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THE RIGHTEOUS FOR THE UNRIGHTEOUS:
CONDITIONAL IMMORTALITY AND THE SUBSTITUTIONARY DEATH OF JESUS

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Conditional immortality—or *conditionalism* for short—is the view that immortality is a gift God will grant only to those who meet the condition of being saved by faith in Jesus Christ, while those not meeting that condition will be resurrected unto judgment and denied ongoing life of any sort whatsoever by being killed, executed, destroyed, or otherwise deprived of life forever. This view, held by a minority in the church through most of its history, stands in stark contrast to the more popular view of hell as eternal torment—often called *traditionalism* owing to its historical dominance—according to which the unsaved will be resurrected and made immortal so they can live forever in punitive misery.¹

Conditionalists have very often commended their view on the basis of biblical texts that describe hell and final punishment in terms of death and destruction, including those typically cited in support of the doctrine of eternal torment, and this article does not seek to reinvent the proverbial wheel.² But in the eyes of some traditionalists, conditionalism is more objectionable on *Christological* grounds than on any other. Robert Peterson, for example, summarizes how the doctrine of substitutionary

1. Notwithstanding novel attempts to characterize the traditional view differently, Ronnie Demler demonstrates conclusively that this is, in fact, what leading defenders of eternal torment have said throughout church history, in Demler, “Sic et Non,” 255–76.

2. The recently deceased Edward William Fudge, for example, makes and defends such a case for conditionalism in his seminal work on the topic, Fudge, *Fire That Consumes*.

atonement should inform one’s understanding of hell: “The cross sheds light on the fate of the wicked,” he explains, “because on the cross the sinless Son of God suffered that fate.”³ Mistakenly understanding conditionalists to be saying Christ’s human nature ceased to exist on the cross, Peterson insists that the “systematic implications of holding that Jesus was annihilated when he died are *enormous*. Nothing less than orthodox Christology is at stake.”⁴ Such a view, he argues, entails a temporary separation of Jesus’ human and divine natures, thereby violating the Chalcedonian doctrine of the hypostatic union. Alternatively—and equally problematically—Peterson argues that if *both* of Christ’s natures “ceased to exist between his death and resurrection, then the Trinity only consisted of two persons during that period of time. The Trinity would have been reduced to a Binity.”⁵

Conditionalists, on the other hand, often argue that the doctrine of substitutionary atonement is more consistent with their view of hell than that of their traditionalist critics. Agreeing with Peterson that “Jesus’ death somehow reveals the nature of final punishment,” Edward Fudge observes that “Jesus *died*; he was not *tortured forever*. Jesus’ death for sinners does provide a window into the final judgment awaiting the lost. But the view we see through that window is one of suffering that ends in death—not one of everlasting conscious torment.”⁶ Glenn Peoples likewise writes, “the New Testament is replete with the language of Jesus dying for sin, for sinners, and for us. Whatever else this might mean, it at least means that in Christ’s passion and ultimately his death we see what comes of sin.”⁷ Peoples concludes, “in identifying with sinners and standing in their place, Jesus bore what they would have borne. Abandonment by God, yes. Suffering, yes. But crucially, death.”⁸

3. Peterson, *Hell on Trial*, 216.

3. Peterson, “Hermeneutics of Annihilationism,” 207; emphasis added.

4. Fudge and Peterson, *Two Views of Hell*, 177.

5. *Ibid.*, 204; emphasis in original.

6. Peoples, “Introduction to Evangelical Conditionalism,” 21.

7. *Ibid.*

Peterson and other critics of conditionalism are right to test it for consistency with an orthodox doctrine of the atonement. Despite their Christological objections, however, conditionalism passes that test quite well—while their own traditional view fares poorly—given the Bible’s teaching of the substitutionary *death* of Jesus. As the following essay sets out to demonstrate: (1) in the Old Testament, the lives of sacrificed animals substituted for the lives of those who deserved to die; (2) animal sacrifices prefigured Christ’s own atoning sacrifice, likewise described by New Testament authors as the giving of his life in place of those for whom he died; (3) his infinite worth as the God-man enabled him to bear the death penalty deserved by the millions for whom he bore it; (4) by applying his infinite worth to his *torment*, traditionalists risk unintentionally denying the substitutionary nature of his *death*, a denial conservative evangelicals are not typically willing to countenance; (5) because Jesus was to be raised, he did not wholly cease to be when he died, but since no resurrection will follow the *second* death, the bodies *and* souls of the unredeemed will be destroyed in hell; and (6) although Christians continue to suffer death and will until Christ returns, his substitutionary death shatters its power over the redeemed, guaranteeing their resurrection unto eternal life.

Animal Sacrifice and Substitutionary Atonement

“It is true,” observes Peoples, “that there are several models of the atonement that deserve to be called mainstream, penal substitution—the view that Jesus was punished instead of those for whom he died—being only one of them.”⁹ Argued by Gustaf Aulén to have been “the dominant idea of the Atonement throughout the early church period,” *Christus Victor* has again become quite popular today, championed by the likes of Greg Boyd.¹⁰ Developed later by Anselm, *satisfaction* was instrumental in the development of atonement theories, and

9. Peoples, “Introduction to Evangelical Conditionalism,” 20.
8. Aulén, *Christus Victor*, 6; Boyd, *Crucifixion of the Warrior God*.

remains very influential and controversial a millennium later.¹¹ However, “All such views,” suggests Peoples, “take substitution as an integral part of them”:

In ransom theories of the atonement (including the *Christus Victor* view currently enjoying a resurgence), Christ pays his life as a ransom for ours, leaving death and hell with no claim on those saved through Christ. In the satisfaction theory of the Western Catholic tradition, Jesus’ sacrifice was accepted by the Father instead of the need for punishment. The common theme in all of this, regardless of the rationale for the atonement (although perhaps especially for the penal substitutionary model), is that Christ, the sinless son of God, is part of an exchange: his life for the lives of others.¹²

Penal or otherwise, this theme of substitution is worked into the fabric of salvation history from the very beginning. After Adam and Eve violate God’s lone command not to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (Gen 2:17), formerly naked and unashamed (v. 25) they now fashion garments from fig leaves to cover themselves (3:7). For reasons unstated, however, these will not do, and the Lord replaces them with garments of animal skins he fashions himself (v. 21). Whatever the inadequacies of their own handiwork, “Adam and Eve,” explains Victor Hamilton, “are in need of a salvation that comes from without. God needs to do for them what they are unable to do for themselves.”¹³ Bruce Waltke supposes that the Lord’s provision involved “the ‘sacrifice’ of an animal,” for the “killing of an animal necessary to make garments of skin may suggest/imply the image of a sacrifice for sin.”¹⁴ Kenneth Mathews, while acknowledging that “the text does not specify that animals were slain to provide these coverings,” argues that “it is a fair implication and one that likely would be made in the Mosaic community, where animal sacrifice was pervasive.”¹⁵ Thus, having warned Adam and Eve that their disobedience

11. Holmes, *Wondrous Cross*, 52–54.
9. Peoples, “Introduction to Evangelical Conditionalism,” 20–21.
10. Hamilton, *Genesis*, 207.
11. Waltke and Fredricks, *Genesis*, 95.
12. Mathews, *Genesis 1–11:26*, 255.

would result in death (2:17), God kills an animal (or animals) in their stead, whose death as their substitute provides the means of covering their shame.

Perhaps it is not insignificant that this proto-substitute appears only a few verses after the *protoevangelium*. Regarding Eve's offspring, God promises Satan, "he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel" (3:15).¹⁶ Gordon Wenham observes that "from at least the third century BC Jews, and subsequently Christians, have seen this as a prediction of the Messiah who would be victorious over the powers of evil."¹⁷ The proximity thereto of the garments made from the first substitutionary death prompts John Bunyan to see them as "the meaning of that promise that you read of in verse 15. Namely, that by the means of Jesus Christ, God himself would provide a sufficient clothing for those that accept of his grace by the gospel."¹⁸

If it is a stretch to see the Messiah and substitution in the opening chapters of Genesis, it is a much greater stretch to deny their appearance elsewhere. Passover commemorates the tenth and last of the plagues by which God compelled Pharaoh to set the Israelites free from Egypt. The Lord commanded every Hebrew family to kill an unblemished lamb and sprinkle its blood on their doorposts (Exod 12:5–7), and then he killed the firstborn son of every household whose doorposts were not so anointed, passing over those homes which were (vv. 12–13). Steve Jeffery, Michael Ovey, and Andrew Sach conclude, "The clear implication is that the firstborn son of the Israelite families would die if this instruction were not followed . . . Thus the lamb becomes a substitute for the firstborn son, dying in his place."¹⁹ This substitutionary death of the Passover lamb ultimately pointed forward to the substitutionary death of the Messiah, Jesus Christ, who when celebrating the Passover with his

16. Unless otherwise noted, all biblical passages referenced are from the English Standard Version.

13. Wenham, *Exploring the Old Testament*, 23.

14. Bunyan, *Works*, 440.

15. Jeffery et al., *Pierced for Our Transgressions*, 37.

disciples called the bread and wine "my body" and "my blood" (Mark 14:22–24; emphasis added). Were that not enough to make the connection clear, Paul makes it explicit, saying, "Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed" (1 Cor 5:7). Thus "New Testament writers see Jesus' death as the fulfillment of the Passover: he suffered in the place of his people in order that they might be marked out by his blood and thus spared from God's wrath."²⁰

Indeed, the concept of substitution is foundational to the entire Old Testament sacrificial system. God prohibits the consumption of blood because "the life of a creature is in the blood, and I have given it to you to make atonement for yourselves on the altar; it is the blood that makes atonement for one's life" (Lev 17:11 NIV). Stott sees this as the "clearest statement that the blood sacrifices of the Old Testament ritual had a substitutionary significance."²¹ As he goes on to explain, "it is only because 'the life of a creature is in the blood' that 'it is the blood that makes atonement for one's life.' One life is forfeit; another life is sacrificed instead. What makes atonement 'on the altar' is the shedding of substitutionary lifeblood."²² Stott's case is even stronger, it seems, if the text is understood to be saying that the substitute's blood makes atonement "by means of the life" (NET; cf. ESV, NRSV). In other words, blood atones because life was taken from that which shed it, in place of the life (or lives) for whom it was shed.

The Substitutionary Death of Jesus Christ

It is to such substitutionary sacrifices that New Testament authors allude in describing the work of Christ. As I. Howard Marshall observes,

Sacrificial language is widespread in the New Testament. It is present in the Gospel of John with its understanding of the Lamb of God bearing the sins of the world (John 1:29, cf. 1 John 3:5). First John

20. *Ibid.*, 42.

16. Stott, *The Cross of Christ*, 137.

17. *Ibid.*, 138.

uses the language of atoning sacrifice (1 John 2:2; 4:10) and of fellowship with God (i.e., the result of reconciliation). Hebrews develops at full length the concepts of Christ as the sacrifice on the Day of Atonement and as the high priest who puts us in a right relationship with God.²³

It is therefore no surprise that Jesus, as the typological fulfillment of animal sacrifices in the Old Testament, is so consistently said to have died in the place of sinners. He himself says he came "to give his life as a ransom for [ἀντι]

sinner” (Matt 20:28; cf. Mark 10:45). The preposition ἀντί is here “a marker of a participant who is benefited by an event, usually with the implication of some type of exchange or substitution involved.”²⁴ Morris observes that this latter sense of “in the place of” or “instead of” is the preposition’s most common meaning, and that it is not here used in a way that would warrant a less common meaning.²⁵ After surveying the evidence, Daniel Wallace concludes that it “appears to be overwhelmingly in favor of viewing ἀντί in Matt 20:28/Mark 10:45 as meaning *in the place of* and very possibly with the secondary meaning of *in exchange for*.”²⁶

In 1 Tim 2:6, Paul combines ἀντί with the noun translated “ransom,” and uses a different preposition to communicate the idea of substitution: ὑπέρ. He writes, Jesus “gave himself as a ransom [ἀντίλυτρον] for [ὑπέρ] all.” Paul also uses ὑπέρ in 2 Cor 5:14, saying Christ “has died for [ὑπέρ] all.” John records Caiaphas prophesying “that Jesus would die for [ὑπέρ] the nation, and not for [ὑπέρ] the nation only, but also to gather into one the children of God who are scattered abroad” (John 11:50–52). Wallace traces how the preposition ὑπέρ increasingly overlapped with ἀντί as it evolved from classical Greek to Koine, and examines its use in the New Testament.²⁷ He concludes, “although it is possible that substitution is not the sense of ὑπέρ

23. Marshall, *Aspects of the Atonement*, 39–40.

18. Louw and Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon*, 1:802.

19. Morris, *Apostolic Preaching*, 35.

20. Wallace, *Greek Grammar*, 367; italics in original.

21. *Ibid.*, 384–88.

in *some* of the soteriologically significant texts, because this *must* be the sense in many such texts, the burden of proof falls on those who would deny such a sense in the others.”²⁸

The New Testament frequently emphasizes the substitutionary nature of Jesus’ death. Hinting at it beforehand, Jesus says, “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for [ὑπέρ] the sheep” (John 10:11). “Greater love has no one than this,” Jesus says later, “that someone lay down his life for [ὑπέρ] his friends” (15:13). Paul tells the Romans that “while we were still sinners, Christ died for [ὑπέρ] us” (Rom 5:8). To the Thessalonians Paul says we are destined “to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for [ὑπέρ] us” (1 Thess 5:9–10). The author of Hebrews says Jesus was “crowned with glory and honor because of the suffering of death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for [ὑπέρ] everyone” (Heb 2:9).

It should go without saying that in such texts death does not mean “separated forever from the presence of God, and cut off from his benevolence, his providential care, and his grace,” as the death awaiting those sentenced to hell is sometimes alleged to mean by defenders of eternal torment.²⁹ Biblical references to Jesus’ death speak of death as ordinarily understood: the privation of embodied or psychosomatic life. Paul says that “Christ died for [ὑπέρ] our sins according to the scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day” (1 Cor 15:3–4), the language of burial and resurrection unmistakably indicating that the bodily death of Jesus is in view. Peter is more explicit, writing, “Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for [ὑπέρ] the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God, being put to death *in the flesh*” (1 Pet 3:18; emphasis added). The author of Hebrews says that “we have been sanctified through the offering of the *body* of Jesus Christ once for all” (Heb 10:10; emphasis added).

Of course, among conservative evangelicals this is not at all controversial, even among defenders of eternal torment. John

28. *Ibid.*, 388; emphasis added.

1. Boa and Bowman Jr., *Sense & Nonsense*, 107.

Walvoord, for example, writes that “Christ died as a Substitute for sinners on the cross accomplishing salvation for those who put their trust in Him . . . in keeping with the general idea of sacrifices in the Old Testament.”³⁰ Morris explains that “all that the ancient sacrifices foreshadowed was perfectly fulfilled in the sacrifice of Christ,” and that “his death was a death for others . . . it is his life instead of theirs.”³¹ Peterson agrees, saying, “as the culmination of all of the Old Testament sacrifices, [Jesus’s death] is an atoning death that brings forgiveness to everyone who believes.”³² Elsewhere Peterson writes, “Scripture presents Christ in his death as making a substitutionary atonement for his people,” meaning “he died in their place and bore the punishment that they deserved.”³³ Millard Erickson insists that “Christ’s atoning death must also be seen against the background of the Old Testament sacrificial system,” explaining that “the legal portions of the Old Testament typify with considerable clarity the sacrificial and substitutionary character of Christ’s

death.”³⁴ By substitutionary, Erickson means not only “that Christ died for our sake or on our behalf,” but that he died “in our place.”³⁵

The Infinite Worth of the God-Man

It seems eminently reasonable, then, that the consequences of sin, borne by Jesus on the cross as a substitute in the place of sinners, is the sort of death he suffered. Yet that sort of death—the privation of embodied or psychosomatic life—is the very sort that the finally impenitent in hell will *never* undergo, according to traditionalists. Often this inconsistency can be chalked up to a move in the wrong direction in their systematic theology, from eschatology to Christology instead of the other way around.

30. Walvoord, *Jesus Christ Our Lord*, 157.
2. Morris, *Gospel According to John*, 130, 504.
3. Peterson, *Salvation Accomplished*, 75.
4. Fudge and Peterson, *Two Views of Hell*, 175.
5. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 735–36.
6. *Ibid.*, 742.

Consequently, they end up affirming that what Jesus bore in place of sinners was in fact pain, not death, and appealing to his infinite worth as the God-man to explain how the few hours he suffered could substitute for the eternity of suffering awaiting the damned.

Peterson, for example, begins his Christological critique of conditionalism by observing that the traditional understanding of hell includes “separation from God (*poena damni*, the punishment of the damned) and the positive infliction of torments in body and soul (*poena sensus*, the punishment of sense).” So likewise, he argues, “the Son of God suffered the pains of hell: separation from God and the positive infliction of torments in body and soul.”³⁶ Peterson then *ostensibly* affirms the substitutionary death of Jesus, saying, “he died in their place and bore the punishment that [his people] deserved.” But in the next two sentences, Peterson reveals what he *means* by death: “This does not mean, however, that he literally endured never-ending punishment. If he had, *he would be on the cross forever* and wouldn’t be able to save anyone.”³⁷ Thus the punishment Jesus bore as a substitute, according to Peterson, is the pain he endured on the cross, not the privation of his life.

How, then, could Jesus save sinners as their substitute by suffering pain for a few hours, if the fate purportedly awaiting them in hell is an eternity of pain? Peterson answers, “because of the infinite dignity of Christ’s person, his sufferings, though finite in duration, were of infinite weight on the scales of divine justice . . . As God incarnate, Jesus was capable of suffering in six hours on the cross what we can suffer only over an infinite period of time.”³⁸ Wayne Grudem similarly explains, “if we had to pay the penalty for our own sins, we would have to suffer eternally in separation from God. However, Jesus did not suffer eternally . . . by virtue of the union of divine and human natures in himself, Jesus was able to bear all the wrath of God against sin

36. Fudge and Peterson, *Two Views of Hell*, 174–75; italics in original.
7. *Ibid.*, 175; emphasis added.
8. *Ibid.*

and bear it to the end.”³⁹ Larry Dixon likewise writes, “The Cross is God’s infinite response to man’s sin. Christ exhausts the punishment due to sinners because He Himself was the infinite and eternal God. Christ did not die for our potential nonexistence, but for our eternal bearing of the wrath of God in a place separated from him.”⁴⁰ Robert Morey observes that penal substitutionary atonement implies “the nature of Christ’s vicarious punishment will be a good indication of the nature of divine punishment of rebel sinners,” and he says that punishment consisted of separation from God, conscious suffering, and death.⁴¹ But to explain the finite duration of Jesus’ suffering, he appeals to “Christ’s divine nature, which is eternal, and the infinite value of Christ’s sacrifice,” and says his punishment “was suffering as a result of moral alienation from God. *This* is the ultimate fate awaiting rebel sinners.”⁴²

Yet as has been demonstrated, the consistent *biblical* testimony is that as a substitute, Jesus died. Even texts which speak of his agony discuss it in the context of his atoning death. On the cross he cries out, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Matt 27:46; Mark 15:34), but the psalm he quotes goes on to say, “you lay me in the dust of death” (Ps 22:15). Isaiah’s suffering servant “was pierced for our transgressions” and “with his wounds we are healed” (Isa 53:5), but also “he was cut off out of the land of the living” and “he poured out his soul to death” (vv. 8, 12). Christ “learned obedience through what he suffered” (Heb 5:8), but his obedience was “to the point of death, even death on a cross” (Phil 2:8). He “suffered” for Peter’s readers (1 Pet 2:21, 23), but he did so “being put to death in the flesh” (3:18). It was written that he “should suffer,” yes, “*and on the third day rise from the dead*” (Luke 24:46; emphasis added).

The infinite worth of the God-man, then, did not enable him to suffer in a few hours the eternity of pain awaiting the

39. Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 577–78.

9. Dixon, *Other Side of the Good News*, 217.

10. Morey, *Death and the Afterlife*, 102.

11. *Ibid.*, 103; emphasis added.

otherwise damned. Rather, it enabled him to atone for their sins by dying in their stead. Because “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Rom 3:23), human beings are incapable of redeeming themselves. Yet only a human being could justly stand in their place. What was therefore required was the substitutionary death of a perfect and sinless human being, one who must therefore also be God since “no one is good except God alone” (Mark 10:18; Luke 18:19). Thus, Paul writes, “for our sake [God] made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Cor 5:21). As the author of Hebrews puts it, “since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, he himself likewise partook of the same things, that through death he might . . . deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery” (2:14–15) as a high priest “who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin” (4:15). And as Erickson explains, whereas “the death of an ordinary human could scarcely have sufficient value to cover his or her own sins, let alone those of the whole race,” because Jesus is the God-man his death “is of infinite worth” and “can atone for the sins of all of humankind.”⁴³

The Christological Danger of Eternal Torment

Meanwhile, whereas traditionalists charge conditionalism with being Christologically problematic, it seems the *real* danger to orthodox Christology lies in their own tendency to locate the substitutionary work of Christ in his suffering. In support of the idea that the union of Jesus’ divine and human natures rendered him uniquely capable of enduring God’s infinite wrath, Grudem writes, “When Jesus knew that he had paid the full penalty for our sin, he said, ‘*It is finished*’ (John 19:30).”⁴⁴ Grudem’s use of the perfect-tense “had paid” makes explicit what logically follows from treating Christ’s pain as that in which his substitutionary work consists: On the cross Jesus completely bore the punishment of hell—separation from God and infliction

43. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 735.

22. Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 578; italics in original.

of suffering—and only *then* did he die. But if the finite duration of his suffering is the substitutionary equivalent to the eternity of suffering awaiting the risen, undying wicked, why did he go on to die? If “he had paid the full penalty for our sin,” as Grudem says, what penalty was left to pay with his death?

The doctrine of eternal torment thus risks rendering Jesus’ death irrelevant, unnecessary, and arbitrary. One can hardly imagine a more egregious heresy; to Paul, the substitutionary death of Christ is paramount in importance and definitional of the gospel itself (1 Cor 15:1–3), and one who preaches another gospel—such as one denying the substitutionary death of Jesus—should be accursed (Gal 1:6–9). Conservative evangelicals are ordinarily adamant that it is heresy to deny the substitutionary death of Christ. Bruce Ware, for example, insists that “open theism is an unacceptable and nonviable view for Christians who desire to remain biblically faithful.”⁴⁵ Among his reasons is that in open theism, “no *actual* substitution can be made, for God cannot know, when Christ hangs on the cross, any *actual* person who will yet be conceived. His death must be seen as a substitution in general, not a specific substitution for sinners who deserved the judgment he received on their behalf.”⁴⁶ John Piper includes belief in the “substitutionary dimension of the death of Christ” in his small

list of salvation prerequisites.⁴⁷ J. I. Packer and Gary Parrett insist that “Christ’s atoning death” features at the center of the gospel, and that while there “are many aspects of this glorious atonement,” nevertheless “the other aspects of the atonement disappear if at its heart it is not a *substitutionary* atonement.”⁴⁸

But if it was not until Jesus died that his substitutionary, atoning work was complete, why did he say, “it is finished,” just *prior* to dying (John 19:30)? The answer lies in “the idea of prolepsis or anticipation,” illustrated by the famous phrase “dead man walking,” in which “the man walking is not yet dead but the

45. Ware, “The Gospel of Christ,” 310.

23. *Ibid.*, 333; emphasis in original.

24. Piper, “What Must Someone Believe.”

25. Packer and Parrett, *Grounded in the Gospel*, 98; italics in original.

reality of his death is very much present.”⁴⁹ E. W. Bullinger refers to biblical figures of speech as prolepsis or anticipation “when we anticipate what is going to be done, and speak of future things as present.”⁵⁰ Accordingly, as explained by John Gill, Jesus said “it is finished” because all those things he was given to do—“that he should be incarnate, be exposed to shame and reproach, and suffer much, and die; the whole work his father gave him to do”—all these things “were now done, *or as good as done*.”⁵¹ And after Jesus drew his final breath, and his heart stopped beating, this work that was “as good as done” moments before was, in fact, done.

The Continued Existence and Resurrection of Jesus

The substitutionary death of Jesus thus suggests that the finally impenitent must ultimately die, rather than live forever in hell, either because Christ did not die in their place as their substitute (as per the Reformed doctrine of particular redemption), or because they refuse to accept his substitutionary but provisional death on their behalf (as per a particularist take on universal atonement). Conditionalism, however, further entails belief that in hell, after being temporarily raised back to embodied life in resurrection, both the bodies *and* the souls of the wicked will be destroyed (Matt 10:28), and that therefore they will cease to exist altogether.⁵² Must conditionalists not also therefore affirm the destruction of Jesus’ soul when *he* died, and the cessation of *his* existence until his resurrection? And does conditionalism not therefore necessarily entail that for the three days in which Jesus’ body lay in the tomb, either he temporarily lacked a human nature, or the Trinity was temporarily rendered a binity?

No, the final annihilation of the lost does not require that Jesus’ substitutionary death include the destruction of his soul and the cessation of his existence. Mathews explains that “the

49. Mostert, “Radical Eschatology,” 403.

26. Bullinger, *Figures of Speech*, 914.

27. Gill, *An Exposition of the New Testament*, 2:117; emphasis added.

28. This explains why the view is also known as *annihilationism*.

Old Testament emphasizes the individual person as a unified whole.”⁵³ Often called “holistic dualism,” this view is not limited to the Old Testament. Stephen Travis says it is “characteristic of Paul,” who sees the human person “as essentially a psychosomatic unity.”⁵⁴ After “the Lord God formed the man of dust from the ground,” it was not until he “breathed into [the man’s] nostrils the breath of life” that he “became a *living creature*” (Gen 2:7; emphasis added). Whereas the KJV renders the verse’s final words “living soul,” Mathews observes that here “‘breath,’ not ‘soul,’ comes closest to the idea of a transcendent life force in man. Therefore the breath of God energized the dormant body, which became a ‘living person.’”⁵⁵ Assuming, therefore, an anthropological dualism in which human souls exist and remain conscious after death, humans are alive only if they are embodied and their bodies continue to breathe.

Conditionalists see death—whether temporal or eternal—as the privation of this psychosomatic life. Thus death, “the wages of sin” (Rom 6:23), consists in being deprived of life formerly enjoyed as a psychosomatic unity, in whatever way that lack is consciously experienced—if it is experienced at all. A conditionalist might therefore affirm the disembodied conscious existence of Jesus after his death and yet deny that the impenitent will persist consciously after their final deaths (Matt 10:28). But whether or not human beings have a substantive soul which is capable of existing apart from the body in an intermediate state, the punishment will have been the same: the privation of life.

Jesus truly stood in the place of those for whom he died, giving up his psychosomatic life as a genuine substitute for theirs.

If, however, Jesus consciously experienced the privation of his life in a disembodied subsistence for three days, and if the finally impenitent will instead be annihilated, why the disparity in experience? Moreover, whatever Christ's experience while

53. Mathews, *Genesis 1–11.26*, 197.
12. Travis "Psychology," 984–85.
13. Mathews, *Genesis 1–11.26*, 197.

dead, why the disparity in duration between his temporal death and the everlasting death of the annihilated lost? Perhaps Jesus, having borne death as the consequences of sin, was raised because, unlike them, he lived a perfect, sinless life. He did not deserve the privation he suffered, and so it was reversed, whereas the finally impenitent will deserve their privation, and so it will never be undone. And because the privation of Christ's life would be reversed, his soul subsisted consciously beyond death so as to be later reunited with his body in resurrection. But after the impenitent are raised once from the dead to face God's public judgment, and after they justly die the 'second death' (Rev 20:6; 21:8), there will not be a second resurrection, and so their souls are destroyed. Only those who died "in Christ" are raised "with Christ," never to die again.

Philosophers have often insisted that genuine resurrection is not possible if human beings lack immaterial souls that subsist beyond death. If they do not, then there is a gap between death and resurrection during which nothing exists to preserve personal identity, or so the argument goes. The ostensibly resurrected person may be identical to the one who died in every respect, but so too would a hundred exact copies created by an omnipotent mad scientist. Garrett DeWeese explains that such hypothetical copies of himself, created after his death, "would have, at the moment of their assembly, the same memories, beliefs, desires, fears, hopes and so forth as I had at the moment of my demise," and "if identity is grounded in psychology, all would have equal claim to be 'me.'"⁵⁶ If resurrection is truly possible, then personal identity must be grounded in something that subsists beyond death to be reunited later with the resurrected body: the soul.

Jesus' soul may thus have subsisted consciously beyond death so as to preserve his personal identity until his resurrection, in which case those of all human beings will do likewise until reunited with their risen bodies for judgment. As Paul says to the governor at Caesarea, "there will be a resurrection of both the just and the unjust" (Acts 24:15)—only the former raised unto

56. DeWeese, *Doing Philosophy*, 256.

life, according to Jesus, and the latter unto judgment (John 5:29). Because the lost will finally fail to be covered through faith by the saving blood of Christ, and because God will no longer have any reason to preserve their souls in an unnatural, disembodied half-existence, they will altogether perish forever. They will disintegrate wholly into the dust whence they came, never consciously experiencing anything ever again, and the breath that animated them will return to God who gave it (Eccl 12:7).

Substitutionary Death and The Death of the Redeemed

One final Christological question remains: If Jesus suffered death as a substitute for sinners, why do Christians still die, necessitating future resurrection in the first place? Athanasius might answer, as George Foley characterizes him as doing, that Christ "rescued us from the *continuance* of death."⁵⁷ His death "enabled Him to triumph over death as a *continuing* power, by permitting men to share His immortality."⁵⁸ The character of death has thus changed for believers; it is no longer permanent. "We, the faithful in Christ," Athanasius writes, "no longer die the death as before, agreeably to the warning of the law." Rather, "corruption ceasing and being put away by the grace of the Resurrection, henceforth we are only dissolved, agreeably to our bodies' mortal nature, at the time God has fixed for each, that we may be able to gain a better resurrection."⁵⁹

Erickson similarly writes, "Humans still die, but death's finality has been removed. Paul attributes to sin the power that physical death possesses in the absence of resurrection."⁶⁰ Erickson further argues that while death did not become a reality until the Fall, it was nevertheless a *potentiality* inherent to human nature. Had their access to the tree

of life not been revoked (Gen 3:22), they “could have either lived forever or died,” but lacking that access after being banished from the

57. Foley, *Anselm’s Theory of the Atonement*, 51–52; emphasis added.
14. *Ibid.*, 58; emphasis added.
15. Athanasius, “On the Incarnation,” 47.
16. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 558.

garden, “it became inevitable that they would die.”⁶¹ This, Erickson adds, would explain why Jesus, though sinless, was nevertheless capable of dying. And because he *did* die—in the place of sinners, bearing the death penalty on their behalf—one day the conditions necessary to prevent death will be restored. Until then, however, his people continue to die.

Moreover, and relevant specifically to the doctrine of *penal* substitutionary atonement, death need not be inherently punitive. Because Paul says there is “now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” (Rom 8:1), Grudem rightly insists that “even though we know that Christians die, we should not view the death of Christians as a punishment from God or in any way a result of a penalty due to us for our sins.”⁶² How can this be? Perhaps it is because an act or experience is only a punishment if it has been judicially declared to be. Given two suspects who have been charged with the same crime and have been imprisoned awaiting trial, if upon being tried one of them is found guilty and is sentenced to several years in prison, the time he has already spent there is thought to have been punitive, and will count toward his total sentence. If the other suspect, on the other hand, is cleared of all charges, his imprisonment is *not* thought to have been a punishment. After all, he is judicially declared to have committed no crime for which he could *be* punished! Likewise, believers will be raised from the dead and declared innocent on the basis of their faith in the one who took their sin and bore their punishment in their place, and they will live forever after.

Thus, although Christians die, Jesus has died in their stead, as their substitute, and therefore they will one day be rescued from death, never to die again. This is what Jesus has in mind when he says of his church, “the gates of Hades [ἹριAai Λδου] will not overpower it” (Matt 16:18, CSB). “The gates of Hades” refers to “death as an impersonal supernatural power.”⁶³ The LXX records Yahweh rhetorically asking Job, “have the gates of death

61. *Ibid.*
17. Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 810.
18. Louw and Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon*, 148.

[πύλαι θανάτου] been opened to you in terror, and the gatekeepers of Hades [πυλωροι ἄδου], seeing you, cower?” (Job 38:17).⁶⁴ Likewise the psalmist sings of those who “abhorred every food” and “came near to the gates of death [τῶν πυλῶν τοῦ θανάτου]” (Ps 107:18), and Isaiah says, “At the top of my days at the gates of Hades [πύλαις ἄδου] I will leave my remaining years” (Isa 38:10). R. T. France summarizes Jesus’ words accordingly: “The ‘gates,’” he writes, “thus represent the imprisoning power of death: death will not be able to imprison and hold the church of the living God.”⁶⁵ It is this, the church’s eventual and permanent rescue from death’s clutches, that Christ secured by suffering death in their stead.

Conclusion

This author joins a growing number of conservative evangelicals who are convinced that biblical texts describing hell and final punishment promise total death and destruction for the unredeemed, rather than immortality and eternal life in torment. But critics of this view wisely insist that any understanding of personal eschatology, no matter how seemingly supported by such texts, must also be consistent with an orthodox understanding of the cross. After all, the Bible teaches that on the cross Jesus suffered the consequences of sin in the place of those who otherwise deserved it. And as Morris puts it, “The atonement is the crucial doctrine of the faith. Unless we are right here it matters little, or so it seems to me, what we are like elsewhere.”⁶⁶

This essay has attempted to demonstrate that conditional immortality passes muster, and that the doctrine of eternal torment is in fact found wanting. Like the lives of animals sacrificed on the altar, the life of Jesus was sacrificed on the cross in the place of those whose lives were otherwise forfeit, the

64. Septuagint Greek is from Brenton, *The Septuagint Version*. English translations are from Brannan et al., *Lexham English Septuagint*.
 29. France, *Gospel of Matthew*, 624–25.
 30. Morris, *The Cross in the New Testament*, 5.

one qualifying as a substitute for the many because of its infinite worth. Accordingly, conditionalists believe the consequences of sin, borne by Jesus for those who accept his gift, is the death he died in their stead: the privation of embodied life. Defenders of eternal torment, however, seem unable to explain how Jesus' death can be considered substitutionary if those in whose stead he *died* would have *lived forever* in hell. Indeed, some traditionalists come dangerously close to denying the substitutionary nature of Jesus' death altogether. Meanwhile, because of his impending resurrection, Jesus' death was temporary and did not result in his total annihilation, unlike the everlasting *second* death awaiting those who, raised unto judgment and found guilty, will die and never live again. And while Christ's followers do still die, his substitutionary death on their behalf ensures that for them death is likewise temporary. For one day the Lord will pry open the gates of the grave in victory and triumphantly march forth his bride, the church, free from the clutches of death forever.

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