
The Biblical Case for AND Against Penal Substitutionary Atonement (PSA) – Series Intro

Description

We'll start with a definition of Penal Substitutionary Atonement (PSA) so that everyone is on the same page. You almost certainly know the doctrine, even if you don't know the name.

According to PSA, Jesus suffered the wrath of God by suffering the punishment for sins as a substitute for us instead of us taking that punishment ourselves, and as a result, we have Jesus's righteousness credited to us and thus are restored to right relationship with God.

It breaks down thusly:

- **Penal.** This word refers to punishment, specifically saying that Jesus was punished on the cross.
- **Substitutionary.** This word indicates that Christ was punished "in our place" and "instead of us" as our substitute.
- **Atonement.** This word is generally understood to mean a restoration of "right relationship", meaning that according to PSA, Jesus's penal substitution restores us to right relationship with God.

Now, many Christians might say "Isn't that just the Gospel?" And the answer is yes... according to some Christians, but definitely not all. Arguably the oldest Christian denomination in the world — the Eastern Orthodox Church (*off of which the Roman Catholic Church split because the Orthodox wouldn't recognize the Pope*) — rejects PSA, and others do as well.

This article series on PSA will be a thorough Biblical examination of the doctrine to see if it aligns with scripture.

Why?

Because while doing my daily Bible reading some time ago, I ran across a passage that seemed to make PSA impossible. (*Ezekiel chapter 18, which we'll cover later in the series.*) I was taught PSA since childhood and only learned that a biblical case against it existed when I started investigating after reading that chapter that day.

To be 100% upfront, I'm still not entirely sure where I will land. I'm currently leaning in one direction, but I'm not ready to "plant my doctrinal flag" either way as I write this series intro. No man is unbiased, but I'll try my best to keep my bias out of this article series. (*And I invite readers to call me out on any bias that they see in the comments.*)

Like in a debate, this article series will present the arguments both for AND against PSA.

This article series is partially my research notes, documenting the strongest arguments both for and against it. I'll present the arguments from both sides and you — like in a debate — can decide which side is more compelling. Regardless of whether you're a firm believer in PSA, uncertain about it, or ardently against it, you'll be far more familiar with **both** sides of the debate by the end of this series.

I will do my very best to accurately and fairly represent both sides of the debate. There will be no "straw man" tactics, nor emotional rhetoric, and the sole arbiter will be the scriptures themselves. We will look at other things (like the Early Church Fathers for historical context), but scripture alone is the sole arbiter of Christian faith and doctrine.

So please, settle in, put on your thinking cap, and maybe make yourself a nice cup of tea because this series won't be a short read. (This intro is pretty short though.)

We'll start with an overview of the core tenets of PSA.

The Core Tenets of Penal Substitutionary Atonement (PSA)

The full doctrine of PSA actually comprises 17 different points. (You can look at them in [this YouTube video series](#) by some Eastern Orthodox Christians. Do be aware that they — like all Eastern Orthodox Christians — strongly oppose PSA. And please don't take the link as an endorsement; I just don't know another source that goes through all 17 points.)

However, you can distill its core essentials down to far fewer points. Not everyone holds to the full 17, and I would argue that **most** modern Christians don't. Thus, we'll only look at the absolutely essential parts of PSA.

If you remove a single one of the following parts, you no longer have PSA.

Note: I came up with this grouping of PSA's core tenets. There are probably other ways to group them, but this made the most sense to me and followed Einstein's principle that: "Everything should be made as simple as possible, but not simpler."

Here are the core tenets of PSA:

1. The sin of man deserves God's righteous, just, and holy wrath.
2. Because God is perfectly righteous, just, and holy, He cannot simply leave sin unpunished, even if the sinner repents; to remain true to His own holy character, He **must** punish sin.
3. 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.
4. 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").

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This leads us right back to the definition that opened this article.

According to PSA, Jesus suffered the wrath of God by suffering the punishment for sins as a substitute for us instead of us taking that punishment ourselves, and as a result, we have Jesus's righteousness credited to us and thus are restored to right relationship with God.

Theopedia defines PSA this way:

Penal substitutionary atonement refers to the doctrine that Christ died on the cross as a substitute for sinners. God imputed the guilt of our sins to Christ, and he, in our place, bore the punishment that we deserve. This was a full payment for sins, which satisfied both the wrath and the righteousness of God, so that He could forgive sinners without compromising His own holy standard.

Again, the core elements of PSA can be distilled into the 4 core tenets above, and we'll examine them in detail in this series. **Some of the verses/passages that touch on PSA won't be covered in our examination of the core tenets.** We will look at those verses/passages after examining the core tenets.

In order to give you an idea of what to expect, here's an overview of what the series will cover.

Series Overview

The current outline for the series is below, but **as with all works in progress, it's subject to change.** I might change/add/combine any of these depending space and relevance. I probably won't write/publish them in this order.

- **Series Intro:** what you're reading now. Following this intro, there will be one article covering each of the core tenets of PSA
 - **PSA's core tenet #1.** This article is finished and you can find it [here](#).
 - **PSA's core tenet #2.** I have a mostly complete rough draft for this article, but it needs a lot of cleanup work.
 - **PSA's core tenet #3.** A thorough examination of it.
 - **PSA's core tenet #4.** A thorough examination of it.
- **Word Definition articles.** There are several words that are used in the discussion that are important to define.
 - **What does "redemption" mean?** This term is used in some of the strongest passages used to support PSA. Thus, we'll take a close look at it.
 - **What is "Atonement"?** This will be a thorough look at "atonement" throughout the Bible and what it means.

- **What is “Propitiation”?** Â This article might be a part of the one on “Atonement”, but we’ll see.
- **Article(s) looking at the strongest PSA verses/passages.**Â The verses/passages on the list so far are below.Â **The list below is in no particular order**, and I likely won’t write/publish them in the order below.
 - **Isaiah 53:** This will likely be split into several articles since there’s a lot to cover.Â In fact, one of them has already been published, sort of.
 - **Isaiah 53:6 “laid on Him the iniquities of us all”:**Â This material was covered in my article: [How To Do a Word Study of a Greek or Hebrew Word in the Bible](#).
 - **1 Peter 3:18:** Â For Christ also died for sins once for all,Â **theÂ just forÂ theÂ unjust**, so that He might bring us to God, having been put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit
 - **2 Corinthians 5:21:**Â **He made Him who knew no sinÂ to beÂ sin on our behalf**, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.
 - **Galatians 3:13:** â€œChrist redeemed us from the curse of the Law, **having become a curse for us**â€”for it is written, â€œCURSED IS EVERYONE WHO HANGS ON A TREEâ€”
 - **Romans 8:3:** â€œFor what the Law could not do, weak as it was through the flesh, GodÂ *did*:Â **sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh andÂ as an offering for sin**, He condemned sin in the flesh,”
 - **Romans 3:25:**Â “whom **God displayed publicly as a propitiation in His blood** through faith. *This was* to demonstrate His righteousness, because in the forbearance of God He passed over the sins previously committed;”
 - **Hebrews 9:28:** “so Christ also, **having been offered once to bear the sins of many**, will appear a second time for salvation withoutÂ *reference to sin*, to those who eagerly await Him.”
 - **1 Peter 2:24:** “**He Himself bore our sins in his body on the cross**, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; for by his wounds you have been healed.”
 - **1 John 2:2:** â€œ**He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins**, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world.â€”
 - **The whole of Hebrews chapters 8-10.** Â I hope to get it all in one article after giving all the context in previous articles, but we’ll see.Â This might need to be more than one article.
 - **Other verses?**Â Â **If you can think of a verse/passage that strongly supports PSA that isn’t on this list, please say something in the comments.**
- **Article(s) on the Early Church fathers’ views of Jesus’s work on the cross.**Â The PSA school says that PSA was taught from the beginning, but the anti-PSA crowd says it was created by Calvin during the Reformation.Â I’ve been reading the original sources — the early church fathers themselves — and making notes as I read.Â I’ll report what I find.
- **Article(s) looking at the strongest anti-PSA verses/passages/objections.**Â Many of these will be covered in other places, but there are a few that might fit here.
 - **Trinitarian objections.**Â We’ll look at some objections that PSA breaks the Trinity in this article.Â (*Example: “If Jesus is God, and God “poured out His wrath on Jesus”, then did God pour out His wrath on Himself”*)
 - **Ezekiel chapter 18.**Â Effectively the whole chapter, but especially verses 20-22.
 - **1 Cor 15:14:**Â And if *the Anointed* hasn’t been raised, then our preaching *is* worthless and your faith *is* worthless.
 - **Other verses?** Â **If you can think of a verse/passage that strongly argues against**

PSA that isn't on this list, please say something in the comments.

I'll update this article with links as I publish each article in the series.

Until then, I recommend you read my article: [How To Do a Word Study of a Greek or Hebrew Word in the Bible](#).^Â Not only does this article look at an important passage in the debate (*Isaiah 53:6*), but it will also show you how to double-check my analysis of original language words, and enable you to do such analysis yourself.

You can read the next part of this series here: [PSA Series "Does Man's Sin Deserve God's Wrath? What is God's Wrath?](#)

God Bless, and I'll see you in another article soon.