

# Penal Substitutionary Atonement and Theories of the Cross

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Alex Kocman

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Alex Kocman

Greetings and welcome to the Missions Podcast, the show that explores your hard questions on missions, theology, and practice to help viewers think and thinkers go. I'm Alex Kocman, director of communications and engagement with ABWE. We are joined once more by my good friend Scott Dunford, pastor of Western Hills Church in San Mateo, California. Whether you're listening from somewhere out on the mission field or in the comfortable confines of your own home, whether you're joining us through YouTube or through your favorite podcast app, or maybe even watching us on the television, for those of you that do that, however, you've found us today.

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Alex Kocman

Thank you for joining and share the show with a friend. If you're a podcast listener or a YouTube subscriber. Leave a positive comment. A review, a five star rating. Hit the like. Subscribe. All those buttons help someone else discover the show. Scott, this show is the nexus of putting our theology into practice on the mission field, taking it to those who need to hear the light of Christ, but also understanding that theology and diving deeper into the tradition of the faith once for all delivered to the saints.

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Alex Kocman

Jude says, in his epistle. And so, every now and again, I think it's important for us to come up for air and talk a little bit less about what's happening in the world, and a little bit more about the core of the faith that we proclaim. Years ago, Scott, I was in a conversation with a Muslim lady, and she was a jewelry, sales lady working at a mall kiosk, and she talked about how she has many Christian friends and Catholic friends and so on and so forth.

00:02:04:01 - 00:02:29:15

Alex Kocman

And yet she pointed at this jewelry kiosk to one of the many crucifixes that she sold. And she said, I just don't understand how you can all worship a dead god or a dead prophet or man. I don't remember what words she said, but she pointed to the crucifix and said that. And I said, well, well friend you do you know that he's not still hanging on the cross, right.

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Alex Kocman

We run into all sorts of misunderstood meanings of the crucifixion of Christ when it comes to taking the gospel message to the nations. And that's why it's so critically important for us to understand, why Christ died. That's what we're going to talk about today. Scott Christian has been talking about this for a long time, not just with unbelievers, but even amongst ourselves.

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Alex Kocman

Why exactly did Christ die? What exactly did it accomplish and how? And for some of us, that's kind of a non question. Of course we know why he died. He died for sinners. He died to save us all. Okay. But let's peel beneath the surface a little bit.

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Scott Dunford

Yeah. It's interesting that just every so often this whole topic just kind of bubbled up to the surface again of like, what was accomplished in the atonement. And I love I love that word. It's a uniquely English word, that I think is just so beautiful to me, being made at one with God, in our relationship being restored.

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Scott Dunford

And that's beautiful. And I think sometimes we just assume that the Protestant Christian, because we're Protestant Christians and Baptist Christians, you and I, that everyone's always thought the same thing about how the atonement works and what it does and, you know, and, and this idea of penal substitutionary atonement, where Christ, fulfilled the legal debt and stood as a representative for humanity and his sacrifice in the cross satisfied God's wrath against humanity and paved the way for, believers to be saved.

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Scott Dunford

I think we just kind of assume that that's exactly the way that Christians have. I've always seen the atonement work. But we know there are other theories that have existed throughout history that, for one reason or another, have kind of fallen away, but sometimes pop up again.

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Alex Kocman

Yeah, walk through the theories, Scott. But then also, I mean, when we say there's theories of the atonement, we don't mean that there's, you know, scientists with test tubes, you know, just taking wild guesses, at what that means. These are different understandings of the atonement, right?

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Scott Dunford

Yeah. Yeah. I think they use that term theory meaning more like. Almost like they're more like metaphors. Like, what is the best way to explain what has happened on the cross and saving us from our sins? You know, one is like the moral influence theory. It's an early theory that in some ways these all have an element of truth.

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Scott Dunford

But part of the reason why I think some of them have fallen away is that they were inadequate to explain all that was happening, even though some of it's true, like it is true that Christ is our example. We're called all the time to follow Christ as our example. But Christ is more than just, example. He's more than just the moral, a moral influence where people follow the example of Jesus in his sacrifice, in his death to bring us to God.

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Scott Dunford

Another one that is, is popular. And I feel like C.S. Lewis kind of hints around at this one. The ransom theory, you know, that that a debt is paid to Satan to ransom us, from sin, and then we're freed from that. He doesn't quite go that far. But, that idea that that who is the debt being paid to?

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Scott Dunford

Was it being paid to God or is it being paid to Satan? This is the idea that it's really ancient, goes back to origin. The church father, not, at the beginning of things, in the third century, that the debt was paid to Satan and other ideas. Christus Victor. Which is very appealing, that the Christus Victor theory of atonement, widely considered, one of the one of the ancient ones.

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Scott Dunford

But the idea that that Christ victory over death, is kind of the pave paves the way for us. And following him in victory.

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Alex Kocman

What do you what do you think? Why don't we just stop and react to those first three? Let's start with the moral influence theory. I mean, I feel like I heard, whispers of that in my time in the Methodist church. Not explicitly, but there was just this idea that, you know, well, Jesus gave us an example.

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Alex Kocman

And so that's when the cross is and now we follow this new way of living. And of course, there's much, much truth in that. But I don't think of at all that we can reduce what Christ did on the cross to merely setting an example. Would that be would that be an accurate, instance of somebody imbibing that theory of the atonement.

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Scott Dunford

Sort of. But at least according to some of the sources I've read, I mean, this is an ancient theory that goes back to Augustine. So it's like, I guess it's not a lightweight theologically. He's not simply saying, we want to follow Christ's example, but he does see that in following Christ's example and actions, that is a the path to, to, to, to, to being made one, one with God.

00:07:07:08 - 00:07:25:17

Scott Dunford

Let me just read this and just to give credit where credit's due, I'm, I'm borrowing this list from, Stephen Morrison, who's got a blog out there. And I think it was just nice to have it in a summarized in such a easy, easy fashion. Yeah, but let me go ahead and, and just read a little section from him, which I know is awesome.

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Scott Dunford

Podcasting work. The theory focuses not just on the death of Jesus Christ, but on this entire life, the seeds, the saving work of Jesus not only in the event of the crucifixion, but also in all the words he has spoken in the example he has set. In theory, the cross is merely a ramification of the moral life of Jesus.

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Scott Dunford

He's crucified as a martyr due to the radical nature of his moral example, and in this way the moral influence theory emphasized Jesus Christ as our teacher, our example, our founder and leader, and ultimately, as our result, our first martyr. And so it does see probably a little bit more heavily emphasis on following Jesus's life and example, which certainly is part of being a Christian.

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Scott Dunford

But it does leave out some pretty important things, as you I think you and I would see it. Yeah, we would.

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Alex Kocman

Agree with that. Well, let's talk about the ransom theory. You know, you mentioned C.S. Lewis. I do think the line which in the wardrobe, that great modern classic is an example of that. Right? Edmund is, purchased out of the clutches of the White Witch. Jadis. The idea

here being that that Jesus has to pay the ransom to Satan himself, as though Satan was really the authority here.

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Alex Kocman

In in the issue of the atonement and where I do think that there's truth in this is that as first John tells us, the world is under the power of the evil one. Satan at the temptation of Christ offered Jesus the kingdoms of the world. We even sing in that that great Christmas hymn that, that, that that Christ comes to, to save us from Satan's wrath and power.

00:09:03:18 - 00:09:24:19

Alex Kocman

Right? There's this idea that we are under the dominion of the evil one. Ephesians chapter two talks about that. And so there is some sense in which we're rescued from Satan, but it's I don't think it's accurate at all to say that the payment that Christ actually gives is a payment rendered to Satan. Rather, it's a payment rendered to the father.

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Scott Dunford

Yeah. And I think it kind of comes to this idea of like, you know, we see this idea of soul selling his soul to the devil, right? Like, you know, we go down to the cross words roads. I want to become a good guitar player. I sell my soul. And I've got this skill and this idea that Adam could sell off humanity to Satan somehow.

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Scott Dunford

And then that needs to be purchased back in that way. So I think, well, there is an element, of course, of the ransom is an idea in Scripture. It's an important idea. We're being the ransom isn't being paid to Satan at all. As if he had some kind of power, in possession of us. The debt is being paid to the holiness of God.

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Scott Dunford

How? I would see it in a grandeur I'm not. I'm not the probably the, the greatest theologian out there, but, so you can see where this has some appeal and into just a the pulpit is like, no one believes this or this is silly. Is not fair, because some great theologians over time have held to this or at least put this out as an, as an option.

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Scott Dunford

And there's a part of it that's true. But there's also a part of it that just is a little bit lacking, I think.

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Alex Kocman

Yeah, I think it's incomplete. I do think that there is real truth in it. I think if you look at job, for instance, Satan is the accuser of the brothers. Revelation also has him as the accuser of the brothers. And so Satan has sort of this cosmic prosecutor is trying to use God's people's sin against them.

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Alex Kocman

And because our sin is done away with by the cross, Satan does lose power over us as believers, but also over the nations in general because of that. That's a critical biblical truth that we do have to recover. So I'm really sensitive that we don't overreact to this and throw out the baby with the bathwater. But I do think that also dovetails into Christmas.

00:11:16:05 - 00:11:21:17

Alex Kocman



Victor. And we can say, Scott. Amen. Christ has won.

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Scott Dunford

Some theologians say this was probably the most, most common. Lee held view up until the 12th century, which, you know, I have no way of knowing that. But this is this is one explanation of it. The work of Christ is first and foremost a victory over the powers which hold mankind in bondage sin, death, and the devil.

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Scott Dunford

Chris is, he, it's a classic, some so-called classic theory of atonement. And another way of putting it is this Christ dies in order to defeat the powers of the devil of evil, in order to free mankind from their bondage. And it's related to the ransom view. And that the difference being here, there is no payment to the devil or to God.

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Scott Dunford

Within the Christmas Victor framework, the cross did not pay off anyone but defeated evil, thereby setting the human race free. I think you can kind of see this in some of the I love some of the icons of the of the Orthodox Church in that beautiful one of Christ emerging from the grave, and the gates of hell are under his feet, and death is bound up beneath him, tied up.

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Scott Dunford

And he's pulling Adam and Eve out of the grave. It's just a really cool picture. But I think that also kind of hints at that Christmas Victor idea of that Christ is setting us free just through his victory over death in the cross. And of course, that is true. Christ has declared victory over the over the grave.

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Scott Dunford

He is declared victor. He has led captivity captive and gave gifts unto men. And so there is truth there as well.

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Alex Kocman

Yeah, there's significant truth. And again, I think it is underplayed. So as we talk now about our views, I do think that one of the dangers is that we can hold so tightly to what we believe to be true, that we lose some of the nuances. I think, especially as we take the gospel into other cultures, there are places where we need to emphasize not only the payment that Christ offered, on behalf of sinners, but the way that in so doing, in his death and resurrection, he is victorious as king.

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Alex Kocman

I think that's really been lost on a couple of generations of evangelicals. I think we'll talk about that as we go on, Scott. But first, yeah, maybe you're thinking about your life and some areas of emphasis that have been under emphasized in your life. Maybe, like me, you want to be a better husband or a better father? Well, in *How to Lead Your Family*, Doctor Joel offers a biblical and practical guide to leading in the home as a prophet, priest, and king in the model of Christ.

00:13:47:09 - 00:14:08:07

Alex Kocman

Drawing from his decades of pastoral experience and family life experience, this short little read, which I don't have here in front of me, I should. It's on my desk upstairs. You'll have to take my word for it. But drawing from, his decades of experience, this short little read is packed with wisdom and encouragement to help men with conviction, to lead and to lead with grace as well.

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Alex Kocman

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Alex Kocman

Getting back into it, Scott, let's try to talk through these last several theories or approaches to the atonement, maybe a little bit more briskly, because I want to give our audience an understanding of the contours of them. But then I also want to talk about how it matters for missionaries and how we actually present these truths, and where kind of the rubber hits the road.

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Scott Dunford

I'm going to go through these really briefly just because they're but they also are very they have a lot of similarities to the to PSR or penal substitution atonement. I think we need to get into like why this isn't cosmic child abuse and why it's important, but also like how in the mission field we can use these different ideas to help our claim a true gospel.

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Scott Dunford

So and so I'm put forward the satisfaction theory, which is kind of an adjustment on the ransom theory, by saying, because he rightly understood. Like what? What did God ever owe to Satan? Nothing. Right. But also seeing that, hey, there is a debt that needs to be paid and that debt needs to be paid to God.

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Scott Dunford

And so they see the satisfaction theory as basically Christ pays back God in his death on the cross and kind of restores, that, that, that relationship, that, that honor, so to speak, back to God. That another theory is a governmental theory. It's a slight theory. Variations are more modern theory, especially coming out of Methodism.

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Scott Dunford

The main difference here is the extent to which Christ suffered in the governmental theory. Christ suffered for the punishment of our sin and propitiate God's wrath, that, in this way it's similar to the penal substitution theory. However, in the governmental theory, Jesus Christ is not. Take the exact punishment we deserve. He takes a punishment. He dies on the cross, therefore, to demonstrate the displeasure of God's toward sin.

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Scott Dunford

And so kind of paves this way, is trying to cut this line because obviously a lot of, Protestant, especially reformed, you start coming into like, okay, who for whom did Christ die? And the Methodists are trying to avoid that, sticky question. And then the last theory is, the scapegoat theory. And this is a more modern, atonement theory.

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Scott Dunford

And within this theory, Jesus dies as a scapegoat of humanity. Moves away from the idea that Jesus died in order to act upon God. Or as payment to the devil. And scapegoating, therefore, is considered to be a form of nonviolent atonement, and that Jesus is a sacrifice but not a victim. There are many philosophical concepts that come up within this model, but in a general sense, we can say that Jesus Christ as a scapegoat means the following one that Jesus is killed by a violent crowd.

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Scott Dunford

Two of the violent crowd kills him, believing he's guilty. Three That Jesus is proven innocent as the Son of God and for the crowd is therefore deemed guilty. So basically, seeing this as a kind of a priestly action.

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Alex Kocman

It sounds this might be cynical, but it sounds very psychological, almost. I mean.

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Scott Dunford

Yes.

00:17:37:16 - 00:17:55:03

Alex Kocman

I would say young Ian. I mean, I, you know, I hear I hear Jordan Peterson say things like that, right? Like, well, he embodies the, the worst horrors of how a human might die. And but that's all true, at a social level. But that, that doesn't really explain what's happening at an unseen level.

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Scott Dunford

I think the big question to kind of run again, run up against is like, so why? Why is there such a violent reaction by people toward penal substitution atonement? Why are there people who come out and say, well, this is cosmic child abuse? I kind of want to hear your answer to that question.

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Alex Kocman

Well, the accusation is that it's archaic. It's barbaric. You know that that phrase, cosmic child abuse has been thrown around for many years by atheists. You know, it's this, I think, overly simplistic, picture. It's sort of taking the, the metaphor of the theory of the atonement and making that metaphor walk on all fours and really emphasizing a father putting his son to death with none of the other layers of meaning or complexity behind that act on the cross, right, without taking into account the eternal decree of God, the covenant of redemption, whereby the son and the father agreed in eternity for the son to do this, to

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Alex Kocman

draw his people to himself, to accomplish the salvation of his people. And that the son comes in the fullness of time, yes, in submission to the will of the father as a man, but also willingly, the son being himself God, and fully sharing in the divine nature, agreeing to undertake that. But it's this overly simplistic picture.

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Alex Kocman

I mean, I really think, again, psychology, I think people with father issues particularly recoil at this, especially when somebody is able to undermine this view by caricaturing it. And to that, I think we have to just bring the full testimony of Scripture to bear. This is exactly what Scripture teaches that the righteous suffered on behalf of sinners, of the unrighteous.

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Alex Kocman

Christ died for us while we were enemies. Romans five Romans three makes this incredibly clear. But we have multiple passages where Christ is not just suffering a general punishment, but that he's specifically enduring in his body what his people deserve. I think

that's presented by the book of Hebrews as well. Price Christ as this high priest offers himself as the sacrifice.

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Alex Kocman

Right. Well, what did the high Priest do in the Year of Atonement? What he did sacrificially for the sins of the people of the covenant nation of God. And so too Christ suffers in his flesh on behalf of all parties of that covenant. But it is something that I think that our modern society. Look, Scott, we don't want to admit.

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Alex Kocman

The fact is that penal substitutionary atonement assumes that God has specific wrath towards specific sinners by name for specific sins, and that there's literal, conscious, eternal torment for those sinners if they do not repent. I think that's really what's happening is, is you have to acknowledge that for penal substitutionary atonement to make sense, it's the fact that I don't want to admit that I have a real punishment that would be levied against me, the punishment which Christ himself bore for his people.

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Scott Dunford

And I think it also does injustice to the I, the true idea of the unity of God. Jesus isn't this unwilling victim of the father's wrath, right? Jesus is the eternal Son of God, with the same, desires as the father and so him willingly coming into our story, living this perfect life for the purpose of going to the cross to take our sin.

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Scott Dunford

That's a huge difference that I just don't think a lot of people can fully understand or grasp that Jesus isn't this unwilling victim or this begrudging victim. He is, this is his mission and purpose, and it is his joy to do the will of the father. This is his will as well, to go to the cross.

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Scott Dunford

So even though he's struggling in the garden, in his humanity, in his in his human nature, in his divine nature, he's unwavering in his commitment to follow through with this redemption of humanity. And, I also think it doesn't, the critics of this don't quite understand the seriousness of our sin. I think that's also, a, a huge problem in that they don't see the, the holiness of God for what it is and the seriousness of our sin for what it is, and that it must be dealt with in some way.

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Scott Dunford

It's interesting for Muslims. I was just, doing some training, with the traveling team, down in down the LA area, and we visited a mosque, and we met with the mosque leaders afterwards, and they were talking about forgiveness. And, you know, God forgives who is going to forgive. And, he's, you know, it's very arbitrary.

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Scott Dunford

And, really, even though they talk a big game about the seriousness, the holiness of God, when it comes down to it, God just is kind of willy nilly forgiving who he's going to forgive. There's no basis for his forgiveness, which really undermines his holiness. Christianity protects the holiness of God by also seeing that our sin is really serious and needs to be dealt with.

00:23:04:21 - 00:23:15:05

Scott Dunford



I think that the PSA, protects all of those things, and it explains really carefully how we can be saved through the sacrificial death of Jesus.

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Alex Kocman

Let's talk about why it matters for missions and the argument that's frequently made is that, well, this this penal substitutionary thing, it's assuming all sorts of legal categories, categories of innocence and guilt and crime and punishment that are Western. And if we're going to take the gospel outside of Western cultures, we have to decenter those themes and draw upon these other themes.

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Alex Kocman

That's the critique. And briefly, I think there's a way to acknowledge some elements of truth in that. But I think that there's a real danger that we're actually letting our approach to contextualization drive our theology, rather than letting the text of Scripture determine our theology. And then thinking, okay, now how do I translate this across cultures?

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Alex Kocman

That would be the concern that I have entering that conversation. But briefly, Scott, why does it matter for missions and how do we make sure that this view, the biblical view, is more than just a particular cultural sensibility?

00:24:19:04 - 00:24:52:04

Scott Dunford

Yeah. And I think this could tease a little bit into our overtime episode where I'd like to talk about some of the metaphors we use in describing penal substitutionary atonement and how we can use those better, in different, different cultural settings, undermining, the truth of the gospel. But I would say this, I think, I think it's easy for us in the West to read a book

that's talking about honor and shame and to so, oriental ize those cultures that we forget the fact that Asians still deal with guilt.

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Scott Dunford

I mean, it might not be the predominant cultural theme, but they still have concepts of guilt. You know, African, tribal, religion, practitioners, they still have ideas of guilt. And it might not be the most dominant thing on their mind all the time, but they still understand it. And, and when it's pointed out to them, they can still fully grasp, grasp the fact that, that they've done wrong.

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Scott Dunford

And, even though we might have to explain it or couch it or use different metaphors than what we typically use, in our explanations of those things. It's not that the concept of guilt is just lost. And, I think that's something that we just I think it's just bad mis theologies, even bad sociology. You know, I think we hear a little bit it's like if you the only tool you have is a hammer.

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Scott Dunford

Everything looks like a nail. And I think sometimes missionaries kind of get in that, that mindset of, hey, I just read this cool new book and now everything looks like a nail and needs to be hammered with it.

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Alex Kocman

I think there's truth there. I also think the reason that we might be a little more disposed to think in guilt innocence terms in the West is because of the influence of Christianity, not the other way around. I think it's the presence of the gospel that that gives us that language.

And our friend Eddie Burns, who runs training here at BWP, writes about this topic in a really helpful way.

00:26:14:21 - 00:26:39:13

Alex Kocman

You can't separate moral code. OBD disobedience and the consequences of our actions. That is at the center of the need for the atonement moral code. It's not just about honor or shame or power or even innocence or guilt, but specifically God's law and our relationship to it. We can't get around the fact that our relationship with God's law fundamentally having broken it.

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Alex Kocman

That's why Christ has to come. Scott, in the overtime episode, though, we're talking about.

00:26:46:02 - 00:27:01:02

Scott Dunford

Yeah, I want to talk about a little bit more about some of the ways we explain, penal substitutionary atonement and how maybe we can kind of, contextualize the metaphor about explaining it, without undermining the truth of the doctrine.

00:27:01:02 - 00:27:17:14

Alex Kocman

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Alex Kocman

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Alex Kocman

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Alex Kocman

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00:28:01:12 - 00:28:25:17

Alex Kocman

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