

## Canceling the Debt We could Never Pay<sup>1</sup>

I couldn't think of a better story to start with than the one we've just heard about Barabbas. Imagine the events from Barabbas' perspective. We meet him as a condemned man spending his last hours in a Roman cell. We can only imagine what goes through the mind of a man who will face the harshest imaginable penalty for his crimes against the Empire. Barabbas is an insurrectionist. He has killed people. He has entered into a desperate, dangerous life realizing that he may well be killed in the process. Awake and alone through the night he steels himself for the terrifying ordeal ahead. He thinks about his childhood. He thinks about his mother and her pleas that he not go into the shadowy life of a radical.

Finally, the footsteps of the legionnaires announce that the end has come. The cell door opens. Big hands pull Barabbas to his feet. The prisoner is shoved to the small door in the cell. Someone delivers Barabbas a good kick just for good measure. "Get outta here, you dog!" Suddenly, Barabbas is standing outside the barracks alone in the morning sun. Imagine his bewilderment! Barabbas begins to walk unmolested, even unnoticed, through the streets.

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<sup>1</sup>Douglas DeCelle preached this sermon on March 9, 2008 at the First Presbyterian Church of LaGrange, GA 30240.

It takes hours, even days, for Barabbas to understand fully what has happened. At length, he realizes that through a series of events another prisoner was selected to die by the Romans and the crowd in the streets. The very cross beam to which Barabbas was condemned to be nailed was placed on the shoulders of another who carried it, almost as if on Barabbas' behalf. Who was that other prisoner? Why was Barabbas so fortunate? What would Barabbas do with his life now?

Today, we look at the last of the great metaphors Christians have used to shed light on why Jesus needed to die. The metaphor I'm thinking about is probably the best known and most taught. Theologians call it the penal substitutionary atonement model.

Here's how it goes. God would like to be in a relationship with you and me—a relationship that begins in this world and continues forever in heaven. Human sin, however, prevents such a relationship because God is holy and cannot be associated with anyone corrupted by sin. What is more, humans simply cannot achieve the sinless perfection, which God requires. The result is a standoff. Further, God is perfectly just and must punish us for our sin. So, there's a hopeless impasse!

God, however, provides a solution. God the Father sends his son to earth to suffer the punishment we deserve by dying on

the cross. In turn, since Jesus has paid our penalty for us, God can regard us as not guilty. If we believe that we are sinners deserving hell, but that Jesus died in our place, then we can be in relationship with God and go to heaven.

In other words, that moment of being set free from our own sentence of death can be ours too.

One of the reasons I postponed talking about the penal substitution model is because it is controversial these days. The strongest criticism is that it involves violence between God the Father and God the Son. In other words, God the Father appears unable to call off his own wrath towards you and me, which must be vented somewhere. It turns out that Jesus must endure it. What is said is that God the Father and God the Son seem to be different kinds of gods. One is angry; the other, compassionate. The question is, must God express such anger?

I would propose a solution to this stumbling point by suggesting that the anger of God isn't necessarily something he sends to us. It may be something he permits.

I had a childhood friend named John Christie who himself became a Methodist minister. One day, I went on a picnic with the Christies. John's mother was one of these wise, relaxed parents who calmly told John and me that we may not be happy if

we ate too much chocolate cake. Now, in my house, we almost never got to natural consequences before there as a parental intervention. My mother would have never permitted that second and third large piece of chocolate cake that Mrs. Christie gladly served us. Let me just end the story this way. It was a very long and uncomfortable trip home in the back of the Christies' station wagon. Even to this day, my own mother sings the praises of Mary Christies' parental technique that taught me a lifelong lesson.

What I'm driving at is that the wrath of God may be that God reaches a point when he simply releases you and me to the consequences of our actions and decisions. We don't break God's laws we break ourselves on God's laws.

Please know that we're exploring a mystery here not solving a crossword puzzle. Maybe in the final days of Jesus' ministry, the Father withdrew his protective hand and let humanity follow its own deeply destructive impulses to seize, torture, and kill its own god. And then somehow in a manner that I can't explain, the whole drama lets our guilt be set aside or transferred to Jesus and eliminated. Either way, the suffering, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ opens the prison door of our sin and guilt and lets us walk away free.

Let me try another story that captures the sense of the penal substitutionary model in a non-violent way.

Two soldiers are pinned down in a foxhole in Flanders during the First World War. One is wounded and will die that night. The other is a scoundrel who has come to the war only to escape the law and his own terrible record at home. The two talk of their lives and their hopes and coming prospects. As the strength of the one fades, he pulls his dog tags over his head and holds them out to the criminal. "Take these," he insists. "Take my name and my reputation and try to make a fresh start. Let me wear your identification. Let them find my body and think you are dead so you may start again."

No matter how we work the story or explore the mystery, a powerful truth confronts each of us. Something has changed because of Jesus' death, that grants you and me a fresh start.

Remember the words of the old revival hymn, "Just as I Am?"

Just as I am without one plea  
But that thy blood was shed for me  
And that thou bidst me come to thee  
O Lamb of God, I come, I come

Just as I am, thy love unknown  
Hath broken every barrier down.  
Now to be thine, yea, thine alone  
O Lamb of God I come, I come.

Broken every barrier down! Imagine that to be true for you. It may seem hard to pray because the thought of speaking with God will only bring up this or that embarrassing situation, or a bunch of mistakes. Forget all that! There are no barriers. God awaits you. You don't need to get your life together before approaching your God. Jesus secured that through his suffering.

Maybe someone here has had the thought that you really would have liked to live a life of holiness and closeness to God. And the only reason you haven't is because you've lived the life you have—full of mistakes and broken relationships and hard memories.

But the good news that flows from Jesus' sacrifice is that you may start that life right now. Nothing blocks a brand new life as far as God is concerned.

You see, the idea that Jesus suffered in our place means that the suffering is behind, we can begin again. We can breathe again. We can live again!