter, and so on. It needs to be emphasized that the employer is not in such cases being held liable for other acts, such as complicity or negligence in, for instance, failing to supervise the employee. Indeed, he may be utterly blameless in the matter. Rather the liability incurred by his employee for certain acts is imputed to him in virtue of his relationship with the employee, even though he did not himself do the acts in question.

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There are criminal as well as civil applications of respondeat superior. The liability for crimes committed by a subordinate in the discharge of his duties can also be imputed to his superior. Both the employer and the employee may be found guilty for crimes which only the employee committed.[30] For example, in *Allen v Whitehead* the owner of a café was found to be guilty because his employee, to whom management of the café had been delegated, allowed prostitutes to congregate there in violation of the law. In *Sherras v De Rutzen* a bartender's criminal liability for selling alcohol to a constable on duty was imputed to the licensed owner of the bar. In such cases, we have the guilt of one person imputed to another person, who did not do the act. Interestingly, vicarious liability is another case of strict liability, where the superior is held to be guilty without being found blameworthy, since no mens rea is required.[31] He is thus guilty and liable to punishment even though he is not culpable.

Thus, the vicarious liability that exists in the law suffices to show that the imputation of our guilt to Christ is not wholly without parallel in our experience. In the law's imputation of guilt to another person than the actor, we actually have a very close analogy to the doctrine of the imputation of our guilt to Christ.

Now, did you notice the absence of the legal tests above? And, frankly, the slight distortion of the legal definition? Here it is again:

Respondeat superior is a legal doctrine, most commonly used in [wex:tort], that holds **an employer or principal legally responsible for the wrongful acts of an employee or agent, if such acts occur within the scope of the employment or agency.**

Please scroll back up to look at the two tests that are commonly used to decide if vicarious liability via respondeat superior is applicable. **So let's apply those two tests to our sin, to see if Jesus could have vicarious liability via respondeat superior.**

1. Did our sin have the express or implied permission from God *and also* benefit God?
 - o **OR**
2. Is sinning characteristic of the job God gave us to do?

No?

Then vicarious liability via respondeat superior isn't applicable to PSA. Thus, Jesus remains not vicariously liable and entirely innocent.

It must be moral because it happened

To be fair, I haven't heard any prominent PSA supporters espouse this understanding. However, it needed to be addressed because I've heard non-prominent PSA supporters espouse it. **Effectively, this argument says: It obviously must be moral for Jesus to take the punishment for our sins because it happened.** That's actually a logical fallacy called **begging the question**:

Begging the Question

petitio principii

(also known as: assuming the initial point, assuming the answer, chicken and the egg argument, circulus in probando)

Description: **Any form of argument where the conclusion is assumed in one of the premises.** Many people use the phrase **begging the question** incorrectly when they use it to mean, **prompts one to ask the question**. That is NOT the correct usage. **Begging the question is a form of circular reasoning.**

[Source.](#)

As the quote points out, begging the question is a form of circular reasoning:

Circular Reasoning

circulus in demonstrando

(also known as: paradoxical thinking, circular argument, circular cause and consequence, reasoning in a circle, vicious circle)

Description: A type of reasoning in which the proposition is supported by the premises, which is supported by the proposition, creating a circle in reasoning where no useful information is being shared. This fallacy is often quite humorous.

[Source.](#)

The argument "It must be moral because it happened" doesn't hold when the very issue being contested is whether it happened at all. It assumes the conclusion in the premise. This is rather like the old trick question: "Do you still beat your mother?" because they both contain an assumption in the question itself. (*That Jesus was punished and that you beat your mother respectively.*)

Thus, this isn't a good argument, and is actually a logical fallacy.

Punishing Himself?

I've never heard anyone in the PSA camp espouse this, but it's worth exploring anyway.

I've noticed that almost everyone in the PSA camp speaks as if the Father punishes the Son. That creates the very issue that we're discussing - the innocent being punished, not to mention the trinitarian issues - and yet this is the normal way of discussing it. However, given the Trinity, perhaps there's another way to look at it that's more friendly to PSA. It's not without problems though.

What if instead of saying that God the Father punished God the Son, what if we say that God collectively (*in a trinitarian sense*) punished the Son, meaning that the Son effectively punished Himself?

Now, there's a certain sense where you then could say that Jesus being innocent is less of a problem because, effectively, Jesus is punishing Himself, so it's not someone else punishing Him. However, we still run into the problem that it's still God punishing someone innocent, even if that person is Himself. It might seem less problematic than Him punishing someone else, but it's still problematic because He's still punishing an innocent person.

I don't see a way around that.

Thus, this doesn't seem to make Jesus a special case either.

Augustinian Anthropology

If any Calvinists are reading this, you'll recognize this immediately. For non-Calvinists, I'll give a short summary of the history, then cover the biblical case.

Augustine of Hippo was born in the mid-4th century and was the bishop of Hippo from 396 to 430. I think it's fair to say that he has had more influence on Christianity, especially Western Christianity, than any other author in church history. **Frankly, his work has had more influence on Christian thought than even some biblical writers.** (Like the minor prophets and others who aren't often read.)

That's a bad thing.

Now, up until Augustine, the church held a particular view of man and his sinfulness. However, Augustine changed that view when he introduced Augustinian anthropology (*Augustine's view of the nature of man*) into the church. It took hold and became firmly entrenched in much of the church, especially the Western church.

Augustine said (*paraphrasing*) that because of Adam's sin, every single person was guilty of sin from the moment of conception. **That is, Augustine said that we are guilty because of the sins of our father, grandfather, etc., all the way back to Adam.** He brought this idea into the church and popularized it.

Now, this is relevant because if Augustine is correct about this, then Jesus would truly be a special case because He was truly without sin while everyone else was guilty from the moment of conception!

!but here's the thing, that makes it worse, not better.

We've already seen how punishing the innocent is wrong. Now, if Augustinian anthropology is correct about the "conceived guilty" doctrine, then we're only "mostly innocent" while Jesus is then "truly innocent". So now PSA is punishing the "truly innocent" if Augustine is correct. Again, that makes it worse, not better.

Additionally, the "conceived guilty" version of original sin explicitly contradicts scripture.

Ezekiel 18:20 (NKJV)

20 The soul who sins shall die. **The son shall not bear the guilt of the father, nor the father bear the guilt of the son. The righteousness of the righteous shall be upon himself, and the wickedness of the wicked shall be upon himself.**

Ezekiel chapter 18 looms large again, completely repudiating the idea that we are conceived guilty. And really, if you read the whole chapter, it's even more compelling because that's the topic of the entire chapter. **When God devotes a whole chapter of the Bible to repudiating an idea/doctrine, it's a good idea to pay attention.** It's an equally bad idea to completely ignore that chapter.

Calvinism would do well to remember that.

The cup of wrath

This isn't quite an argument that Jesus is an exception. However, it's an argument that some PSA supporters use and this seems like the best place to examine it.

One of the most important rules about studying the Bible is to consider the context. That definitely includes the immediate context, but it also includes the wider biblical context. In some cases, certain words or phrases are used throughout the Bible, and knowing how they are used elsewhere can help us understand a passage properly.

PSA uses this good Bible study technique to make a case for PSA based on Jesus's words right before the crucifixion.

Matthew 26:36-39

36 Then Jesus came with them to a place called Gethsemane, and said to His disciples, "Sit here while I go over there and pray." **37** And He took with Him Peter and the two sons of Zebedee, and began to be grieved and distressed. **38** Then He said to them, "My soul is deeply grieved, to the point of death; remain here and keep watch with Me."

39 And He went a little beyond *them*, and fell on His face and prayed, saying, "My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from Me; yet not as I will, but as You will."

Now, the argument that PSA makes is based on how the figurative sense of "cup" is used elsewhere in scripture. Here are the clearest examples:

Jeremiah 25:15-16

15 For thus the LORD, the God of Israel, says to me, "Take this cup of the wine of wrath from My hand and cause all the nations to whom I send you to drink it. **16** They will drink and stagger and go mad because of the sword that I will send among them."

Isaiah 51:17

17 Rouse yourself! Rouse yourself! Arise, O Jerusalem, You who have drunk from the LORD'S hand the cup of His anger; The chalice of reeling you have drained to the dregs.

Isaiah 51:22

22 Thus says your Lord, the LORD, even your God Who contends for His people, "Behold, I have taken out of your hand the cup of reeling, The chalice of My anger; You will never drink it again.

Revelation 14:9-10

9 Then another angel, a third one, followed them, saying with a loud voice, "If anyone worships the beast and his image, and receives a mark on his forehead or on his hand, **10**

he also will drink of the wine of the **wrath** of God, which is mixed in full strength in the **cup of His anger**; and he will be tormented with fire and brimstone in the presence of the holy angels and in the presence of the Lamb.

Revelation 16:19

19 The great city was split into three parts, and the cities of the nations fell. Babylon the great was remembered before God, **to give her the cup of the wine of His fierce wrath**.

It's nigh indisputable that the "cup of God's wrath" is a metaphor for God's judgement. **The PSA argument is that the cup which Jesus asked to pass from him was the cup of God's wrath.** Thus, PSA says that Jesus (*metaphorically*) drank the cup of God's wrath on the cross, which they say is evidence for PSA.

Now, I do think that this is a decent argument, but it does have two holes; a small one and a large one.

The small hole is that Jesus only says "cup", not "cup of wrath" or something substantially similar to "cup of wrath". I say this is a small hole because I honestly think it is a small one. Inspired by the Holy Spirit, the New Testament writers often used very subtle hints to point at things. That's very on-brand for God. Thus, I don't think the lack of "wrath" is necessarily a defeater for this argument.

(And as an example of subtle hints, Matt 14:25 says that Jesus was "walking on the sea". This appears to be an allusion to Job 9:8, where God alone "tramples down the waves of the sea". God is very into subtle hints, giving the Bible depth that non-inspired works simply can't match.)

The large hole is Jesus's words to James and John, the two sons of Zebedee. For context, the two sons of Zebedee are James and John.

Matthew 4:21

21 Going on from there He saw two other brothers, **James the son of Zebedee, and John his brother, in the boat with Zebedee their father**, mending their nets; and He called them.

With that context, here's the verse.

Matthew 20:20-23

20 Then the mother of the sons of Zebedee came to Jesus with her sons, bowing down and making a request of Him. **21** And He said to her, "What do you wish?" She said to Him, "Command that in Your kingdom these two sons of mine may sit one on Your right and one on Your left." **22** But Jesus answered, "You do not know what you are asking. **Are you able to drink the cup that I am about to drink?**" They said to Him, "We are able." **23** He said to them, "**My cup you shall drink**"; but to sit on My right and on My left, this is not Mine to give, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared by My Father."

And further clarifying this is an event in Acts.

Acts 12:1-2

1 Now about that time Herod the king laid hands on some who belonged to the church in order to mistreat them. 2 And **he had James the brother of John put to death** with a sword.

Now, with this context, it seems obvious that Jesus was referring to His (*brutal*) martyrdom, because that's what happened to James, who was told that he would "drink the same cup" as Jesus. **Thus, unless you think that James was punished vicariously in our place as our substitute on the cross, it doesn't make sense to say that Jesus's cup in the garden was the wrath of God.**

Now, this isn't an anti-PSA argument; it merely prevents Matt 26:39 from supporting PSA.

I know many in the anti-PSA camp who say that this is a defeater for PSA, and I don't quite agree. Jesus could've been referring to His martyrdom when talking to James and John, and then PSA could indeed be true based on other passages. Of course, we've already looked at those other passages and they don't support PSA, or at least there are perfectly legitimate alternate understandings for all of them.

Arguments for Jesus being special pleading

This section will be short because the whole argument is the definition of the logical fallacy of "special pleading".

Description: Applying standards, principles, and/or rules to other people or circumstances, while making oneself or certain circumstances exempt from the same critical criteria, **without providing adequate justification**. Special pleading is often a result of strong emotional beliefs that interfere with reason.

Logical Form:

If X then Y, but not when it hurts my position.

[Source.](#)

Personally, I don't see how the PSA position of "Jesus is a special case where the innocent can be punished" makes sense. There's no legal argument that makes sense, and no scripture I've seen that makes Him an exception to God's way of not punishing the innocent for the sins of the guilty. I obviously could've missed one, but I did a lot of research to find a PSA argument for this and we've already looked at the ones I found.

Thus, PSA seems to have a problem with special pleading.

There's simply no evidence that Jesus is an exception to the rule that the innocent shouldn't be punished for the sins of the guilty. **Given that, the clear teaching of scripture that the innocent shouldn't be punished for the sins of the guilty stands, including in Jesus's case.** That teaching is arguably most clearly spelled out in Ezekiel chapter 18, but it's present in other places as well.

Wrapping up PSA pillar #3

As covered in the intro article, PSA's 3rd pillar is this:

1. It is acceptable for God to punish an innocent substitute instead of the man guilty of sin, provided that all three of the following conditions are met:
 1. The substitute is of the same nature as the guilty. (*which is why animals won't do*)
 2. The substitute is 100% righteous with no sin whatsoever. (*Otherwise his own sin would need to be punished*)
 3. The substitute is voluntary.

There's no evidence that PSA's 3rd pillar is true, but there is evidence that it's false.

Ezekiel chapter 18 alone makes it false, unless PSA can show that Jesus is a special case. However, there doesn't seem to be anything in scripture that makes Him a special case as far as punishing the innocent is concerned. Thus, the PSA position appears to have another support for it removed for lack of evidence.

Before we move on, there's one more thing that we need to examine that occurred to me while writing this article. Please consider it seriously, because it's not a rhetorical device; it's a serious question.

Does PSA make the cross masochism and/or sadism?

Before you react emotionally, remember that **this is exactly and literally the most common PSA interpretation of Isaiah 53:10.**

Isaiah 53:10

10 But the LORD was **pleased**
 To crush Him, putting *Him* to grief;
 If He would render Himself as a guilt offering,
 He will see *His* offspring,
 He will prolong *His* days,
 And the good pleasure of the LORD will prosper in His hand.

As translated, and as the PSA school of thought understands it, that would *literally* make God either a masochist or a sadist. (*Depending on whether you think the Father punished the Son, or God/the Trinity collectively punished the Son, so that it was at least partially self-inflicted.*) **Please don't shoot the messenger because that's what the words mean:**

masochist

noun [C] US /ˈmɑːsɪs.tɪk.əst/

a person who gets pleasure from being hurt by another person

[Source](#). (*Cambridge dictionary*)

And:

sadist

noun [C] US /ˈsæd.ɪst, ˈsɑːd.ɪst/

a person who gets pleasure from hurting another person

[Source](#). (*Cambridge dictionary*)

Again, according to PSA's understanding of Isaiah 53:10, God is either a masochist or a sadist. However, as we saw in [our examination of Isaiah 53](#), you could alternatively translate it thusly:

Isaiah 53:10 (*modified in accordance with the research in the article.*)

10 But the LORD was pleased
To humble Him, making Him weak.

If you, *My people*, would make Him a guilt offering,
He will see *His* offspring,
He will prolong *His* days,
And the good pleasure of the LORD will prosper in His hand.

That understanding/translation is completely legitimate (see [this article](#) for the evidence) and avoids the problem of making God a sadist or masochist. This option is even open to PSA adherents if they wish to avoid the sadism/masochism problem. However, the way PSA is usually taught does make God either a sadist or a masochist.

Further, I would argue that the *it pleased the Father to bruise the Son* argument is almost inseparable from PSA. Perhaps not logically, but I've yet to hear a PSA adherent speak about God reluctantly punishing Jesus vicariously in our place as our substitute. That's what it would take to avoid God being a sadist or masochist (*or both*), but I've never heard that.

Some PSA advocates say that the pleasure God feels isn't so much because He's bruising Him, but because of what it results in: our salvation. Here's John Piper with that argument:

One part of the answer must be what is stressed at the end of verse 10, namely, that God's pleasure is in what the Son accomplishes in dying. It says at the end of verse 10, "The pleasure of the Lord will prosper in his hand." I take that to mean that God's pleasure is not so much in the suffering of the Son considered in and of itself but in the great success of what the Son would accomplish in his dying.

[Source.](#)

He's welcome to think that, but that's not what the verse says. As usually translated, it says: "the LORD was pleased To crush Him, putting Him to grief;". As translated in a PSA system, I don't see how you can avoid the meaning that God not only wanted to crush the Son, but also took pleasure in doing it. Remember, it's important to read the text carefully.

Conversely, with the cleansing model of Jesus's work that we saw in [the article on the gospel](#), "the LORD was pleased To humble Him, making Him weak." makes perfect sense. That understanding would say that it referred to the incarnation, which would've pleased God because it meant uniting man's nature to God's nature, bringing Him that much closer to us.

Not with a bang, but with a whimper.

If it's not obvious by now, I'm no longer in the PSA camp. After doing all this research, I simply don't see how I can be. Every time I looked into a passage that was supposed to be a strong pro-PSA passage, I found that upon deeper study, it didn't support PSA at all. The few that could be translated/understood to support PSA had alternate understandings that were significantly more logical, even when the PSA understanding was possible.

This research project ended up being an exercise in discovering redefinitions and mistranslation more than a theological battle. PSA's foundation ended up being like sandcastles on a beach which simply dissolved in the waves of a closer look. Perhaps sunlight on ice is a better analogy, where in the light of proper definitions and translation, the evidence for PSA simply melted away and evaporated into nothingness.

I expected a theological battle, but got a disappointing facade that melted away upon closer examination.

Early on, I noticed that PSA seemed to rely on redefining words — even foundational words like "forgiveness" — in order to survive. It also seemed to twist the definition of words into something different than their normal meaning, and even sometimes completely opposite their normal meaning. This happened so often that I almost began to expect it.

Every passage and word I looked at seemed to do the same thing, until I was left with no more passages or words to examine. Again, they simply failed to support PSA, and thus the support for PSA melted away piece by piece until nothing was left. Of course, there are a few passages that could be taken in a PSA way, but PSA itself simply has no legs to stand on.

This theological battle didn't end with a bang, but with a whimper.

Loose Ends

Now, there's two more things we need to mention in this article. **First, what about PSA's 4th pillar?** Again from [the intro article](#), here's PSA's 4th pillar.

Once the substitution has been made, the righteousness of the righteous substitute is transferred to the sinner, and the sinner's wickedness (*or sins*) are transferred to the innocent substitute. (*called imputation, and when it goes both ways, it's called double imputation.*)

We've actually already covered [part](#) of this in some detail. Not directly, but indirectly through our examination of the 3rd pillar, and in some measure throughout this series as well. The part we've looked at is the idea of transferring sins/punishing the innocent for the sins of the righteous. But what about the other side of the equation?

What about the righteousness of the righteous substitute is transferred to the sinner, and the various clothed in the righteousness of Christ verses, and other ones like this? Consider Philippians 3:9b, which reads: *not having a righteousness of my own derived from the Law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which comes from God on the basis of faith,* and other verses like this.

Those belong to the 4th pillar, and thus we won't examine them in this article, but in the next one or two articles.

We'll also examine the specifics of [how](#) faith saves us, which is something that's rarely taught on. Of course we're taught that faith does save us, but rarely the mechanics of [how](#) faith saves us. We'll look at that in the next article.

Conclusion

PSA's 3rd pillar relies on punishing an innocent person for the sins of a guilty person. However, numerous verses make it clear that God hates punishing the innocent. Ezekiel chapter 18 is especially clear, as is Proverbs in more than one place. Further, there's no example of God doing that in scripture to establish the precedent.

There is no verse that makes Jesus a special case, which means that the claims of Him being a special case are merely the logical fallacy of special pleading.

That makes PSA's claims untenable and entirely without biblical support.

Now, weâ??ll look at the mechanics of how faith saves us in the next article, and possibly PSAâ??s 4th pillar as well, depending on how long the examination of faith ends up being. After that, there will probably be a recap article containing a summary of the biblical evidence. After that, with possibly some non-PSA articles in between, Iâ??ll finish and publish the article on whether the early church fathers taught PSA. Thatâ??s the article schedule as it stands, though itâ??s subject to change.

Iâ??ll see you in the next article.

God Bless,
Berean Patriot