

# CONTINUING THE CONVERSATION: REJOINDER TO RESPONDENTS FROM THE MORLING CONFERENCE ON ATONEMENT THEOLOGY

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The Morling Conference in May 2014 comprised four lectures by me encompassing a range of topics and texts, based on my book *Atonement, Justice, and Peace: The Message of the Cross and the Mission of the Church*, followed by responses to each lecture: “Jesus’ Death and Christian Tradition: Ancient Creeds and Trinitarian Theology” (Graeme Chatfield responding); “Jesus’ Death and the Old Testament: Atoning Sacrifice and the Suffering Servant” (Anthony Petterson responding); “Jesus’ Death and the Synoptic Gospels: New Exodus and New Covenant” (Matthew Anslow responding); and “Jesus’ Death and the Pauline Epistles: ‘Mercy Seat’ and Place-Taking” (David Starling responding). I thank each of my interlocutors for their respective contributions to the conversation. As readers will have discovered, two of the respondents were more favorable, and two were more sceptical, toward the Anabaptist perspective and particular arguments presented in my book. I will present my rejoinder in that order.

## REJOINDER TO GRAEME CHATFIELD AND MATTHEW ANSLOW

Graeme Chatfield adds some helpful historical background and nuance to the question of the relationship of the penal substitution theory of atonement (PSA) to Christian tradition. In addition to Cyprian, whose view he nicely details, one could consider Tertullian and Augustine as Western-Latin writers articulating views of atonement that could, in retrospect, be read as “anticipating” later developments of atonement ideas in Anselm and Calvin. Yet, as Chatfield appropriately cautions us, the historical and cultural distances between these respective writers prevents easy identification of such terms as “satisfaction” that depend on context and thus shift in meaning over the centuries. Furthermore, I would add, while Athanasius is not to be read as an ancient anticipation of Calvin, even reading Anselm as a medieval anticipation of Calvin obscures the way in which Anselm’s apologetic not only explicitly addresses the same question as Athanasius—“Why the incarnation?”—but also effectively aligns with Athanasius both by viewing the whole incarnation—Jesus’ obedience in life and death—as having redemptive value and by understanding (in differing terms, to be sure) Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection as integral to God’s purpose in the divine economy to restore creation.

In general, I concur with Chatfield’s conclusion: “I would suggest that PSA is anticipated in the writings of the early church fathers and the creeds in the sense that the language used to support PSA

existed at that time and is not incompatible with the later fully developed meanings attributed to it by those who support PSA. This means that other theories of the atonement can also be anticipated in the writings of the early church and creeds.” In stating that God the Son became human “for (*dia*) us and for (*dia*) our salvation” and that Christ “was crucified for (*hyper*) us,” the Nicene Creed affirms in generic terms the saving purpose of the divine incarnation and the vicarious function of Jesus’ death. Whereas the creedal tradition, I think, does place broad constraints on theological construction, these statements themselves do not specify any theory of atonement; the generic language is compatible with many possible theories. While any atonement theory could look back to the Nicene Creed as precedent for its preferred explanation of Jesus’ death, it is an exercise in special pleading to argue that the creedal language privileges one theory over others.

One general constraint on atonement theories derived from the creedal tradition is that Father and Son are related as both one (qua “substance”) and distinct (qua “persons”) and that this relationship of unity-in-distinction is maintained continuously throughout the divine economy. I am not the first critic to question whether PSA transgresses that boundary by (implicitly, at least) pitting Father against Son or dividing Son from Father at the cross. Chatfield challenges my critique of John Stott on this point and defends (a la Paul Fiddes) the idea of “a separation based on mutual consent” between Father and Son at the cross as a consequence of the reality of sin as experienced by the Son, a separation of “real abandonment” expressed in Jesus’ cry of God-forsakenness. He illustrates this idea with a story of a final, consensual separation between husband and wife that leaves one partner to die “alone and abandoned.”

I agree with Chatfield that faith accepts mysteries beyond reason and thus that theology is not reducible to logic. My concern here is not merely logical, that our language not contradict itself, nor only systematic, that our language not contradict the creed, but in the first place biblical, that our language not contradict the testimony of Scripture. While I think that there is a subtle slide in meaning from “alone” to “abandoned,” to avoid further squabbles over words let’s focus simply on “alone” and consider one text from John’s Gospel.<sup>1</sup> On the night before his death, during his final discourse to his disciples, Jesus issued a warning: “The hour … has come” when they would scatter in fear and “leave me alone” as he faced his death. “Yet,” Jesus immediately affirmed, “I am *not alone* because the Father is with me” (John 16:32, emphasis added).<sup>2</sup> Jesus went on, praying: “Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son so that the Son may glorify you … I glorified you on earth by finishing the work that you gave me to do. So now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had in your presence before the world existed” (John 17:1, 4–5). As to what this final “hour” of his glorification would be, Jesus had already given testimony in anticipation of his death: “Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say, ‘Father save me from this hour?’ No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour” (John 12:27; cf. vv. 32–33). To say that Jesus died “alone,” in the absence even of the Father, is at odds with Jesus’ testimony that the Father’s “own presence” would glorify Jesus in “the hour” of his death with the same glory that Jesus had known in the

<sup>1</sup> *Atonement, Justice, and Peace: The Message of the Cross and the Mission of the Church* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing, 2012), 303–305.

<sup>2</sup> All Scripture quotations, unless indicated otherwise, are taken from the New Revised Standard Version.

Father's presence from all eternity. Whatever one's interpretation of Jesus' cry at the cross, therefore, it cannot lead to the conclusion that Jesus died "absolutely alone," bereft even of the Father's presence (as Stott claimed). Perhaps I overplay the philosopher here, but I would suggest that any atonement theory that contradicts Jesus has, at best, missed the mark.

Matthew Anslow asks some warranted questions concerning my methodology, both hermeneutical (how I read Scripture and why) and rhetorical (who I engage with and why). First, Anslow accentuates the "conservative nature" of my exegetical approach, assessing it as a virtue of the book. This approach is both convictional and tactical. While informed by critical scholarship, my interpretive habits reflect my faith commitment concerning Scripture as primary authority for Christian doctrine: Scripture is "the Rule that rules" against which every candidate for Christian doctrine must be measured. Accordingly, I would test any atonement theory against careful exegesis of the biblical text; and that is the measure by which I have sought to judge PSA in the book. My approach to Scripture also respects readers inclined to favour PSA, whose own theological convictions are likely to be based on what they believe "Scripture says." To retain the sceptical reader, much less have any chance of persuading him or her to seriously consider an alternative perspective, I must adhere closely to, and persuade primarily on, Scripture.

Second, Anslow wonders why I picked John Stott as primary interlocutor for discussion of the "Ransom" text, rather than more recent biblical scholars and commentators. Picking Stott follows my deliberate strategy to engage directly with prominent proponents of PSA and address their arguments on their own terms and texts rather than rely on arbitrary reconstructions or, worse, distorted caricatures of PSA. Throughout the first half of the book, which develops a comprehensive critique of PSA, I engage with such recognized and respected scholars as Charles Hodge, Roger Nicole, Leon Morris, I. Howard Marshall, J.I. Packer, Thomas Schreiner, and Daniel Wallace in addition to John Stott. Accordingly, I begin the discussion in each of the thirteen chapters dealing with PSA by engaging with the views of one or more PSA proponents before involving other scholars, precisely to avoid prejudicing the discussion against PSA. I picked Stott for initiating discussion of the "Ransom" text because I thought he provided the best standard representation of the PSA viewpoint on that text from among the major proponents of PSA.

Now, a couple of comments on fine points about specific texts: Regarding the "Ransom" saying in Mark 10:45, Anslow states that I seek to disconnect this text from the "Suffering Servant" of Isa 53 and instead connect it to the "Son of Man" of Dan 7. I don't think that this accurately reflects what I've argued in the book. I do not actually try to connect Mark 10:45 to Dan 7, but only suggest that in Jesus' self-reference as "Son of Man" in Mark 10:45 one might hear an echo of the "Son of Man" of Dan 7 rather than an allusion to the "Suffering Servant" of Isa 53. The question at stake is not whether the Gospel writers depict the ministry of Jesus according to the pattern of the Servant of the Lord in Isa 40–55—they clearly do so. The question, rather, is whether by his "Ransom" saying Jesus meant to self-identify with the "Suffering Servant" of Isa 53, as is often claimed; and I find the inter-textual evidence for

that specific connection to be insufficient to draw the inference with confidence.<sup>3</sup> Nonetheless, even if we cannot pin Jesus' "Ransom" saying precisely on Isa 53, I do affirm that Isa 40–55 is the appropriate canonical reference of the "Ransom" saying. I thus go on in the book to interpret Mark 10:45 against the background of the broader theme of "ransom/redemption" in Isa 40–55. In doing so, I give emphasis to the first and second Servant songs in Isa 42 and Isa 49, which are often neglected in atonement discussions in favour of the third Servant song in Isa 53 but which, I would argue, are just as relevant for understanding Jesus' ministry as fulfilling the pattern set forth in the prophets.<sup>4</sup>

Regarding the Last Supper, Anslow warns against unnecessarily narrowing the Gospel narrative to a single canonical reference. I agree. While arguing that the Levitical cult is not the appropriate canonical reference for interpreting the Last Supper (an argument with which Anslow is sympathetic),<sup>5</sup> at the same time I do not interpret the Last Supper by reference to a single canonical narrative. Rather, I elaborate Jesus' understanding of the saving significance of his death and resurrection as symbolized in the Last Supper in terms of two inter-connected canonical narratives, the Exodus from Egypt that was remembered at the Passover meal and the covenant at Sinai that Jesus referenced by his "cup" saying.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, it is precisely by seeing both of these canonical narratives as converging in the Last Supper that I am able to draw the connections between Jesus' death and resurrection and liberation ("ransom") from sin and death, renewal of covenant, and forgiveness of sin without resort to the presuppositions and categories of PSA.

#### REJOINDER TO ANTHONY PETTERSON AND DAVID STARLING

Anthony Petterson and David Starling have offered detailed responses to specific arguments in the book as well as biblical interpretations from their own perspectives. Together they present substantive contentions that merit serious consideration, but to which the limited space of this venue does not allow a point-by-point response. Rather, I will respond by tracing out a common thread of logic that runs through their respective contributions.

Petterson offers a rebuttal to my argument in the book that challenges the PSA premise of a necessary linkage between sin, wrath, and punishment as sin's consequence to satisfy God's wrath. He observes that there are many texts in the Old Testament that do exhibit sin, wrath, and punishment linked in this way. Lest the reader be confused, we need to clarify the question. The question is not whether God is disposed against sin or whether God's opposition to sin is expressed by wrath; there is, of course, ample biblical evidence that such is the case. Nor is the question whether there are various texts in the Old Testament that exhibit sin, wrath, and punishment in a sequence that links (a) sin to (b) God's wrath and to (c) punishment of sin as the satisfaction of God's wrath: yes, there are such texts. To this extent, there

<sup>3</sup> *Atonement, Justice, and Peace*, 146–48.

<sup>4</sup> *Atonement, Justice, and Peace*, 153–55; cf. 369–71.

<sup>5</sup> *Atonement, Justice, and Peace*, 156–59.

<sup>6</sup> *Atonement, Justice, and Peace*, 159–63 (concerning the Passover context) and 164–67 (concerning the covenant connection).

is no dispute; in fact, I catalogue various such texts in the book.<sup>7</sup> The question, rather, is whether the sin-wrath-punishment sequence, having been observed in certain texts, thereby establishes a general pattern that (and this is the crucial point) then warrants us to *infer* (b) God's wrath and (c) punishment of sin to satisfy God's wrath in *other* texts where (a) sin *is* mentioned but (b) wrath and (c) punishment are *not* mentioned. Petterson claims that there is a general pattern, such that "God's wrath against sin is implied even in passages where it is not mentioned." In Petterson's view, there is no need for the text before us to explicitly reference God's wrath, or even explicitly link God's wrath against sin to punishment of sin to satisfy God's wrath; the general pattern establishes an implicit linkage such that where sin is mentioned we can then infer God's wrath and punishment of sin to satisfy God's wrath.

The necessary linkage of sin-wrath-punishment for which Petterson argues is essential to PSA.<sup>8</sup> The PSA rationale for the *necessity* of Jesus' death *as* sin's punishment to satisfy God's wrath is premised on the presupposition of a *necessary* linkage between sin, wrath, and punishment, such that: (1) wrath is God's *necessary* response to sin; and (2) punishment for sin is the *necessary* remedy to satisfy God's wrath against sin. If the latter necessities (1) and (2) are lacking—that is, if wrath is *not* God's necessary response to sin *or* if punishment for sin is *not* necessary to satisfy God's wrath against sin—then the former necessity of Jesus' death *as* sin's punishment to satisfy God's wrath is also lacking. Petterson's argument thus calls for careful scrutiny.

Let's consider the logical form of Petterson's argument. That logic goes like this:

Text A exhibits sequence sin-wrath-punishment.

Text B exhibits sequence sin-wrath-punishment.

Text C exhibits sequence sin-wrath-punishment.

Text D mentions sin; therefore it implies wrath and punishment.

This argument form will be recognized as an inductive inference (all the crows observed thus far are black, therefore all crows are black). Now, an inductive inference of a general pattern is confounded by a single counterexample (the observation of one white crow disproves the inference that all crows are black). And, in fact, Scripture exhibits two classes of "white crows"—counterexamples to the sin-wrath-punishment sequence—that undercut the twin necessities (1) and (2), respectively. One class of counterexample comprises those texts that depict God's response to Israel's sin, not as the wrath of a punishing disciplinarian, but as the sadness or sorrow of a disappointed parent or spurned lover (Isa 1:2-4; Isa 5:1-7; Jer 3:19-22; Hos 11:1-9). Another class of counterexample comprises those texts that depict God responding in wrath to sin but where God's wrath is turned away by other than punishment: by acts of humility (2 Chr 32:24-26; Zeph 2:1-3) or petition/confession (Pss 6 and 32) or repentance (2 Chr 7:13-14; Jer 4:1-4) on the part of the sinner; and, frequently, by acts of God, either on account of sheer mercy or for the sake of God's name (Isa 12:1; 48:9-11; 57:16-18; Jer 3:12-14; Ezek 20:7-9, 13-14, 21-22; Hos 14:4).<sup>9</sup> Psalm 78, which recounts God's leading Israel through the wilderness, exhibits both classes of

<sup>7</sup> *Atonement, Justice, and Peace*, 211-12.

<sup>8</sup> *Atonement, Justice, and Peace*, 210.

<sup>9</sup> *Atonement, Justice, and Peace*, 212-13, 401.

“white crows.” Although God has liberated the people from slavery and supplied them with drink in the desert, the people sin against God by ingratitude and complaint (vv. 9–20). Israel’s lack of faith offends God, arousing God’s anger; yet, God’s first response to Israel’s sin is not to pour out wrath to punish them but rather to rain down manna to feed them (vv. 21–29). Despite God’s gracious response to their sins, Israel continues sinning, provoking God further to anger; and in wrath God does dispense punishment on Israel (vv. 30–37). But then God restrains wrath, suspends punishment, and forgives sin—not because God has been satisfied by punishment, nor even because the people have appeased God by repentance, but simply because God is “compassionate” and remembers that “they were but flesh” (vv. 38–39).<sup>10</sup>

From these counterexamples, we can draw two conclusions. First, Scripture testifies that wrath is not God’s *necessary*—not God’s *only*—response to sin; God can respond to sin in ways other than wrath. And, second, Scripture testifies that even when God does respond in wrath to sin, punishment is not the *necessary*—not the *only*—means by which God’s wrath is turned away; God’s wrath can be turned away by means other than punishment. Not only *can* God deal with sin otherwise than by punishment to satisfy wrath, moreover, but the Torah, Prophets, and Psalms bear repeated witness that God actually *does* deal with Israel’s sins in a manner that transcends the sin-wrath-punishment sequence—and thus that God, in characteristic love and faithfulness, is free to break the sin-wrath-punishment linkage. Even when Israel persists in sinning to the point of provoking God and receiving punishment, neither is wrath God’s first response to, nor is punishment God’s final word concerning, Israel’s sins: YHWH is “slow to anger” (Exod 34:6–7; Pss 86:15; 103:8; 145:8), “ready to relent from punishing” (Jonah 4:1–2; Joel 2:13) and “ready to forgive” (Neh 9:17). God’s just dealings with Israel’s sins, framed within God’s covenant, display a “redemptive tension” between wrath and mercy held together by God’s characteristic love and faithfulness—which always holds out promise of, and thus grounds Israel’s hope for, redemption beyond retribution.<sup>11</sup>

What is the upshot of all this? The scriptural testimony of the Old Testament pulls the logical rug from under the PSA rationale for the *necessity* of understanding Jesus’ death *as* sin’s punishment to satisfy God’s wrath: because God can (and does) respond to sin other than in wrath, and because God can (and

<sup>10</sup> Petterson disputes my reading of the Uzzah story (2 Sam 6:1–11) as illustrating God’s wrath against transgression of the holy (i.e., God’s wrath on account of some cause other than sin). He contends that Uzzah suffered the penalty of death to satisfy the wrath of God aroused by the sin of mistreating the ark of covenant. He is correct, of course, that the treatment of the ark in this incident is contrary to God’s intentions and instructions and is displeasing to God. Petterson’s reading of the story entails a conundrum, however. The military campaign to retrieve the ark and enshrine it at the recently conquered Jerusalem was planned and led by King David; and he did this to consolidate his power in “the city of David” rather than to honour God’s glory (2 Sam 6:16–19). If there is guilt to be punished here, then the greatest guilt—and the first punishment—should fall on David. Moreover, if one thinks the guilt should fall on all participating, then the punishment also should be shared by all. Both Uzzah and his brother Ahio were transporting the ark on the ox cart; both brothers should thus have suffered the same fate for the same sin. But neither David nor Ahio die, only Uzzah dies. Therefore, if Uzzah dies by God’s wrath *as* punishment for the sin of mistreating the ark, then God’s retribution appears arbitrary in selecting Uzzah for death. To avoid this implication of Petterson’s interpretation, I have concluded that the cause of God’s wrath and Uzzah’s death lies in some factor peculiar to Uzzah: he is the only one to touch the ark and thus the only one to die; for improperly touching the holy things of God is deadly (Num 4:15).

<sup>11</sup> *Atonement, Justice, and Peace*, 396–433. Unfortunately, Petterson’s response is unaware of my extensive discussion of divine judgement in a covenant framework.

does) deal with sin other than by punishment, it is *not necessary* that we understand Jesus' death "for our sins" *in terms of PSA*, as punishment of sin to satisfy God's wrath.

The reader may wonder at this point whether being taxed by this exercise in logic is itself necessary or beneficial. That such careful scrutiny is needed and helpful is evident when we turn to two central texts in atonement theology—Isa 53 and Rom 3:21–26—and consider how Petterson and Starling, respectively, read those texts. Petterson acknowledges that "the fourth Servant Song does not mention God's wrath." That fact notwithstanding, Petterson argues that we should still read Isaiah 53 as depicting the penal satisfaction of God's wrath by means of the Servant's suffering because God's wrath is "the frame for understanding the book as a whole." Accordingly, Petterson catalogues various references to God's wrath throughout Isaiah, including references in chapters near Isa 53; this textual milieu of divine wrath, in effect, carries over into Isa 53, such that God's wrath is the main point of that text as well. In Petterson's reading, Isa 53 is "the turning point" of the book, in which the Servant's suffering resolves Israel's problem of God's wrath: before this point, YHWH is declaring wrath and inflicting punishment; after this point, YHWH is announcing compassion and bringing salvation.

Petterson's reading, however, does not successfully correlate all the textual evidence. If Isa 53 is "the turning point" that resolves Israel's problem of God's wrath, with wrath coming before and compassion following after, then we may ask: (a) Why does God announce "comfort" to the people and "speak tenderly" to Jerusalem, assuring the city that "her penalty is paid" (Isa 40:1–2) *before* the prophet reveals the Lord's Servant to Israel (Isa 42:1)? The text here would seem to indicate that, prior to the Servant's commissioning, God's wrath and Israel's punishment have already come to an end and God's compassionate salvation is already underway (Isa 40:3–11)—and, thus, that the Servant's suffering was unnecessary to resolve Israel's problem. (b) Why does the prophet petition God to "not be exceedingly angry ... not remember iniquity forever," to not "punish us so severely" (Isa 64:8–12) *after* the Servant's suffering? The text here would seem to imply that, despite the Servant's suffering, God's wrath is not yet satisfied, God's punishment has not yet relented, Israel's sins are not yet forgiven—and, thus, that the Servant's suffering was insufficient to resolve Israel's problem.

There is, moreover, a significant anomaly in the textual evidence for the "wrath" reading of the Servant's suffering. The mention of God's wrath immediately preceding Isaiah 53 is found in Isaiah 51:17–23, which comes between the third and fourth Servant songs. The prophet proclaims that, whereas the people of Jerusalem "have drunk at the hand of the LORD the cup of his wrath" (v. 17), now YHWH announces: "See, I have taken from your hand the cup of staggering; you shall drink no more from the bowl of my wrath" (v. 22). YHWH's wrath *against Jerusalem* has ended, says the prophet; yet YHWH's wrath is not ended—the "cup" is to be transferred to another to drink. To whom does YHWH transfer the "cup of wrath"? On the "wrath" reading of the Servant's suffering, we would expect YHWH to hand the "cup" to the Servant, who would then "drink to the dregs" and exhaust God's wrath in the people's place. However, YHWH says: "And I will put it into the hand of your tormentors" (v. 23). According to the prophet, therefore, YHWH transfers the "cup of wrath" from Jerusalem, not to the Servant, but to the

nations, who will now be judged because they have oppressed God's people and despised God's name (52:3–6).

While one could try to work out an interpretive fix to resolve these anomalies in the “wrath” reading of Isaiah 53, we might just as well seek a different reading by taking different texts as the “frame” for Isa 53. The four Servant songs, of which Isa 53 is the last, all fall within the section of Isaiah that is sometimes called “the book of consolation” (Isa 40–55). That section begins with God announcing “comfort,” not wrath, for Israel (Isa 40:1–2). Accordingly, we observe, none of the four Servant songs (Isa 42:1–7; 49:1–13; 50:4–11; 52:13–53:12) makes any mention of, or allusion to, God's wrath. Suppose, then, that we take Isa 40:1–2 as projecting the horizon for interpreting the Servant's mission; and suppose, further, that we interpret the fourth Servant song in line with the thematic trajectory of the first three Servant songs. We might thus interpret the Servant's mission and suffering in relation to God's work of redemption in a mode other than as penal satisfaction of God's wrath. Consider this alternative reading: God announces “comfort” to Israel, that Jerusalem's “penalty is paid”—wrath is ended, punishment is finished, forgiveness has begun (Isa 40:1–2). The prophet envisions God returning in glory to the ruins of Jerusalem and gathering the scattered flock with tender care—exile is ending, return is commencing, peace is renewing (Isa 40:3–11). God then calls the Servant to facilitate God's work of redemption and restoration: the Servant's mission is to teach God's justice to the nations (Isa 42:1–4), liberate prisoners from captivity (Isa 42:4–7), gather Israel back to God and return the people to the land (Isa 49:1–13), and repair the streets of the city (cf. Isa 61:1–4). When the Servant, willingly obedient to God's cause, encounters accusation and abuse from the very people to whom he is sent, God comes to the Servant's defense (Isa 50:4–11). And when the people finally turn in hostility against the Servant, taking him away to trial by injustice and putting him to death by iniquity, God lets the people strike down the Servant in their rebellion.<sup>12</sup> But then God not only vindicates the Servant but also—by a surprising act of sheer grace—turns the Servant's unjust punishment at the people's hands to the people's peace by making the Servant's life an offering to heal the people's guilt (Isa 52:13–53:12). Reading the mission and suffering of the Servant in this way, we might easily see why the Gospel writers depict the mission and passion of Jesus as fulfilling the pattern of the Lord's Servant.

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<sup>12</sup> It is crucial to how we interpret the Servant's suffering that we get the translation of the text correct. Most English translations read like the NRSV: “he was wounded *for* our transgressions, he was crushed *for* our iniquities” (Isa 53:5a). This rendering is usually interpreted in terms of penal substitution: God punished the Servant instead of the people to pay the penalty for the people's sins and so satisfy God's wrath. But this translation is simply incorrect; it is not what the Hebrew or Greek text actually says. The Hebrew preposition *min* carries the sense of “from” or “by” (not “for”) and the Greek preposition *dia* carries the sense of “on account of” or “because of” (not “instead of”). The translation should read: “he was wounded *from* our rebellion, he was crushed *by* our sins.” The same preposition appears a few verses later in the same vein of thought: “By (*min*) oppression and by (*min*) judgement he was taken away ... stricken from (*min*) the rebellion of my people” (Isa 53:8, my translation). Thus, the prophet reveals that the Servant suffers, not from having been “stricken” by the hand of God as the people had wrongly supposed (Isa 53:4), but from the rebellion of the people: the Servant suffers because the people have, by their own unjust acts, killed him! Nonetheless, by means of the Servant's endurance of the unjust punishment inflicted upon him by the people, God brings forth healing and peace for the people: “upon him was the punishment that made us whole, and by his bruises we are healed” (Isa 53:5b). See my detailed discussion of this text in *Atonement, Justice, and Peace*, 224–43.

Next we turn to Starling's response and Rom 3:21–26, a key Pauline text concerning "the redemption that is in Christ Jesus" (Rom 3:24). Like Petterson, Starling acknowledges that this text makes no mention of God's wrath against sinners much less of Jesus' death as satisfaction of God's wrath: "Certainly, in Rom 3:21–26 ... the explicit references are to "sin," not to "wrath," as the plight that is addressed by the redemption accomplished in Christ." Nonetheless, Starling observes, the textual milieu of Rom 3 is itself framed by the problem of God's wrath and retribution against sinners (cf. Rom 1:18–32; 2:5–10; 5:9). Therefore, Starling concludes, the rest of Romans establishes an interpretive framework centered on God's wrath and retribution such that we should interpret this text, and thus God's work of redemption in Christ, in terms of resolving the problem of God's wrath and retribution: "There is therefore an ample basis for the traditional reading of Rom 3:21–26, in which the depiction of Christ as a *hilasterion*, a mercy-seat, through the shedding of his blood, is understood against the backdrop of not just our sin but also the divine, judicial wrath that stood against us because of our sin."<sup>13</sup>

There is no disagreement that, according to Paul, sinners live under God's wrath and, by persisting in their alienation from God, receive the deserved end of their disobedient choices, death (Rom 1:18–32; 6:20–23). Indeed, Paul says that all those who choose disobedience against God and live according to the "desires of flesh" are "children of wrath" and are already "dead" in the life of sin they now lead (Eph 2:1–3). There is also no disagreement that Paul understands God to hold the prerogative of retribution (cf. Rom 12:19) and thus envisions a final judgement when God will "repay according to each one's deeds," such that those who are unrepentant and persistent in their sinful ways will receive the "wrath" that they have "stor[ed] up for [themselves]" (Rom 2:5–10). The question here is how Paul understands the redemptive work of Christ in relation to both sin and judgement. Again, as with Isa 53, key to this question is which text we are to take as our cue for interpreting the cross when Paul introduces it at Rom 3:21–26. Petterson interprets the cross in Rom 3 as the logical conclusion to the premises of sin and of God's wrath against sinners set forth in Rom 1 and Rom 2: the cross of Christ satisfies the wrath of God.

Suppose, however, that we take a different cue for reading the text. I would suggest that, at the very point in his argument where he introduces the cross, Paul deliberately signals a decisive break from the logic of sin-wrath-punishment with an emphatic declaration: "But now ..." (*Nuni de*). Up until "now," in the old era, the law of sin-wrath-punishment had reigned: humanity, having denied the truth about God evident in creation, had exchanged the worship of the Creator for the worship of creatures; God, revealing "wrath" against such "impiety" and "injustice," thus "gave up" humanity to their "lusts" and "passions" with the decree that those who chose to sin as a way of life would be destined for the end of death that their sins deserved (Rom 1:18–32). Since "all ... are under the power of sin," all were also "under the law," such that no one was exempt from the judgement of sin and thus no one could escape the end of

<sup>13</sup> Unfortunately, Starling's response ignores my detailed examination of the Old Testament background and the New Testament usage of the noun *hilasterion* (along with the related verb *hilaskomai* and noun *hilasmos*), which is crucial to interpreting Rom 3:21–26. The textual evidence demonstrates clearly that *hilasterion* (which referred originally to the lid of the ark of covenant) does not signify propitiation of God—and thus, I think, warrants the conclusion that Paul, by saying that God presented Jesus as *hilasterion* through the cross (Rom 3:25), did not intend to depict Jesus' death as satisfying God's wrath. See *Atonement, Justice, and Peace*, 244–64.

death (Rom 3:9–20, 23). “But now” God has acted in Christ with justice that transcends the law of sin-wrath-punishment: “But now, *apart from law*, the justice of God has been disclosed … through the faithfulness of Jesus Christ” (Rom 3:21–22, my translation, emphasis added). God’s law-transcending justice-doing has provided a way of “redemption in Christ Jesus” (Rom 3:24) and thus has opened a new era for humanity, such that those who had been “slaves of sin” under the “dominion of death” in the old era (“in Adam”) are now freed from “the power of sin” in order to live for righteousness in the new era (“in Christ”) (cf. Rom 5:12–6:23). What “justice of God” is this that has been disclosed by the faithfulness of Jesus and by which God has redeemed sinners through the cross of Christ? God has “justified [sinners] by his grace as a gift” (Rom 3:24; cf. 5:15–17). God’s justice has redeemed us “by his grace as a gift”—not justice by punishment to satisfy the personal wrath of God (per PSA) but rather justice rooted in the personal generosity and abundant grace of God.<sup>14</sup> The “redemption that is in Christ Jesus,” one could thus read this text, is not the logical conclusion to the law of sin-wrath-punishment but rather the faithful outworking of God’s law-surpassing, grace-giving justice: God’s justice through the cross of Christ transcends retribution for the sake of redemption.

Although God’s wrath cannot be *found* in Isa 53 or Rom 3:21–26, Petterson and Starling contend that God’s wrath can be *inferred* in these texts; and God’s wrath, once inferred, becomes the gravitational center and interpretive axis around which revolves their readings of these texts. This hermeneutic principle—that God’s wrath is implied by, and thus may be inferred in, texts where God’s wrath is not mentioned—prompts various questions. (1) What is the textual criterion for inferring God’s wrath in a text where it is not mentioned? Is the mere mention of sin sufficient or is some further textual cue necessary? (2) Insofar as the milieu of wrath may carry over from one text where wrath is mentioned to another text where wrath is not mentioned, how close to the present text must be the nearest mention of wrath to warrant making an inference of wrath in the present text? (3) What is the canonical scope of this hermeneutic principle? Is God’s wrath the frame for understanding the Bible as a whole? Are there any salvation texts that *cannot* be read as implicitly about God’s wrath? Making a reasonable defense of this hermeneutic principle, I think, requires giving plausible answers to these questions; otherwise, it seems to me, invoking this mode of interpretation is an exercise in begging the question.

Petterson and Starling read Isa 53 and Rom 3:21–26 in a manner that is par for the PSA course. No doubt, one *can* read those texts to revolve around the interpretive axis of God’s wrath. The question, rather, is whether these texts *must* be read in that manner—and, if not, *why* those of us who do *not* share a prior disposition toward PSA should read those texts in that manner. Were we to remove PSA as the assumed lens for reading Scripture, then interpreting those texts in terms of God’s wrath and punishment, despite the fact that the texts make no mention of such, is not at all obvious much less necessary.

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<sup>14</sup> Starling might respond at this point by charging me as guilty of making a “false dichotomy.” Can we not, he might ask, understand God’s “grace as a gift through the redemption in Christ Jesus” to be the penal satisfaction of God’s wrath by Jesus’ death? The “false dichotomy” charge begs the question, I think, because it implies that any attempt to interpret the text in terms other than PSA (wrath and retribution) is guilty of a “false dichotomy.” Of course, it is logically possible to stipulate that “grace = penal satisfaction of God’s wrath by Jesus’ death” but why, other than having a prior bias in favor of PSA, should we adopt that theological equation?