

# **JESUS' UNDERSTANDING OF HIS OWN DEATH: REFLECTIONS ON CHAPTER 9 OF DARRIN SNYDER BELOUSEK'S ATONEMENT, JUSTICE, AND PEACE**

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I begin my reflections by expressing my gratitude to Dr. Belousek. I am deeply appreciative of his service to the church by way of his monumental work on the subject of the atonement. It is crucial that we be willing to thoroughly and critically engage the Scriptures and the history of Christian theology in order to refine our understanding(s) of the central event of Christian belief—indeed, the central event of history itself—the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. Equally important is our ongoing reflection on the implications of this event for our discipleship; the mission to which we are called must of course be understood in light of Christ's person and work. Belousek does both in an impressive fashion.

## OVERALL REFLECTIONS

Before moving to discussion of the chapter in question (“Jesus’ Understanding of His Own Death”), I offer some overall reflections on *Atonement, Justice, and Peace*. As one who shares in Belousek’s commitment to Anabaptism, I am well aware of the tension between, say, the teaching of Jesus regarding love of enemies and biblical images of violence. How we interpret the cross is, in some ways, an indication of our wider hermeneutical commitments. For those committed to Jesus’ teaching regarding peace, questions around penal substitution have been pervasive in recent times given the obvious implications for Christian discipleship of propitiatory sacrifice as a descriptive attribute of God.

Belousek’s book is important in regard to such ongoing debates, not least because of the approach it represents. While it is nowadays common for Christians to cast doubt over doctrines such as penal substitution, I cannot help but wonder whether such doubt is often motivated by a feeling of discomfort, a subjective sense of dis-ease. Such feelings may be somewhat valid, but they hardly constitute a meaningful refutation of the doctrine in question. Belousek’s work stands against such an approach by committing to engage with the Scriptures in a robust and (I would say) orthodox fashion. In fact, anecdotally, some people have commented to me regarding the conservative nature of Belousek’s exegetical approach. I take this as a strength, since it means people from all stripes can engage with his work (not always the case with critiques of PSA).

Related to this is that I am impressed with Belousek's commitment to an inductive approach on the question of atonement. This involves his insistence on sifting through the textual evidence rather than moving from a general theory of sin, sacrifice or justice toward more narrow conclusions. In this sense Belousek's approach is quite distinct from, say, the increasingly fashionable espousal of Girardian sociological and anthropological theories for interpreting the atonement. This is not to say that Girardianism or similar frameworks are without value—on the contrary, I think there is much value in Girard's work—but just that such theories are unconvincing to those who do not share their basic presuppositions. Belousek's work, focusing as it does on scriptural evidence as the starting point for a larger theory, centres debate on the biblical text itself rather than on the theories that only potentially form the basis of engagement with the text. This provides a methodologically suitable approach for people from a wide range of theological and philosophical backgrounds.

Not that Belousek is blind to the necessity of presuppositions in biblical interpretation—indeed he spends some time addressing the retributive paradigm as a commitment that exists *prior* to the act of reading. Where, perhaps, Belousek's book could be strengthened is in the exposition of his own philosophical commitments as they relate to the act of biblical interpretation, although I acknowledge this could easily be a tome in itself.

I also make note of the scope of Belousek's work. While his treatment of penal substitution will no doubt be a point of interest for enthusiasts and critics alike (hence this issue of PJBR), this is by no means the sole aim of *Atonement, Justice, and Peace*, nor is a general treatment of atonement in an abstract sense. Rather, Belousek's work takes seriously the ethical implications for any atonement doctrine, noting from the beginning that the retributive paradigm, particularly as reflected in certain approaches to Christian doctrine, manifests itself very concretely in human society, including public policy. It is fitting, then, that he sets out to explore the mission of the Church in terms of justice and peace as an expression of a cruciform worldview.

## JESUS' UNDERSTANDING OF HIS OWN DEATH

From here we move to discuss the content of the book chapter in focus, "Jesus' Understanding of His Own Death." Though in this chapter he will eventually move to analyse three key passages for his overall case—two that are often used in support of PSA—Belousek begins with a methodological consideration regarding the question of the historical Jesus. This allows him to set out his commitment to the historical authenticity of the Gospels' accounts of Jesus' sayings about his own death. Such is in contrast to the scepticism of some historical Jesus scholars who give primacy to their own historical presuppositions over the evidence of Scripture. This may turn off some progressive readers, but they are probably not the target audience since they are more likely to have already rejected PSA. Such readers would, however, benefit from familiarising themselves with Belousek's critiques of some of the recent attempts to formulate a nonviolent atonement.

Belousek then discusses the Lukan Transfiguration account, concluding that Luke understands Jesus' death as fitting the pattern of the rejected prophets, and as a New Exodus. Again, this is somewhat uncontroversial, though the implications are not minor. I imagine some exploration of the Matthean and Markan accounts of the Transfiguration may have been helpful since they also picture Jesus as fitting the pattern of a prophet, but with particular focus on the relationship with Elijah/John the Baptist, though I am sympathetic to the sole choice of Luke's account for the sake of brevity.

### The “Ransom Saying” (Mark 10:45)

Where the chapter moves into more challenging and controversial territory is in the section dealing with the so-called “ransom saying” in Mark 10:45, and indeed this is the section most requiring attention. The ransom saying is one of the most difficult and debated verses in the NT. Belousek is critical of John Stott's insistence that this verse is connected with the Suffering Servant of Isa 53, preferring instead to connect it to the Son of Man reference in Dan 7. Despite the towering influence of Stott, particularly his *The Cross of Christ*, I am left wondering why Belousek makes him his primary conversation partner at the outset of this section. There have been more scholarly treatments of this passage in subsequent decades,<sup>1</sup> including by those who concur with Stott's insistence that Mark 10:45 should be connected to Isa 53. Belousek does refer at some points to significant studies on the topic—including those of Hooker, McKnight and Kaminouchi—but these are not primary. Moreover, given Belousek's eventual dealing with Isa 53,<sup>2</sup> whereby he interprets the Suffering Servant poem as not supporting PSA, it is not clear why separating Mark 10:45 from Isa 53 is critical to his overall case. In fact, in light of Belousek's enlightening discussion of the Suffering Servant in a later chapter of his book, an intertextual discussion of these texts would have proved interesting, if nothing else. It may be that Belousek is too stringent, and in principle I do not see why an echo of both Isa 53 and Dan 7 cannot exist concurrently in Mark 10:45.<sup>3</sup> It may also have been a strengthening factor for Belousek's book to have engaged with more Markan commentators on this question, since many of them associate Mark 10:45 with Isa 53.<sup>4</sup> To be fair, Belousek does

<sup>1</sup> See especially the discussion by well-known scholars in William H. Bellinger, Jr. and William R. Farmer, eds., *Jesus and the Suffering Servant: Isaiah 53 and Christian Origins* (Harrisburg: Trinity, 1998), esp. Morna Hooker, “Did the Use of Isaiah 53 to Interpret His Mission Begin with Jesus?” 88–103; Rikki E. Watts, “Jesus’ Death, Isaiah 53, and Mark 10:45: A Crux Revisited,” 125–51; and N. T. Wright, “The Servant and Jesus: The Relevance of the Colloquy for the Current Quest for Jesus,” 281–97. See also G. R. Beasley-Murray, *Jesus and the Kingdom of God* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: W.B. Eerdmans, 1986), 273–83; Adela Yarbro Collins, “Mark’s Interpretation of the Death of Jesus,” *JBL* 128/3 (2009): 545–54; Craig A. Evans, *Mark 8:27–16:20* (WBC 34b; Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2001), 109–25; Peter Stuhlmacher, “Vicariously Giving His Life for Many, Mark 10:45 (Matt 20:28),” in *Reconciliation, Law, and Righteousness* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986), 16–29; Rikki E. Watts, *Isaiah’s New Exodus in Mark* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1997), 270–87; N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 579–91. For seminal examples prior to Stott’s work see C. K. Barrett, “The Background of Mark 10:45,” in *New Testament Essays* (ed. A. J. B. Higgins; Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1959), 1–18; Morna Hooker, *Jesus and the Servant: The Influence of the Servant Concept of Deutero-Isaiah in the New Testament* (London: SPCK, 1959).

<sup>2</sup> Chapter 13 of *Atonement, Justice, and Peace*.

<sup>3</sup> For an example of seeing echoes of both passages see Brant Pitre, “The ‘Ransom for Many,’ The New Exodus, and the End of the Exile: Redemption as the Restoration of All Israel (Mark 10:35–45),” *Letter & Spirit* 1 (2005): 41–68.

<sup>4</sup> E.g. R.T. France, *The Gospel of Mark* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 419–21; Ben Witherington III, *The Gospel of Mark: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 288–89; R. Alan Cole, *The Gospel*

acknowledge that even if one sees a textual link between Mark 10:45 and Isa 53, this is not sufficient grounds for equating ransom with penal substitute—a point with which I agree—and so he does make space for his argument even if his conclusion about the link between Mark 10:45 and Isa 53 were to be incorrect.

In any case, Belousek is correct to note that any interpretation of the ransom saying should begin not with Isa 53, another external passage, or any presupposition about Jesus, but with Mark 10:45 itself. Belousek notes some basic literary-critical observations, and I think incontrovertible his suggestion that the ransom saying is an elaboration of the entire pericope found in Mark 10:35–45 dealing with greatness and servanthood. However, when Belousek draws an intertextual comparison between Mark’s ransom saying and Luke 19:10 (“the Son of Man came … to serve … to give his life”) he opens himself to the criticism of conflating two distinct narratives, even if he has already stated a hermeneutic of trust regarding the historicity of the accounts of Jesus’ statements in the Gospels. I am not necessarily opposed to such a connection, but the point that he makes—that Jesus’ serving is a reference to his whole life and not just his death—need not rely on Luke 19 since it can be inferred from Mark 10’s insistence that the disciples are to serve in the same way Jesus serves. Such service cannot refer solely to Jesus’ atoning death since the disciples cannot emulate it. Belousek’s conclusion that Jesus’ service involves his whole life, and not merely his death, helps overcome the problem of reducing Jesus’ life and ministry to a mere prelude to the crucifixion.

In the next part of Belousek’s argument he argues that “ransom” (*hýtron*) refers neither to sacrifice nor punishment but to the price of the liberation of a slave.<sup>5</sup> In this way, Jesus’ way of servanthood becomes the ransom, the way of liberation. This conclusion regarding this verse is of course not novel; it was reached by Ched Myers over 25 years ago in his *Binding the Strong Man*.<sup>6</sup> Others have offered various versions of this interpretation.<sup>7</sup> Nonetheless it is necessary to repeat it; Mark 10:45 is one of those passages that arises regularly for those that seek to explore alternatives to penal substitutionary atonement, and the sole reason is this word “ransom.” Indeed, John Phillips calls 10:45 the “key verse in Mark’s gospel,” before associating it directly with the *lex talionis*.<sup>8</sup> Belousek goes to some lengths to define *hýtron* in a way that is consistent with the Hebrew OT (*kóphér*)/LXX, thus freeing this passage from the imposition of an external substitutionary paradigm. Moreover, his demonstration of the logical problems of seeing ransom as substitution is also helpful in clarifying what precisely is meant by the relevant terms

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<sup>5</sup> According to Mark: An Introduction and Commentary (TNTC; Leicester: IVP, 1989), 244–45; John R. Donahue & Daniel J. Harrington, *The Gospel of Mark* (Sacra Pagina; Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2002), 313–15.

<sup>6</sup> A contested claim, no doubt. See especially Collins, “Mark’s Interpretation,” 545–49.

<sup>7</sup> Ched Myers, *Binding the Strong Man* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.; Maryknoll: Orbis, 2008), 279.

<sup>8</sup> See for example Sharyn Dowd & Elizabeth Struthers Malbon, “The Significance of Jesus’ Death in Mark: Narrative Context and Authorial Audience,” *JBL* 125/2 (2006): 271–97; Alberto De Mingo Kaminouchi, *But It Is Not So Among You: Echoes of Power in Mark 10:32–45* (London: T&T Clark, 2003), 88–156; also those works referenced in Belousek’s chapter.

<sup>9</sup> John Phillips, *Exploring the Gospel of Mark: An Expository Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Academic, 2004), 227–28.

“substitution,” “exchange,” “ransom,” and “life.” Too often references are made to substitution—whether for or against the idea—without a firm understanding of what substitution logically entails.<sup>9</sup>

One issue with Belousek’s work is in his critique and response to the “penal substitution view.” As stated above, Belousek summarises the PSA view of Mark 10:45 as being in agreement with Stott’s association of the verse with Isa 53. But this is an incomplete summary. For example, Collins, though affirming the connection between Mark 10:45 and Isa 53, bases her affirmation of the synonymous relationship between *hytron* in Mark 10:45 and *hilasterion* not on any Isaian connection, but rather on a combination of a lexical study of *hytron* in OT and Greek literature and literary-critical considerations in Mark.<sup>10</sup> It would have been helpful for Belousek to engage with such a perspective, or others like it that do not rely on Isa 53 to hold to a substitutionary reading of Mark 10:45, since they conflict with the chapter being discussed without being directly addressed in it.<sup>11</sup>

Another issue worth mentioning is Belousek’s insistence, following Leon Morris, that the ransom of Mark 10:45 is not literally paid to anyone, that the ransom is not an “exact description of the whole process of salvation.”<sup>12</sup> I am sympathetic to this perspective, though I do wonder if rejecting the need for a literal explanation of the mechanism of ransom is hermeneutically problematic in light of Belousek’s very literal rendering and critique of the notion of “substitution” vis-à-vis “exchange.” If we are able to take the concept of ransom as a “useful metaphor”<sup>13</sup> in which certain details are not exact (to whom the price paid), why can we not, in principle, do the same with other concepts embedded in the metaphor (“exchange”)? This concern cascades into another regarding the persuasiveness of Belousek’s argument for his intended evangelical audience. Specifically, will those who subscribe to an alternative and exact explanation of the mechanism of ransom within the framework of PSA be convinced by Belousek’s argument here? Of course, this last point is not a criticism of Belousek’s position, since even if he is correct, he will not be convincing to all readers.

### The Last Supper

Belousek moves finally to discuss the Last Supper accounts. He rectifies the PSA insistence on associating the “cup of Jesus’ blood” with the Levitical sacrifices by pointing out that, narratively speaking, the Last Supper is actually associated with the Passover. Here Belousek must be careful not to create a false dichotomy, as if the Last Supper cannot reference more than one narrative of the past. Belousek does defend the exclusion of a reference to Levitical sacrifice by pointing out Jesus’ bypassing of the temple system, but there is still the possibility that Jesus intends his act at the Last Supper to reference and *subvert*

<sup>9</sup> See Collins, “Mark’s Interpretation,” 547 for an example of blurring the distinction between “substitution” and (in Belousek’s language) “exchange.”

<sup>10</sup> Collins, “Mark’s Interpretation,” 545–49. See also Adela Yarbro Collins, “The Signification of Mark 10:45 among Gentile Christians,” *HTR* 90/4 (1997): 371–82.

<sup>11</sup> Belousek, *Atonement, Justice, and Peace*, 149–56.

<sup>12</sup> Belousek (quoting Leon Morris), *Atonement, Justice, and Peace*, 156.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

this system. Jesus' forgiveness of sins, and thus his assumption of the atoning function of the temple cult, prior to the Last Supper, however, suggests Belousek is probably correct on this point.

The remainder of Belousek's discussion of the Last Supper is fairly detailed, and I am not able to do justice to it in this context. His acumen in deconstructing the logical problems of seeing Jesus the Passover Lamb as a penal substitute is clear and formidable. The same is the case with his treatment of the blood of the covenant as seal of relationship rather than instrument of remission of sins. By portraying Jesus' death as the moment of a New Exodus and the restoration of covenant, Belousek puts forward an aspect of the atonement that includes liberation from slavery to sin and death, the renewal of relationship with God, the forgiveness of sins, return from exile, the healing of disease, and the coming of God's kingdom, all without giving up anything of crucial importance within the penal substitutionary model. It does this without the need for a retributive approach to justice and peace but with a profound appreciation for the details of the biblical story.

## CONCLUSION

I conclude by noting that among Belousek's most sage pieces of advice is his reminder to us that, "When interpreting Jesus' death, we must be careful neither to collapse its manifold of meaning into a singularity, nor to superimpose the view of Jesus' followers onto Jesus himself."<sup>14</sup> This does not entail accepting every proposed meaning for Jesus' atonement (indeed Belousek clearly does not), but it does mean being attentive to the varied aspects of the scriptural witness. May the ongoing discussions of Belousek's work be open to more than just our favourite texts. Furthermore, may these discussions approach the subject of the meaning of the atonement with the necessary patience to sit with the whole story of God's restorative action in the world and to attempt to be faithful to it in its fullness. I thank Dr. Belousek for his magisterial attempt to do such things.

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<sup>14</sup> Belousek, *Atonement, Justice, and Peace*, 159.