An Orthodox Priest's view of Christ dying for our sins

An orthodox priest's comments on the atonement
at a panel held March 2026, Mechanicsburg PA.
Superscript numbers are used to connect response with numbered paragraphs

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Comments by Orthodox Priest (see response on page 4):

[1] We don't talk in these terms. **What category do we fall into? Penal Substitution? No.** Our understanding of sin is that sin is seen as sickness, and we need to be healed. **Sin is not you broke the rule, and you need to be punished.** So, for Christ to come into the world, he comes to save mankind from sickness. So, **this idea of Him taking punishment or that kind of thing is very foreign or alien from our understanding**.

[2] The Scripture we use is the prodigal son. The father does not go to the pig pen but waits for his return. When the kid gives his halfhearted confession, the father cuts him off and doesn't let him finish it because he doesn't want hired servants; he wants sons. **The fatted calf is killed not to appease anyone but in celebration. No one has to suffer.** The father just forgives him. The Father forgives period because He is God.

[3] Atonement is an English creation. We see it as "at one ment." To be in communion with God. **So, the purpose of Christ coming into the world is not to appease anything, but to restore and heal humanity.** The Lord God takes upon all of our humanness but sin and saves us from the inside out. So the incarnate God is a child, a baby, a teenager… even goes to death itself and blazes a trail through that. Christ comes into the world for its healing.

[4] There is always some kind of level of atonement discussion. **Paul used a lot of mediatory terms. The problem is it was done as a way to explain something, not that this is the way it is supposed to be**. The problem is that we force this model that this is the way it is. We try to explain something that is unexplainable. Instead, missionaries present the gospel in a way they understand it. They present the gospel in a way the culture will receive it.

[5] So, for us, the ultimate message of the gospel is the Lord out of love comes into the world to save us**. It's not that the Father has to be appeased for anything** because there is nothing deficient in God. He's not waiting for someone to do something or else.

[6] **Some of these models we would see as a blasphemous thing of God who would demand that His Son would suffer to appease His wrath.** I have three boys and a girl. If I'm ticked off about something, I'm not going to make my kids suffer just to appease something. **That would be monstrous! That would be something that we would just reject wholesale.**

[7] Ultimately from the orthodox perspective it is the image of healing. That **we are sick and Christ has come to heal us. We come to the church not as a showpiece for the holy people but as a hostel for the sick.** We all got our stuff.

[8] Christ has redeemed the whole world. We believe the whole world is saved because of what Christ did. How we live our lives as a reflection of that is a whole other story. **That would be the orthodox perspective on this, to try to use the same terms to answer a protestant question in an orthodox answer**.

Question 1: How do you understand the annual atonement sacrifice in Leviticus 16 if it's not penal substitution? He responded… The word itself is "at one ment." To be in communion with. To unify. Language changes over time. **We shy away from sacrifice. Christ said "you've heard it said, now I'm telling you." He's raising it to a higher level.** He becomes the one sacrifice, once and for all. The OT sacrifices led up to the final sacrifice of

Christ himself. That sacrifice draws us to that unity with God. And ultimately that's what we would say Christ came to do – to reconcile us to the Father.

Question 2: Explain what God's justice is. I know I've broken God's law so I'm guilty. Exodus says God won't clear the guilty. The wages of sin is death. How can God just forgive me if I deserve death? That would be injustice, wouldn't it? He responded… **We never pray "God be just." If God be just, we're all toast. We pray for mercy.** We don't presume the mercy of God, but we trust in it. All we have is the mercy of God that saves us. We would never say "oh God be just to us."

Question 3: Under your view of atonement, how does that affect how someone knows they're saved? He responded… Am I sure that I'm married? Yes. Assurance of salvation? Salvation happened, happens and will happen all at the same time. **Our understanding is not that we say one prayer and we're done**. I still have to be loving and forgiving. Its an ongoing thing, a daily process. I can have assurance that Christ did this for me, but I'm also working it out right now and I pray that at his judgment seat his mercy is enough that I trust in.

Question 4: If God is just and sin is an offense towards him, how does it make sense for God to forgive and give us everlasting life, if there is no punishment for sins? If an earthly judge had a murderer come before him and the judge said they are compassionate, you may go free, we would say the judge is wicked. Does God just sweep it under the rug? He responded… **Sometimes we try to drag God down into our pettiness.** How dare He do this, He isn't punishing? He's God! He sees so much above these things. **God isn't petty. This idea of an earthly judge – you're right, it wouldn't make sense in this world. That's the point. He's above the world**. Because His mercy endures forever and His righteousness is an everlasting righteousness, He sees things in a different lens. He shames us at times. We say, "we deserve something." He says, "No, I just forgive you."

Comments are by Very Reverand Father Timothy Hojnicki, Rector
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at "Three Views of the Atonement" Panel, Messiah University, March 19, 2026

What does God's Word say about these thoughts?

[1] **The orthodox priest explicitly states that the orthodox religion does not accept the teaching that Christ died as a substitute paying the penalty for our sins ("penal substitution")**. Later he will call this idea of penal substitution "monstrous." However, God's consistent testimony in the Scriptures is that sin is in fact that we "broke the rule" and that as a result we are to be "punished." God said, "the soul who sins shall die." (Eze 18:4) We are under the wrath of God. (John 3:36) **God's gospel as briefly presented in Romans 1:16 to 18 is that God provides righteousness by faith to save us from God's wrath against our unrighteousness.** "The wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of people." (Rom 1:18) This is the reason why we need salvation (Rom 1:16) It is the danger that we face, and from which we need to be rescued. One may say Christ came for a different reason, but He Himself said that the Son of Man came "to give His life as a ransom for many" (Mark 10:45). A ransom is a payment to set a person free.

When the Lord Jesus spoke of people realizing they are "sick," He is indicating that they realize they have a problem before God and so they come to Christ and repent of their sins in order to receive salvation. "It is not those who are healthy who need a physician, but those who are sick. I have not come to call the righteous to repentance, but sinners." (Lk 5:31-32) **Note that the issue is righteousness.** The problem is that some people think they are righteous, so do not think they need Christ's work.

The orthodox idea of Christ coming to heal us promotes the idea that we do not have a real problem as sinners. It suggests we need some help, but do not need to be rescued from grave danger. As noted later, he sees "healing" as something accomplished by coming to a church (i.e., through religious practices). But God teaches us that we do not need repair or treatment, but new life. Rather, Christ emphasized to a religious leader that he "must be born again" (John 3:3) receiving a whole new life, becoming a "new creation." (2 Cor 5:17) He did not just need more religious knowledge or experiences.

[2] **To use a parable to dismiss other Scriptures is dishonest. No parable addresses everything.** The prodigal son parable beautifully illustrates God's heart to receive a "sinner who repents" (Luke 15:7, 10), while at the same time showing how a religious person thinks they do not have anything to repent of as seen in the older brother. Praise God that His disposition is one of grace that desires that we be reconciled to Him.

God does indeed desire communion with us, so He provided for us to be reconciled to Himself. **How has God arranged for this reconciliation? "God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself… we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were making an appeal through us; we beg you on behalf of Christ, 'be reconciled to God!' He made Him who knew no sin to be sin in our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him."** (2 Cor 5:19-21) How did God provide a way for people to be reconciled to Him? By having Christ become sin for us. He does not "just forgive" us. He does not set aside His righteousness. **God went to great lengths to make a way that we could be righteously forgiven.** Praise the Lord!

[3] When Christ uses sickness imagery, He parallels it with sinners repenting, unlike people who think they are righteous, so they do not see themselves as in need (Luke 5:31-32). He came to save sinners by giving Himself as a ransom for them. **Religious people do not think they need Christ to pay a ransom for them. They think they just need some help.** Like Nicodemus they are just looking for a teacher. (John 3) They do not see their need for a savior to die in their place. But that is who Jesus Christ is. "You shall name Him Jesus for He will save His people from their sins." (Matt 1:21) People need to be rescued, but religious people want to think they just need some assistance.

[4] In using mediatory language, Paul was not just using language Jews could understand. He preached the same message to Gentiles, such as those in Rome to whom he taught Christ paid the penalty for our sins.

The language of sacrifice is God's language. Throughout history God communicated that sin must be addressed through a sacrifice. He taught Israel this need through the sacrifices at the tabernacle. "He shall lay

his hand on the head of the burnt offering, so that it may be accepted for him to make atonement on his behalf." (Lev 1:4) God taught the need for a substitutionary sacrifice through the law and prophets. So, it is false to represent that the apostles were just accommodating themselves to speak this way since it is how the people thought. The Lord in His Word never abandons this teaching. In the last book of the New Testament, it is emphasized that Jesus Christ the Lamb was slain to redeem us to God. He is worthy to rule for God because "you were slaughtered, and You purchased people for God with Your blood." (Rev 5:9)

[5] Note that the word "save" was redefined by the priest. Be alert to how people do this. Always go back to a plain reading of the Scriptures to have your thinking aligned with God. **When God speaks of "saving" in the context of the gospel, it is rescuing from judgment, delivering us from wrath. This is seen throughout the Scriptures and clearly taught in Romans 1 to 5. The problem mankind has is the "wrath of God" against their sins (Rom 1:18).** The gospel is "the power of God to salvation" (Rom 1:16) because in it God provides righteousness through Christ as "a propitiation in His blood" whereby God is "just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus." (Rom 3:25-26) As a result, those who have been "justified by His blood" have the confidence regarding future judgment that "we shall be saved from the wrath of God through Him." (Rom 5:9)

[6] The priest aggressively attacks the gospel as taught in the Scriptures, calling it "monstrous." But the Scriptures stand and are clear. God's wrath is against mankind's unrighteousness because God is righteous. (Rom 1:18) He is the righteous Judge of the world. But His Son in love gave Himself as a sacrifice. (Eph 5:1) This is how we know love. God "loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins." (1 John 4:10) **Christ voluntarily came to earth and went to the cross. He was not sacrificed against His will, but out of love for us. (Eph 5:1)** How monstrous to call God's love monstrous!

Notice the priest dismisses the gospel of Christ dying for our sins and also attacks it. This is very serious. He is attacking God's gospel.

[7] We are not just suffering from an illness. We are under wrath for our guilt. (John 3:36; Rom 1:18) God's gospel is that "Christ died for our sins" (1 Cor 15:3) Further, the idea is conveyed here that the healing is an ongoing process accomplished by coming to the church. Through this way of thinking, a religious system enslaves adherents. They never know they are saved. Instead, they always need the religion to keep helping them be able to "heal." Paul warns the Colossians about this robbery through manmade religion. **Paul emphasizes that we are complete in Christ, that Christ has done everything and is our life, so we should not be deceived by men who propagate their own religious thoughts and impose them upon people as if they are needed.** If we have everything in Christ, people have nothing to offer us. (Col 2:8-3:4) Thus, we are urged to live in the good of the freedom by which Christ has made us free and not turn back to religious practices. (Gal 5:1-6)

Believers in Christ are "saints" (holy ones) already. Religious systems rob people of this so that they can offer them religion. Yet the reality is that in Christ we are "sanctified." The Scriptures address believers in Christ as saints who are holy in God's sight (1 Cor 1:2, 6:11, Col 1:2).

[8] Note a condescending attitude comes through, as he speaks of the Orthodox having a higher way to think than "protestants". This pride is seen again later when he speaks of Romans logic as "petty." **This high-sounding philosophy is not rooted in God and what God has said. Paul said he would not engage in men's thoughts but would stick with preaching "Christ crucified" even though the cross was seen as foolishness by those who do not see their need (1 Cor 1-2)**. May we follow Paul's example in this.

Regarding response to Question 1: It is not legitimate to force the word "atonement" to be merely an English word. **The Scriptures are clear regarding the meaning of the word "atonement".** Animals were killed as sacrifices to provide "atonement". (Lev 1:4) Regarding the sin offering, "the priest shall make atonement for them, and they will be forgiven." (Lev 4:20) There is the day of atonement in Leviticus 16 when the blood of a substitute

was put on the atonement cover on the ark of the covenant (Lev 16:15). This was where God in His holiness said He would meet with them. (Ex 25:22) **In the New Testament the "atonement cover" in the Tabernacle is referred to in Hebrews 9:5, and the same Greek word is used in Romans 3:25 of Christ being a "propitiation" by his blood as God's way for believers in Jesus to be declared righteous.** Thus, this is not merely an English word, and we are not guessing at its meaning.

Christ never refers to the sacrificial system when saying "you have heard it said, now I'm telling you." Those statements are in Matthew 5, and all are emphasizing that a person needs a righteousness greater than the Pharisees. (Matt 5:20-48) Christ never dismisses the sacrificial system. Rather He fulfills it. He is crucified on the day of Passover when a lamb died so that the firstborn did not die – a substitute. He is declared "the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world." (John 1:29) The Scriptures tell us that Christ brought us to God by suffering for sins as "the just for the unjust." (1 Pet 3:18) In the last book of the Bible, Christ is seen as the Lamb slain to redeem us. (Rev 5:6-9) The book of Hebrews uses the sacrificial system to clearly teach that the Lord Jesus is the Sacrifice that needs to be accepted as my way to be right with God. "He, having offered one sacrifice for sins for all time, sat down at the right hand of God… for by one offering He has perfected for all time those who are sanctified." (Heb 10:12-14) Have you accepted His sacrifice for your sins?

Regarding response to Question 2: Notice that he did not answer the question. Further, know that the gospel does not dismiss God being just. Rather the Scriptures emphasize God's righteousness. "The Lord is righteous; He loves righteousness." (Ps 11:7) Christ "loved righteousness and hated wickedness." (Ps 45:7; Heb 1:9) **God's righteousness serves as the foundation for presenting the gospel in Romans 1 to 3. The gospel does not ignore or dismiss justice; rather it fully addresses justice.** "Righteousness of God is revealed" (Rom 1:17) Through Christ, God remains just in declaring us righteous, for justice regarding our sins has been completely satisfied because Christ died for our sins. (Rom 3:24-26)

We rest in God's righteousness. Do not go along with this idea that we do not want God to be just, and that His mercy sets aside his justice. Rather His mercy has devised means for His justice to be satisfied while we are delivered.

Regarding response to Question 3: God does not want us to have such uncertainty as is seen here in the words of this religious leader. Instead believe the Lord Jesus. **Christ wants you to have absolute certainty. He says "truly, truly" – this is absolutely true!** One who believes God's testimony concerning Christ already has eternal life, "does not come into judgment" in the future, but already has "passed out of death into life." (John 5:24) What certainty!

The orderly presentation of the gospel in Romans leads to this same wonderful peace, confidence and joy! Since we know we are justified on the basis of faith in the finished work of Christ, we have peace with God and "celebrate in hope of the glory of God." (Rom 5:1-2) The believer is resting in the work of God. "God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us." (Rom 5:8) So we having settled, joyful confidence in God Himself. (Rom 5:11) The gospel is the work of God through Christ, so my assurance of salvation is rooted in God Himself**. I trust God's word regarding Christ's work, and therein I find perfect rest.** It is not presumptuous to say I am saved; I am justified; I am a saint. Rather it is believing what God has said. To not believe God is the worst disrespect. [for short teaching videos on Romans 1 through 5 see @EncourageDepending on YouTube]

There indeed will be results in my life. As a new creation with the Holy Spirit within, I will act differently. But **I do not act differently to become different. I act differently because I am different. I have new life** (2 Cor 5:17). I've been born again (1 Pet 1:3). I've been sanctified (1 Cor 6:11). I have a real relationship with the Lord Jesus, with His life within me (Col 3:3). As a child of God by faith, we have God's Spirit within so are able to respond to the call to act like Him. (Titus 2:11-14) Having been "justified by His grace" we should "engage in good deeds" (Titus 3:7-8)

Regarding response to Question 4: The priest says God is not petty like us in thinking justice must be satisfied. Is this what God has revealed? **Does God say it is "petty" to think that unrighteous ways should be righteously judged? Certainly not. All Scripture testifies otherwise.** Nor has God told us that He just forgives because He's God and above us. Rather God systematically educated us in righteousness through the law, so we see that we fall short of His righteous standard and thus see the value of Christ as the Savior of sinners. (Gal 3:24)

This religious leader shows his pride here, saying that using the teaching of Romans is "petty." He presents himself as being above the Scriptures, wiser than God. How is it that he has higher knowledge such that he can not only dismiss the teaching of Romans but also call it petty? Please realize that he as a man is setting himself up above God. And **the priest's teachings result in people remaining in their sins under wrath. How terrible!** How evil! No wonder Paul speaks so forcefully about one who distorts the gospel! (Gal 1:9)

Dear friend, you do not need a religious system of men to help you in a supposed sickness. By this they enslave you to themselves. Rather, agree with God and confess that you have sinned before a righteous God and are in grave danger of His righteous judgment! Look to Christ on the cross dying for your sins (John 3:14-15). Acknowledge your guilt and believe on Christ for salvation from God's wrath (Rom 1:16-18, 3:23-26; Acts 13:38-39). Receive the free gift of eternal life God offers through Christ. (John 3:16, Rom 6:23) Rest in what God has said regarding Christ (John 5:24; 1 John 5:9-13). Rest in the perfect work of salvation Christ finished (Col 1:21-22; 2:10-15). This is God's way of peace with Himself forever. Believe God. Believe His message of good news!

Some Summary Notes

1. The orthodox priest **dismisses and attacks the Biblical teaching that Christ died as a substitute to pay the penalty for our sins**. Yet, this is God's gospel as taught in the Scriptures. Believe God not man.
2. The priest **attacks the God of the Bible as "monstrous" for punishing His Son.** Yet Christ's dying for us was an act of love. (Rom 5:8; Eph 5:1) How terrible to attack God this way!
3. The priest **uses very little Scripture** to provide answers. His thoughts are men's thoughts. Heed God's Word instead. (Col 2:8)
4. The priest **often does not answer the question asked** (calling it petty to think God would be unjust as a judge if he does not righteously punish evil actions), uses strawman arguments (saying penal substitution represents God as having a bad temper that takes out his anger on his son) or makes ad hominems (attacking God's character of requiring sacrifice, rather than addressing the substance of the argument, that justice requires sin to be punished).
5. **The Scriptures consistently teach that God is just yet provided a means for unrighteous people to be declared righteous through the blood of Christ who died in their place.** (Isa 53; Rom 3:21-26) This is how we can be reconciled to God and have communion with Him. (2 Cor 5:17-21) There is no other gospel. (Acts 4:12; Gal 1:9)
6. The priest attacks God and the gospel that God foretold in the Law (Lev 1-5, 16), prophesied (Isa 53), fulfilled in Christ (John 3:14-17), proclaimed in the world (Acts 8:32-35; 10:43; 13:38-39), and taught through the apostles (Rom 1-5; Col 2; 2 Cor 5:17-21; 1 Pet 3:18). **This attack on the gospel was already starting in the days of the apostles**, resulting in corrective writings like Galatians and Colossians addressing religious people undermining God's gospel**.**
7. **See to it that you are not taken captive through philosophy and empty deception that is not in accordance with Christ in His perfect person and complete work.** (Col 2:8-17)

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