

John Calvin's Pernicious View of the Atonement

A Commentary and Critique on Calvin's Institutes of the Christian Religion, Book 2, Ch. 16, Sections 1-12

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Introduction: The Intended Use of This Paper

This paper is a companion-piece to my exposition on the benefits of Jesus Christ's death on the cross, which is entitled, "[Who Killed Jesus?](#)". I have written the present paper for the benefit of those who on one hand find my exposition biblical in its positive points, but who retain on the other hand an uneasy feeling that there may be something I am leaving out. They may be asking, what if there is something important about seeing Christ's death as an act of absorbing and thereby extinguishing the wrath of God against sin and sinners? I have therefore entered into a dialogue with a person very strong on that perspective, so that the reader can listen to the two voices and weigh the issue for themselves. I have chosen John Calvin as my interlocutor because I want my readers to have access to at least one universally recognized, Scripture-based theologian, who consciously builds a case for that understanding.^{[1\[n\]](#)} In that way they can see for themselves whether the "quenching of God's wrath" concept can be built from Scripture. Before reading this commentary, which intersperses short passages with comments, I recommend reading (or at least sampling) the original. That way you will have heard Calvin out uninterrupted without his train of thought being broken up with comments and criticisms. I will be commenting on Chapter 16, sections 1-12. Here is the URL of the original: [Calvin's Institutes, Book II, Chapter 16, at CCEL](#)

On Endnotes

Endnotes are indicated by a raised number with [n] after it, showing as a hyperlink. If you click on them, you can see the note, and then just press the back button on your browser to return to where you were reading.

Commentary

1. [. . .] But here it is necessary diligently to consider in what way we obtain salvation from him [Christ], that we may not only be persuaded that he is the

author of it, but having embraced whatever is sufficient as a sure foundation of our faith, may eschew all that might make us waver. For seeing no man can descend into himself, and seriously consider what he is, without feeling that God is angry and at enmity with him, and therefore anxiously longing for the means of regaining his favour (this cannot be without satisfaction), the certainty here required is of no ordinary description,--sinners, until freed from guilt, being always liable to the wrath and curse of God, who, as he is a just judge, cannot permit his law to be violated with impunity, but is armed for vengeance.

I would like to comment on the second sentence here piece by piece. Note that Calvin begins with an observation about human psychology which he thinks is universal. He thinks that everyone who introspects will feel that God is his or her mortal enemy and needs to be appeased. There is a lot wrong with this approach. First of all, this is not scripturally based; second, Scripture speaks against it; third, common experience proves it false as a generalization about human psychology. Scripture says of the person out of fellowship with God, "The fool says in his heart, 'There is no God'." ^{2[n]} Elsewhere it is said in the name of the person who is out of fellowship with God, "The LORD does not see, the God of Jacob does not take notice." ^{3[n]} So Scripture does not assert that human beings universally feel upon introspection that they need restoration to a wrathful God's favor. Common experience also refutes the generality. Maybe in Calvin's time, when the religious culture was generally superstitious and legalistic, this was a fair generalization. But it leaves out the person of faith, whose sense is that God is merciful and desirous of his or her well being, sinner or not. The person of no faith, in other words, may not pay any attention to God at all, whereas the person of faith may fairly and humbly ask for and hope for forgiveness. The faithless but superstitious legalist who is cowering in expectation of doom is not the general case. Nor should this hypothetical faithless person's mentality be a measure either of what we teach about God's attitude towards sinners nor about Christ's death and what it accomplished. To the contrary, words of Christ and his apostles in the New Testament should be the measure.

. . . (this cannot be without satisfaction). . .

Satisfaction here suggests that God's favor cannot be regained without some kind of penalty being paid for wrongdoing. Since Calvin simply asserts this in passing, the question arises, "Is this true, according to Scripture?". The answer is *no*. There are a goodly number of places in which it is made clear that God is prepared to

forgive the repentant sinner utterly without cost (e.g. Isaiah 5:6-9; 55:1, 6-7). David, for example, commits a sin so grave that there is no sacrifice prescribed for it, and there is no possibility of restitution. He commits adultery and then conspires to have Uriah (the army officer whose wife he has stolen) killed in battle. David concludes, writing a psalm about the experience, "The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; you will not despise a contrite and broken heart." (Ps. 51:16-17). What David discovers is that true repentance, not punishment, is what restores a person to right relationship with God. Exodus 34:6 records the most profound and personal of all the revelations that God made to Moses about his character. After Moses asks God, "show me your glory" (Exod. 33:18), God appears before him and proclaims, "The LORD, the LORD, compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in love and faithfulness, who keeps loving loyalty to thousands, and forgives iniquity, transgression and sin. . .". In this self-proclamation the LORD reveals that in himself he has no stake in demanding satisfaction for all offenses. God's innermost nature is to be forgiving, not legalistic and demanding of vengeance.

. . . the certainty here required is of no ordinary description,--sinners, until freed from guilt, being always liable to the wrath and curse of God, who, as he is a just judge, cannot permit his law to be violated with impunity, but is armed for vengeance.

Calvin is again depending on psychology here. His assertion is that we're going to need a doctrine of the atonement that offers a very high level of assurance, since otherwise people, aware of the intensity of God's potential enmity towards them, will be worried about the possibility that he might strike out at them in vengeance. What does this mean, **"as he is a just judge, [God] cannot permit his law to be violated with impunity"**? This seems to imply that God, in order to remain just, must cause *punishment* to befall every creature that disobeys him. (Otherwise his **"law"** would **"be violated with impunity"**). But this is not what Scripture teaches. Scripture, Old and New Testaments equally, presents God's innermost attitude as forgiving and generous towards sinners and desirous of their free forgiveness. Jesus says, if you want to be like your Father in heaven, then learn to love your enemies and pray for those who do you harm. God's attitude is shown by the fact that he causes his sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and his rain to fall on the just and on the unjust (Mt. 5:44-48). Jesus teaches, in other words, that God is patient with the sinful, and because of his love he is slow to enforce the right he has as creator to destroy the created being

that chooses to live in a harmful way. This is not to say that God will tolerate persistence in harmful behavior indefinitely. Far from it. But the point Calvin misses here is that ***God's status as just judge is not undermined if he grants free pardon to the repentant---as long as he is fair to all in doing so.*** Sinners are simply called on to repent, and to ask for forgiveness, and God, through Scripture, assures them that forgiveness, acceptance and restoration will be freely given. The principle that *vengeance must always be exacted, even in the case of repentance*, cannot be supported by Scripture. Nor does Scripture picture the situation where there is repentance as though God had built up a pressure of wrath, which, when repentance came, needed to be discharged somewhere else than on the repentant.^{[4\[n\]](#)}

2. But before we proceed farther, we must see in passing, how can it be said that God, who prevents [receives] us with his mercy, was our enemy until he was reconciled to us by Christ. For how could he have given us in his only-begotten Son a singular pledge of his love, if he had not previously embraced us with free favour? As there thus arises some appearance of contradiction, I will explain the difficulty. The mode in which the Spirit usually speaks in Scripture is, that God was the enemy of men until they were restored to favour by the death of Christ (Rom. 5:10); that they were cursed until their iniquity was expiated by the sacrifice of Christ (Gal. 3:10, 13); that they were separated from God, until by means of Christ's body they were received into union (Col. 1:21, 22).

To get to the nub of it, Paul in Rom. 5.9-10 does not say, as Calvin mistranslates, **"God was the enemy of men until they were restored to favour by the death of Christ"**. Paul says,

But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God's wrath through him! For if while we were enemies [towards God] we were reconciled through the death of his Son, all the more, now reconciled, shall we be saved by his life.

Calvin leaves out the words *how much more*, and by doing so completely changes the logical structure of the sentence. According to Calvin's misreading, Christ's

death achieves the quenching of God's wrath towards us.^{[5\[n\]](#)} But Paul is plainly saying that Christ's death achieves the reconciliation and reclamation of those who were at enmity towards God, not that it achieves the quenching of God's wrath. And, Paul continues, if God in Christ was willing to go to death on the cross in order to reconcile us when we stood in a position of hostility towards him, *how much more* are we now, standing in a place of reconciliation and obedience towards him, free from the fear of God's future wrath, which must at some point come on those who persist in enmity and rebellion towards him. God's wrath, in other words, does sooner or later catch up with those who persist in enmity and misuse of the gifts and powers of life. God has the full right as creator to be angry with, and to destroy—i.e. to unmake—those created beings that use their power of being to tear down their own life and/or the lives of other beloved created beings. Ultimately persistence in evil does bring God's wrath. But God is no more to be understood as wrathful towards every estranged individual than the father in the story of the prodigal was portrayed by Jesus as wrathful towards his wayward son (Lk. 15:1-32).

that they were cursed until their iniquity was expiated by the sacrifice of Christ (Gal. 3:10, 13)

There is nothing wrong with this statement, except that it hides the fact that "**they were cursed**" by "the curse of the law". That is, they were under the sentences that the Law prescribed for sinful behaviors. Galatians 3 in no way implies that God despises and rejects lost human beings, as the Pharisees did when they said, "This multitude, who do not know the law, are accursed". To be under the curse of the law—at least for Jewish people--means having communally entered into a covenant of obedience, and having pronounced provisional curses (deterrent calamities) over themselves that were to activate upon the breaking of the covenant. No one, says Paul, keeps the law adequately, so the curses that the community spoke over itself if it should break the covenant, must inevitably come home to roost unless someone comes to abrogate the power of the covenant curses. Christ did so by facing the curses himself on behalf of all covenant breakers.

[T]hey were separated from God, until by means of Christ's body they were received into union (Col. 1:21, 22).

Calvin again implicitly tears the sense away from Paul's words. In context of the development of Calvin's thesis, the implication is that Paul pictures God as in a state of enmity towards sinners, and holding himself aloof from them until restoration of unity through Christ's body. But notice how clearly Paul puts the aloofness, the enmity, on the side of humanity, not of God:

All [God's] fullness was pleased to dwell in Christ, and through him to reconcile all things to himself, establishing peace by the blood of his cross. . . And as for you, who were once strangers and enemies in your attitude, with your wicked doings, he has now reconciled you in his physical body by his death, so as to bring you, blameless and unimpeachable, into his presence. (Col. 1: 21-22)

Such modes of expression are accommodated to our capacity, that we may the better understand how miserable and calamitous our condition is without Christ. For were it not said in clear terms, that Divine wrath, and vengeance, and eternal death, lay upon us, we should be less sensible of our wretchedness without the mercy of God, and less disposed to value the blessing of deliverance.

This is totally unscriptural thinking. God was favorably disposed to forgiving and reclaiming us, he says, or Christ would never have come to save us. Nonetheless, God has to make it sound as though he had been inclined towards us with **wrath, and vengeance, and eternal death**, in order that we should be properly grateful for our deliverance. In other words, Calvin says that God is not a fuming, vengeful legalist towards us, but then again, we need to see him as though he were one, in order to appreciate his forgiveness. This makes no sense. Just a paragraph previously Calvin was saying that people are naturally inclined to see God as hating them and holding them under the continuous threat of his wrath. And he was saying that we need a doctrine of the atonement that is going to reassure these people. *But now* he says, if we (or Scripture, which he misquotes) didn't present God as virtually hating people, as holding them under the hungry sword of his wrath, then they wouldn't be able to be properly grateful for his forgiveness. For him to put both these points forward is incoherent and self-contradictory. Moreover, where can he find one single New Testament statement that God *ever* hated those for whom Christ died? In what way does it make me more grateful to imagine God as having hated me before Christ died for me? In what way does it make me more inclined to trust him?

For example, let a person be told, Had God at the time you were a sinner hated you, and cast you off as you deserved, horrible destruction must have been your doom; but spontaneously and of free indulgence he retained you in his favour, not suffering you to be estranged from him, and in this way rescued you from danger,--the person will indeed be affected, and made sensible in some degree how much he owes to the mercy of God. But again, let him be told, as Scripture teaches, that he was estranged from God by sin, an heir of wrath, exposed to the curse of eternal death, excluded from all hope of salvation, a complete alien from the blessing of God, the slave of Satan, captive under the yoke of sin; in fine, doomed to horrible destruction, and already involved in it; that then Christ interposed, took the punishment upon himself and bore what by the just judgment of God was impending over sinners; with his own blood expiated the sins which rendered them hateful to God, by this expiation satisfied and duly propitiated God the Father, by this intercession appeased his anger, on this basis founded peace between God and men, and by this tie secured the Divine benevolence toward them; will not these considerations move him the more deeply, the more strikingly they represent the greatness of the calamity from which he was delivered? In short, since our mind cannot lay hold of life through the mercy of God with sufficient eagerness, or receive it with becoming gratitude, unless previously impressed with fear of the Divine anger, and dismayed at the thought of eternal death, we are so instructed by divine truth, as to perceive that without Christ God is in a manner hostile to us, and has his arm raised for our destruction.

Calvin here thinks he is helping the sinner to repent by painting the most fearsome possible picture of his or her position apart from the reconciliation made by Christ on the cross. In trying to figure out how to have the greatest persuasive impact on his audience, he has forgotten to listen to how Jesus or Paul would present the Good News. The Holy Spirit doesn't need our help to impress people with how much they have been benefited by the death of Jesus on the Cross. Above all he doesn't need our help when our "help" is to try to impress people with something that even Calvin admits is ultimately false---that God wished to destroy them before Christ died for them. Calvin's whole approach is psychological and rhetorical, not scriptural, and his conclusion, based on psychology, is that we should present Christ's death as an absorption of God's wrath. There is something sick about the mentality being exhibited here---that we need to engender a deeper sense of God's mercy in people by giving them a picture of God as previously dangerous and hostile towards them. It doesn't make

me feel grateful to contemplate Calvin's way of looking at God's attitude--on the contrary, it makes me hope that no such hostile, relentlessly vindictive God as this exists. What makes me feel thankful is when I read Scripture and over and over find assurances that God is nothing like Calvin has just portrayed him here, but rather as Jesus portrays him.

5. When it is asked then how Christ, by abolishing sin, removed the enmity between God and us, and purchased a righteousness which made him favourable and kind to us, it may be answered generally, that he accomplished this by the whole course of his obedience.

Note that he began by saying that he was talking in an accommodating way, in order to help people be grateful, but now he settles into his model as though he has already proven it as scriptural. Scripture *does not say* that Christ died in order to procure God's favor and kindness towards us. To the contrary, it repeatedly says that Christ's death on the cross *expresses* God's favor and kindness towards us.

But God demonstrates his very own love for us, in that when we were still sinners, Christ died for us.^{[6\[n\]](#)}

For this is how much God loved the world: so much that he gave his one and only son, in order that everyone who trusts in him would not be lost, but have eternal life. For God did not send his son into the world to judge the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.^{[7\[n\]](#)}

. . . Our acquittal is in this, that the guilt which made us liable to punishment was transferred to the head of the Son of God (Is. 53:12).

This is an interesting assertion, that our guilt was transferred to the head of Christ. Let's look at Isaiah 53:12 and see what it says.

Therefore I will give him a portion among the great, and he will divide the spoils with the strong,
Because he poured out his life unto death, and was numbered with the transgressors.
For he bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors.

Where in here does it say that our *guilt* was taken on by Christ? It says that he was numbered (by human beings) with the transgressors, and that he "bore the sin of many", which means (1) that he was *sinned against* by many, in that the human race crucified him, and (2) that he died on their behalf, and paid the penalty of their sins, all the while interceding for them. Nothing is said here about a metaphysical transfer of guilt.

Now notice the next move:

We must specially remember this substitution in order that we may not be all our lives in trepidation and anxiety, as if the just vengeance which the Son of God transferred to himself, were still impending over us.

We have already shown that Calvin's approach to preaching about the cross was psychological---he says that we have to paint a picture of God as previously vengeful, hateful and wrathful towards us in order to heighten people's sensitivity to the mercy of God and gratitude for the forgiveness of their sins. But now he says, we have to specially remember to view Christ's death as a substitutionary absorption of God's wrath, in order to allay the trembling fear of those who have accepted this view of God's attitude. It does not matter whether this fear comes about because, as Calvin began by asserting, all people naturally view God that way, or because, thanks to his way of preaching, they have become totally fear-stricken and in dread of God's hostility. In either case there is no requirement that they or we view Christ's death as absorbing God's inclination to harm us. We could just as easily, with Paul, teach people that God loves us, and loved us before we ever loved him, before we ever turned from our sins, before Christ ever died for us. We could also just as easily look to apostles such as Paul and Peter to teach us exactly what Christ's death accomplished, rather than supplying a meaning that corresponds to the warped view of God that Calvin has pretended was necessary to put forward for psychological reasons.

Putting psychological arguments to the side as at best secondary, let us attempt to zero in on what the scriptures of the New Testament have to say about this matter. After all, the idea that Christ died in order to take upon himself God's wrath towards us is relatively clear and coherent. I have just expressed it in so many words without any trouble. If this concept is so easy to enunciate, and is also true, then *why, in all 400 pages of the New Testament, do we never once find it voiced?* We saw that Calvin extracted it from (or rather, imported it to) Rom.

5:10, but only by ignoring the context and by excising the very words that completely change the sense, "then how much more". And Calvin never cites any other New Testament passage in favor of this idea. Instead, as we have seen, he keeps framing the issue in psychological terms. If we didn't focus on this transfer of wrath idea, he says, we'd be constantly in fear and dread of God's vengeance. But it is *Calvin* that set up that warped view of things in the first place, in order, supposedly, to help people feel grateful for God's grace forgiveness.

Once again, I am not in any way moving towards a characterization of God as passive and laissez faire. Scripture makes it clear that God's vengeance will have to come on some human beings. But it will not come because of some alleged fundamental hostility and inclination towards destructiveness on God's part, but rather because of fundamental human persistence in unrepentance. God, quoted by Ezekiel, says that he takes no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but desires for them that they turn from their wicked ways and live (Ezek. 33:11). And if people do turn to life from deathly ways, their past sins will not be remembered or held against them (Ezek. 18:31-32; 33:14-16). God's implacable resentment does not hang over the sinner in the way that Calvin wants them to imagine, nor in the way that he suggests they imagine all on their own anyway. What they need is teaching from Isaiah and Christ and Paul and the other apostles about the mercy and patience and forgiveness of God. They need to know the lengths to which Christ was willing to go to reclaim them from their state of hostility and death. If they appreciated that, there would no longer be any need, nor any inclination, to view Christ's death as an absorption of God's hostility towards them.

6. The very form of the death embodies a striking truth. The cross was cursed not only in the opinion of men, but by the enactment of the Divine Law. Hence Christ, while suspended on it, subjects himself to the curse. And thus it behoved to be done, in order that the whole curse, which on account of our iniquities awaited us, or rather lay upon us, might be taken from us by being transferred to him.

Calvin is thinking of Galatians 3:10-14 in his first sentence here. "Cursed is every one who is hung on a tree". What he does not realize is that this "cursedness" does not come about "**by the enactment of the Divine Law**". The Deuteronomy 21:23 passage says that if the Israelites subject some criminal to capital punishment, and then hang him on a tree (in public disgrace as a deterrent to

similar crimes), they are not to leave his corpse exposed overnight. "Be sure to bury him that same day, because anyone who is hung on a tree is a curse to Yahweh. You must not desecrate the land that Yahweh your God is giving you as an inheritance." The idea behind this is that a capital offender is still a human being created in the image of God, and the human body is not to be treated, even in death, with contempt. To do so would be to bring defilement on the holy land that God is giving to the Israelites. To be killed and to have your corpse publicly shamed is a curse in God's eyes. It is an evil, disgraceful and utterly calamitous thing to happen to a human being. In my opinion, the last thing this Deuteronomy passage is trying to convey is that God, when he sees a person killed and hung on a tree, automatically curses the person according to some grotesque divine law. God is not one whose nature it is to add insult to injury. That, indeed, is what God is *legislating against* in this passage. No other reading makes sense of the reasoning---Do not hang a person overnight, or your land, given to you by grace, will be defiled.

Coming again to Galatians, it is clear that Christ's facing of the curse of the law was not a transference of a divine curse mechanically resulting from his being publicly hanged on the cross. Christ, the One who fulfilled the law, was subjected to a cursed, disgraced death by the very ones who claimed to uphold and administrate the law. In voluntarily facing this undeserved torment and death without either fighting or running away, he took all ammunition out of their hands, *and out of the hands of all the unforgiving forces in all creation*. For he not only died for those who knew they had broken the law and incurred the curses of covenant-breakers, but he even died for those who crucified him, taking away the curse from those who thought they were immune to it.

This was also shadowed in the Law, since [*ashmah*, *chatta'ah*], the word by which sin itself is properly designated, was applied to the sacrifices and expiations offered for sin. By this application of the term, the Spirit intended to intimate, that they were a kind of . . . (purifications), bearing, by substitutions the curse due to sin.

Calvin is here observing that the Hebrew words *ashmah* and *chatta'ah* can each mean both guilt and sin on the one hand and guilt offering/sin offering on the other hand. From this coincidence of terminology he concludes that the Spirit would have us understand that the sacrifices experience God's curse in place of the sinner. Aside from the fact that this is a pure *non-sequitur*, there exists a

simple, fatal difficulty with Calvin's interpretation. In reading the entire Old Testament, including Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy, as well as all the prophetic literature and the Psalms, one finds it said *not once* that the function of the sacrificial victim is to suffer God's wrath, displeasure, anger, or curse on behalf of the offender. Sin offerings and guilt offerings, as the Scriptures explain many times, make a way for the worshipper to re-establish right standing with God if an *unintentional ritual lapse* has been made. There is *no sacrifice* prescribed that can atone for intentionally hurting or killing another human being, or other high-handed acts of treachery against God or society. However, in such cases there is still a path to restoration of right relationship with God—namely, the path of repentance followed by absolutely free forgiveness (see Pss. 32:5; 51:16-17; Isa. 55:6-9, etc.).^{[8](#)} The New Testament authors, in their turn, describe Jesus' death in sacrificial terms, and not one of them ever takes up Calvin's interpretation. In scores of references to the cross and its meaning by Jesus and by the apostles, we find not one statement that Jesus suffered or removed God's wrath, curse or displeasure.

But that which was represented figuratively in the Mosaic sacrifices is exhibited in Christ the archetype. Wherefore, in order to accomplish a full expiation, he made his soul . . . a propitiatory victim for sin (as the prophet says, Is. 53:5, 10), on which the guilt and penalty being in a manner laid, ceases to be imputed to us.

Calvin here starts off in agreement with the New Testament writers. Israel's sacrifices (including the Passover) are shadows, reflections, of something deeper than themselves. Christ's facing of death on the cross is the reality that they prefigure. We must start with the cross, and learn first what Christ and the apostles say about its meaning and significance, and from there proceed to deepen our understanding by observing the way in which it is prefigured, foreshadowed, by the OT sacrificial system. But Calvin goes on to *assert*, unsupported by any OT or NT statement, that the role of the sacrificial victim was to take upon itself the disgrace and ignominy of our iniquities. He *asserts* that the victim trades over its innocence and purity to the offerer, so making him or her acceptable in God's eyes. This is not how any writer of the Old or New Testament expresses the function of sacrifice. Isa. 53:4-5 says,

We ourselves regarded him as one punished, struck down by God,
But he was pierced for our wrongdoings, bruised for our sins.

The punishment that brought us peace was laid on him,
And by his wounds we are healed.

Nowhere in Scripture is it stated that this transaction came about because God's nature required him to take vengeance for every wrongdoing, without mercy. Much more in tune with the context (see Isa. 52-53) is the idea that God is prepared to suffer in order to answer for his free mercy towards the guilty. It is said over and over again in the Scriptures that God forgives freely, and that an attitude of true repentance restores one to complete acceptance before God.^{[9\[n\]](#)} What repentance *does not procure* is freedom from accusation by our enemies, such as Satan, or those whom we have harmed, who may refuse to forgive us. The merciless will argue before the throne of God that fairness demands no one should receive forgiveness without suffering some kind of penalty for their wrongdoing.

Thus Paul says, interpreting the cross:

When you were dead in your offenses. . . God made you alive together with Christ, having forgiven us all our offenses, having cancelled out the certificate of debt that listed the points of the case against us and was hostile to us. He has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross. He had disarmed the rulers and authorities, and made a public spectacle of them, having triumphed over them through the cross (Col. 2:13-15).

According to all the Scriptures, God in himself passionately desires to forgive and restore people without cost. **It is our accusers**—and, indeed, our own mercilessness— **that caused Jesus to face punishment in our place**, and his innocent death on the cross put paid to all their accusations. You can see from this that the cross was indeed a place of vicarious, substitutionary suffering.

The Apostle declares this more plainly when he says, that "he made him to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in him," (2 Cor. 5:21). For the Son of God, though spotlessly pure, took upon him the disgrace and ignominy of our iniquities, and in return clothed us with his purity.

Calvin's idea, that the essence of Christ's suffering had to do with God transferring our filthiness and unacceptability on to him, is absolutely unscriptural. It both

wrenches Paul's words out of context and misses the point of the very coincidence in terminology (*chatta'at* means both "sin" and "sin offering") that Calvin has just been talking about. Here is the context:

...God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people's sins against them. And therefore he has committed to us the message of reconciliation... We implore you on Christ's behalf, be reconciled to God. God made him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in him.

The movement of God in the death of Christ (2 Cor. 5.15), Paul says, was a movement of reaching out to us, the hostile ones, through Christ, in compassion and reconciliation. It was not a wrathful turning against Christ in substitutionary condemnation. When Paul says that "God made him who knew no sin to be sin for us", he is poetically repeating the word "sin" (Gr. *hamartia*), in the full knowledge that the Greek Old Testament (the Septuagint) uses *hamartia* on many key occasions to translate the Hebrew word *chatta'at*. As Calvin himself has noted above, the word *chatta'at* is paradoxical because this very same word means "sin" in some contexts, but "a sin offering" in other contexts. (Careful use of a concordance will confirm this.) So the person familiar with either the Greek or the Hebrew Old Testament will hear Paul saying, here, "he made him who knew no sin (*chatta'at/hamartia*) to be a sin offering (*chatta'at/hamartia*) for us...". Who is it that is supposed to kill the sin offering? Is it the priest, symbolically representing an angry God who wants to take revenge on the sinner, but transfers his displeasure onto the animal? No, it is the one who has sinned who comes before God, bringing the innocent victim, and that person personally slays the animal (see Leviticus 4). The sin offering has done nothing wrong, yet it dies in the offender's place, for the offender's sin, at the offender's hands, and the offender stands accepted, completely forgiven by God. This is a reflection of the cross, cast into the deepest grain of the sacrificial system of Israel. Humanity, even in its place of enmity towards God, unknowingly offered the sacrifice that purchased its own redemption from all creaturely accusation (Col. 2:13-15; 1 Jn 2:1-2; Zech. 12:10; Rev. 1:7; 5:9).

To the same thing he seems to refer, when he says, that he "condemned sin in the flesh," (Rom. 8:3), the Father having destroyed the power of sin when it was transferred to the flesh of Christ. This term, therefore, indicates that Christ, in

his death, was offered to the Father as a propitiatory victim; that, expiation being made by his sacrifice, we might cease to tremble at the divine wrath.

Once again Calvin is wrenching Paul's words out of context and imputing to them a meaning that contradicts Paul's larger train of thought. Here is Paul:

There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of Life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and death. For what the law was powerless to do, being weak through the flesh, God did, sending his own Son, in the likeness of sinful flesh and as a sin offering. Thus he condemned sin in the flesh, in order that the requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who do not walk according to the flesh, but to the Spirit (Rom. 8:1-4).

By dying on the cross on our behalf, Christ has freed us in at least two senses from "the law of sin and death". (1) The Old Testament dictated that one who had suffered harm could insist on an "eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth". Human beings in self-alienation from God are such deadly creatures that sooner or later every human being would be beholden for his or her life according to this principle (cf. Isa. 59:2-8, Rom. 3:9-20). (2) More central to Paul's thinking in Romans 8 is the idea that human beings, living apart from the Spirit as their inner life-principle, are headed inexorably towards death. Sin, in the sense of self-separation from God, equates to life on the "flesh principle" (bodily life in rejection of Holy Spirit life), which leads inevitably to death by simple cause and effect. If you refuse the Spirit who supports your life and generates eternal life from within, then you will die. This is a "law" not in the sense of a divine statute written on stone or paper, but in the sense of an inescapable principle, like a law of nature.¹⁰[\[n\]](#) Christ's death on the cross frees us from the law of sin and death in both the above senses. First, it provides freedom from all accusation on the part of those graceless accusers who would demand our death (Col. 2:14-15), and second, it reconciles us to God, bringing us back into life-giving communion with God through the Spirit of Christ (Col. 2:13; Rom. 8:4-23). It is a deep mystery that *God meets us in Christ's self-sacrifice on the cross and breaks through to give us the power to repent, which we did not have in ourselves in our position of hostility.* Beyond this, through the Spirit he has brought us the power to live out the requirements of the law of love—which we could never have obeyed in our selfish, godless state

In the larger context, the words "he condemned sin in the flesh" indicate that Christ's sinless life and willing self-sacrifice on the cross prove that "fleshy", selfish, "Holy Spirit-less" existence is not integral to the human condition. God condemned (passed judgment on) sin in the flesh by proving in the person of his Son that a human being *can* live bodily by the Spirit. God took away the dishonest excuse that "you made me of flesh, and having a body of flesh makes sin inescapable". He did this by demonstrating through Christ's bodily, fleshly life the way God *did* make us—to be filled with the Spirit and to walk by the Spirit. By demonstrating that it was possible to live bodily in the Spirit, Jesus opened the way for us to follow him in the lifestyle of the Spirit, and so to enter into eternal life (see the whole context, Rom. 8:1-39).

Understanding Paul's train of thought helps throw off some of the fog from around Calvin's interpretation. Calvin presents sin and guilt as though they are metaphysical substances that you can pick up from one place and move to another. Thus to him the phrase "he condemned sin in the flesh" means that God took the "sin" and "guilt" stuff that was stuck on/in us and stuck them onto/into Jesus' body on the cross. According to Calvin's implicit mythology, this "stuff" stinks terribly and makes God want to destroy anyone who smells of it. So God removed the "stuff" from us, put it onto Jesus, and destroyed Jesus. Therefore we smell fine to him. Calvin goes on in the same vein:

It is now clear what the prophet means when he says, that "the Lord has laid upon him the iniquity of us all," (Is. 53:6); namely, that as he was to wash away the pollution of sins, they were transferred to him by imputation. Of this the cross to which he was nailed was a symbol, as the Apostle declares, "Christ has redeemed us from the curse of the law, being made a curse for us: for it is written, Cursed is every one that hangeth on a tree: that the blessing of Abraham might come on the Gentiles through Jesus Christ," (Gal. 3:13, 14). In the same way Peter says, that he "bare our sins in his own body on the tree," (1 Peter 2:24), inasmuch as from the very symbol of the curse, we perceive more clearly that the burden with which we were oppressed was laid upon him. Nor are we to understand that by the curse which he endured he was himself overwhelmed, but rather that by enduring it he repressed broke, annihilated all its force. Accordingly, faith apprehends acquittal in the condemnation of Christ, and blessing in his curse.

There are many problems with this model, of which I will mention a few. First, it is out of character with God, who forgives freely by nature (see [n. 9](#)). Secondly, as we have discussed above, it is entirely possible to understand the concept of "bearing sins" without resort to the notion that God must symbolically move sin/guilt "stuff" from one party to another in order to forgive. Jesus bears our sins/guilt/punishment not because God implacably demands tit for tat, but because God, through Christ, chooses to face our hostility and to answer our graceless accusers at his own expense (Col. 2:14-15).^{11[n]} Thirdly, Calvin's model flatly contradicts New Testament writers' ways of describing Christ's sacrifice on the cross. The cross was the place *par excellence* of Christ's acceptability before God (see Lk. 23:46; Eph. 5:2; Phil. 2:8-11; Heb. 5:7).

Hence it is not without cause that Paul magnificently celebrates the triumph which Christ obtained upon the cross, as if the cross, the symbol of ignominy, had been converted into a triumphal chariot. For he says, that he blotted out the handwriting of ordinances that was against us, which was contrary to us, and took it out of the way, nailing it to his cross: that "having spoiled principalities and powers he made a show of them openly, triumphing over them in it," (Col. 2:14, 15). Nor is this to be wondered at; for, as another Apostle declares, Christ, "through the eternal Spirit, offered himself without spot to God," (Heb. 9:14), and hence that transformation of the cross which were otherwise against its nature.

Calvin has been saying that the cross is the place where God threw all the human race's spiritual garbage onto Jesus and took vengeance on him for it. The alleged *effect* of that, the buying of our redemption from God's wrath, now explains for Calvin why some NT writers talk as though the cross were a place of positive triumph over enemies or a pleasing self-offering, rather than a place of unspeakable, unthinkable horror. But Calvin's paradox disappears if we do not follow his divine tit-for-tat thinking in the first place. The true paradox is not that the place of divine rejection of Jesus became the place of divine acceptance of us, but that the place of human rejection of Jesus became the place of divine acceptance of us, and the place of human deadliness became the place of divine redemption. "The stone that the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone; this was brought about by the Lord, and it is amazing to us" (Mt. 21:42; Acts 4:11). Jesus was he whom rebellious, murderous human beings and angels hated and killed precisely because he was God. But God turned their very

act of murderousness into the occasion for a priceless invitation to acceptance, and into an unanswerable claim for their forgiveness.

But that these things may take deep root and have their seat in our inmost hearts, we must never lose sight of sacrifice and ablution. For, were not Christ a victim, we could have no sure conviction of his being *apolutrosis*, *antilutron*, and *hilasterion*, our substitute-ransom and propitiation. And hence mention is always made of blood whenever Scripture explains the mode of redemption: although the shedding of Christ's blood was available not only for propitiation, but also acted as a laver to purge our defilements.

In his first sentence here he is alluding to a sentiment we commented on earlier. He is implying that we need to keep thinking of Christ's work as a sacrifice that absorbs and quenches God's wrath. For if we lost sight of Jesus as a **victim** (of God's wrath), then we "**could have no sure conviction of his being our. . substitute-ransom**". This is true enough—in fact, tautologous—on his terms. But if we, following Scripture, understand that God's mentality is that of desiring to forgive and accept us, rather than wanting to remove and destroy us, then we will not be in trembling need of a **sure conviction** that his wrath has been effectively quenched by a substitute **victim**. Our concerns will be about whether we are fully accepting and living out that dearly bought forgiveness. We will be preoccupied with the challenge of adequately glorifying him, honoring him and loving him. [12\[n\]](#)

7. The Creed next mentions that he "was dead and buried". Here again it is necessary to consider how he substituted himself in order to pay the price of our redemption. Death held us under its yoke, but he in our place delivered himself into its power, that he might exempt us from it. This the Apostle means when he says, "that he tasted death for every man," (Heb. 2:9). . . . Accordingly in the death and burial of Christ a twofold blessing is set before us--viz. deliverance from death, to which we were enslaved, and the mortification of our flesh (Rom. 6:5; Gal. 2:19, 6:14; Col. 3:3).

I don't have a lot of quarrel with this section. Lets hear him go on:

8. Here we must not omit the descent to hell, which was of no little importance to the accomplishment of redemption. For although it is apparent from the writings of the ancient Fathers, that the clause which now stands in the Creed was not formerly so much used in the churches, still, in giving a summary of

doctrine, a place must be assigned to it, as containing a matter of great importance which ought not by any means to be disregarded. . . . the place which it holds in a summary of our redemption is so important, that the omission of it greatly detracts from the benefit of Christ's death. . . .

Note that he feels that the "descent into hell" is of very great centrality in the benefit of Christ's death. We'll see why below.

9. Others interpret differently--viz. That Christ descended to the souls of the Patriarchs who died under the law, to announce his accomplished redemption, and bring them out of the prison in which they were confined. To this effect they wrest the passage in the Psalms "He hath broken the gates of brass, and cut the bars of iron in sunder." (Ps. 107:16); and also the passage in Zechariah, "I have sent forth thy prisoners out of the pit wherein is no water," (Zech. 9:11). . .

Calvin spends a while trying to refute the idea that the "descent into Hades" of the Creed refers to a preaching to the "spirits in prison" (1 Pet. 3:18-20). I actually think that this passage, attributed to the apostle Peter, is the main reason why the article about the "descent to Hades" ended up in the Apostles' Creed. But the issue of Christ's preaching to the spirits in prison is a minor one, which is not necessary to solve. All that is going on is that Calvin is refuting a whole range of interpretations in order to set the stage for his own, which is now going to appear in section 10:

10. But, apart from the Creed, we must seek for a surer exposition of Christ's descent to hell: and the word of God furnishes us with one not only pious and holy, but replete with excellent consolation. Nothing had been done if Christ had only endured corporeal death.

Following through his own overall train of thinking about how God's acceptance is procured, Calvin has finally gone completely into heresy. His last sentence here directly contradicts and is contradicted by every major New Testament teaching on the significance of Jesus' death on the cross. It is also supported by no Scripture whatsoever. The awesome power of the gift of the incarnation—together with the awesome crisis in which Jesus, the historical man, faced rejection and murder at the hands of the very ones he came bodily to save—all this is swept away in one statement: "**Nothing had been done if Christ had only**

endured corporeal death." Calvin has entirely lost sight of "He bore our sins in his body on the tree. . .by his wounds you have been healed" (1 Pet. 2:23-24). Instead, he continues to be obsessed with something else:

In order to interpose between us and God's anger, and satisfy his righteous judgment, it was necessary that he should feel the weight of divine vengeance.

We have already shown that there is nothing in Scripture that points in this direction—in fact, a great deal in Scripture that points in the entirely opposite direction. God is the one whose deepest nature is *to forgive freely*. Thus Christ's substitutionary death does not solve the alleged problem of a surplus of divine desire to kill someone, but the problem of God's determination to answer to all the merciless forces in creation for choosing to have mercy on the repentant without cost. Because of his sacrifice in Christ Jesus, God has an answer to all accusers on earth and in heaven who will say, "We have refused your mercy and have chosen to receive punishment for our sins—therefore all should receive the same treatment." God, through Christ, says, "I assent to your demand of punishment of all offenses without mercy, but not the punishment of those whom I have forgiven. I will pay for them." In this way, Paul says in Romans that Jesus died on the cross so that God "might both be just and also be the one who acquits the person who has faith in Jesus". The larger passage reads like this:

Now, the justice of God has been revealed independently of the Law, but it is testified to by the Law and the Prophets—the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction, since all have sinned and lack God's glory, and are justified as a gift by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus. It was he whom God displayed publicly as an appeasement gift, by his blood, through faith. This was to demonstrate his justice, because in his patience he passed over sins previously committed. It was for the demonstration of his justice at the present moment, that he might both be just and also be the one who acquits the person who has faith in Jesus (Rom. 3:21-26).

The hostility that Christ died to neutralize is *always*, in the New Testament, the hostility of the created beings (whether angelic or human), *not the hostility of God*. For example:

But now in Christ you who were formerly far off have now been brought near through the blood of Christ. For he himself is our peace, who has made the two [Jew and Gentile] into one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of **hostility** [between the two groups], by abolishing in his flesh the law with its commandments and regulations. His purpose was to create in himself one new man out of the two, thus making peace, and in this one body to reconcile both of them to God [note: he does not say *reconcile God to both of them*] through the cross, by which **he put to death their hostility**. He came and preached peace to you who were far away, and peace to those who were near. For through him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit (Eph. 2:13-18).

Whence also it was necessary that he should engage, as it were, at close quarters with the powers of hell and the horrors of eternal death. We lately quoted from the Prophet, that the "chastisement of our peace was laid upon him" that he "was bruised for our iniquities" that he "bore our infirmities;" expressions which intimate, that, like a sponsor and surety for the guilty, and, as it were, subjected to condemnation, he undertook and paid all the penalties which must have been exacted from them, the only exception being, that the pains of death could not hold him. Hence there is nothing strange in its being said that he descended to hell, seeing he endured the death which is inflicted on the wicked by an angry God.

This could only begin to make sense if it is assumed that God's nature is that of a heavenly tyrant who cannot forgive a wrong without first taking hellish vengeance on someone. As we have been saying, this premise is directly contradictory to what the Law, the Prophets, Jesus and the apostles have to say about God's nature. It is simply not true that in order to forgive, the full punishment for every offense has to be exacted on someone somewhere. God is the one who—for his own part—is willing to forgive.

It is frivolous and ridiculous to object that in this way the order is perverted, it being absurd that an event which preceded burial should be placed after it. But after explaining what Christ endured in the sight of man, the Creed appropriately adds the invisible and incomprehensible judgment which he endured before God, to teach us that not only was the body of Christ given up

as the price of redemption, but that there was a greater and more excellent price--that he bore in his soul the tortures of condemned and ruined man.

Now Calvin is floundering. The framers of the Apostles Creed added the article about Christ descending to hell (Hades, to be exact, *not* Gehenna, the place of final punishment), because they were trying to take into account the apostle Peter's statement that Jesus, "having been put to death in the flesh, was made alive in the Spirit, in which he went and preached to the spirits now in prison" (1 Peter 3:18-20). But Calvin is interested in making Jesus face all the possible eternal torments of the damned, and he can't exactly have that happen when Jesus is "made alive in the Spirit", and also after Jesus has said, with his dying breaths, "Father, I commit my spirit into your hands" (Lk 23:46), and "It is finished" (Jn 19:30). So he tries to propose that Jesus, in a certain sense, must have "descended to hell" as he suffered on the cross. Where is his Scriptural justification? Absolutely missing, because there is none.

11. In this sense, Peter says that God raised up Christ, "having loosed the pains of death: because it was not possible he should be held by it" (Acts 2:24). He does not mention death simply, but says that the Son of God endured the pains produced by the curse and wrath of God, the source of death.

This is pure, unadulterated eisegesis. Calvin is reading a horror story of the Father tormenting Jesus into the text. No words in the text support him. [13\[n\]](#) God is the one who releases Jesus from the "pains of death", not the one who subjects him to them.

How small a matter had it been to come forth securely, and as it were in sport to undergo death. Herein was a true proof of boundless mercy, that he shunned not the death he so greatly dreaded. And there can be no doubt that, in the Epistle to the Hebrews, the Apostle means to teach the same thing, when he says that he "was heard in that he feared," (Heb. 5:7). Some instead of "feared," use a term meaning reverence or piety, but how inappropriately, is apparent both from the nature of the thing and the form of expression.

Calvin now suggests that if Jesus' experience had only been physical death, it would have been easy for him. The expression "**as it were in sport**" means that facing mere death would have been to all intents and purposes as easy as playing a game for Jesus. However, Calvin wants to emphasize, Jesus *feared*, and

therefore, by implication, he knew that there was something much worse than ordinary death to be undergone. Strangely, he wants to translate the word *eulabeia* in Heb. 5:7 to mean fear as in terror, rather than reverence, even though reverence is the only sense that the Greek word stem *eulab-* takes in the New Testament. In Greek, *eulabeia* simply does not mean terror, even in secular contexts. It means prudence and sensible cautiousness. But in a context of prayer, as here, it absolutely and unambiguously connotes reverence. Calvin is crudely wrenching things. He's anxious to underline the idea of Jesus being afraid, because he is trying to put some meat on the bones of his baseless theory that Jesus suffered the torments of hell on the cross. Yet, even granting the impossible use of the term *eulabeia*, what is the result of that move? Yet more incoherence. It makes no sense to say that the Father heard Jesus' prayers because Jesus was afraid. The Father hears Jesus' prayers because Jesus is his loyal son, because Jesus is looking to him in total faith, in a word, because of his *reverence*. That Jesus is afraid *as such* is no logical reason for the Father to hear his prayers. But, as I mentioned, Calvin is sacrificing coherence in order to try to squeeze some terror into the equation. He is trying to find some fingerhold somewhere in the New Testament where he can claim to see evidence that something worse than physical death is being faced by Jesus. Calvin, we will see later, has little respect for frail human fears such as the fear of being viciously tortured and murdered. So he thinks Jesus could never be afraid of such things. But if Jesus is said to be *afraid*, then Calvin thinks this must be a clue that Jesus knows that God is going to pile the deserved eternal torment of all the elect on him. One can only respond that there is not one single statement, not a word, in the New Testament that supports this theory.

Christ then praying in a loud voice, and with tears, is heard in that he feared, not so as to be exempted from death, but so as not to be swallowed up of it like a sinner, though standing as our representative. And certainly no abyss can be imagined more dreadful than to feel that you are abandoned and forsaken of God, and not heard when you invoke him, just as if he had conspired your destruction. To such a degree was Christ dejected, that in the depth of his agony he was forced to exclaim, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" The view taken by some, that he here expressed the opinion of others rather than his own conviction, is most improbable; for it is evident that the expression was wrung from the anguish of his inmost soul. We do not, however, insinuate that God was ever hostile to him or angry with him. How could he be angry with the beloved Son, with whom his soul was well pleased? or how could he have

appeased the Father by his intercession for others if He were hostile to himself? But this we say, that he bore the weight of the divine anger, that, smitten and afflicted, he experienced all the signs of an angry and avenging God.

Once again Calvin's train of thought suffers from incoherence. Calvin thinks that he has proven that Jesus didn't fear physical pain and death, but feared going to hell like a sinner, being treated just as though God "**had conspired to [his] destruction**". However, even if we grant his mistranslation of *eulabeia* and his interpretation of Hebrews 5:7, then the result should be, Jesus didn't have to experience the torments of hell, because his prayer was *heard*. The author of Hebrews, after all, says specifically that Jesus cried out with loud crying and tears to "the One who was able to save him from death, and he was *heard*." That is, his prayer was answered. But Calvin is not prepared to go in that direction, because it would destroy his whole argument. According to his thinking, Jesus *feared* in Gethsemane because he was looking forward to experiencing the treatment of a sinner in hell. If it had only been *crucifixion* that he was looking ahead to, Calvin doesn't think that Jesus would have prayed, "Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me". A really courageous man, according to Calvin, would have gone ahead bravely into that kind of suffering without fear. However, let it be remembered that this whole way of reading the Gethsemane accounts is not justified by anything in the text. It has only become necessary because Calvin has *not one single clear piece* of evidence from anywhere else in Scripture for his premise that Jesus underwent something like an encapsulated version of eternal torment. Yet, as we have seen, when Calvin tries to wrench the Hebrews 5:7 statement so that it backs up his reading of Jesus' fear in Gethsemane, his theory collapses at the end of the sentence: "he was heard because of his reverence (*eulabeia*)". Unfortunately, that doesn't deter him. He is not building on a scriptural foundation, but only taking fragments of scriptural statements from here and there and pressing them into service without regard to their original contexts and meanings. It is as though he is waving a passage of Scripture before his audience and then quickly putting it away before they can get a chance to read the whole thing.

Hence Hilary argues, that to this descent we owe our exemption from death. Nor does he dissent from this view in other passages, as when he says, "The cross, death, hell, are our life." And again, "The Son of God is in hell, but man is brought back to heaven." And why do I quote the testimony of a private writer, when an Apostle asserts the same thing, stating it as one fruit of his victory that

he delivered "them who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage?" (Heb. 2:15). He behaved therefore, to conquer the fear which incessantly vexes and agitates the breasts of all mortals; and this he could not do without a contest. Moreover it will shortly appear with greater clearness that his was no common sorrow, was not the result of a trivial cause. Thus by engaging with the power of the devil, the fear of death, and the pains of hell, he gained the victory, and achieved a triumph, so that we now fear not in death those things which our Prince has destroyed.

Calvin has found a church father who seems to support him. But, he says, why listen to Hilary, when the writer to the Hebrews asserts the same thing? But *does* he? Here is what Hebrews 2:14 says:

Since then the children share in blood and flesh, he himself likewise partook of them, that through death he might render powerless him who has the power of death, the Devil, and might deliver those who through fear of death were subject to slavery all their lives.

Calvin's idea is that Jesus experienced the fear and pain of God's rejection and torment—in a word, hell, at least according to Calvin's historically conditioned concept of hell—in order that the elect would not have to fear these things "in death". But the author of Hebrews here is quite obviously not talking about hell, not talking about Jesus' fear, not talking about God's vengeance. He's talking about Jesus clothing himself with humanity and facing physical death, and so robbing the Devil of the ability to intimidate (and so enslave) anyone who puts their faith in Jesus. Jesus faced death and triumphed over it, therefore he is able to deliver us both (1) from death itself, through resurrection, and (2) from the *fear* of death, because of the hope that has been planted in us through faith in the resurrection in Christ. It is he to whom we now look for the source and proof of our resurrection. This context is a hundred miles from what Calvin is thinking. Yet he hastily waves a fragment of Heb. 2:14 in front of us and says, "Hebrews supports me. It is talking about the same thing as I am."

12. Here some miserable creatures, who, though unlearned, are however impelled more by malice than ignorance, cry out that I am offering an atrocious insult to Christ, because it were most incongruous to hold that he feared for the safety of his soul. And then in harsher terms they urge the calumnious charge that I attribute despair to the Son of God, a feeling the very opposite of faith.

First, they wickedly raise a controversy as to the fear and dread which Christ felt, though these are openly affirmed by the Evangelists. For before the hour of his death arrived, he was troubled in spirit, and affected with grief; and at the very onset began to be exceedingly amazed. To speak of these feelings as merely assumed, is a shameful evasion. It becomes us, therefore (as Ambrose truly teaches), boldly to profess the agony of Christ, if we are not ashamed of the cross.

Calvin appears to be starting out well here, affirming that Jesus' sorrow and grief and dread in the Garden of Gethsemane came out of his humanity, which we ought to honor, rather than try to evade.

And certainly had not his soul shared in the punishment, he would have been a Redeemer of bodies only.

But hold on a minute! Suddenly he has flipped into the language of gnostic spirit/matter dualism. First he has been arguing that God had to torment Jesus with hellish punishments in order to satisfy his wrath against us. Now he is saying that it's not enough that Jesus should be tormented in body only—whatever that could mean.^{[14\[n\]](#)} It appears that Calvin thinks Jesus has to be tormented by God in his "soul" too, or else his sufferings would only procure the redemption of bodies, not souls. But where does this reasoning come from? Certainly not from Scripture, or from any principle that could be gleaned from Scripture. Nowhere in the Law is there any mention of a penalty of soul-suffering for any crime. Nowhere in the New Testament is there any such idea. Rather, the misuse of the body results in death. "The wages of sin is death" (Rom. 6:23). When God says that Jesus' bodily suffering and death have bought our forgiveness and redemption from death, then that is settled. Who would dare stand before the One who met us in the person of his own Son and accomplished "an atonement in his blood", and say, "That doesn't make the grade. Jesus' physical death can only forgive our bodies. I think he needs to have died in his soul too." But Calvin in fact drops this thought, and turns again to focus on Jesus' feelings of dread and grief as he faced the cross.

The object of his struggle was to raise up those who were lying prostrate; and so far is this from detracting from his heavenly glory, that his goodness, which can never be sufficiently extolled, becomes more conspicuous in this, that he declined not to bear our infirmities. Hence also that solace to our anxieties and

griefs which the Apostle sets before us: "We have not an high priest who cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities; but was in all respects tempted like as we are, yet without sin," (Heb. 4:15). These men pretend that a thing in its nature vicious is improperly ascribed to Christ; as if they were wiser than the Spirit of God, who in the same passage reconciles the two things--viz. that he was tempted in all respects like as we are, and yet was without sin. [T]hey fly off to another cavil, that although Christ feared death, yet he feared not the curse and wrath of God, from which he knew that he was safe. But let the pious reader consider how far it is honourable to Christ to make him more effeminate and timid than the generality of men. Robbers and other malefactors contumaciously hasten to death, many men magnanimously despise it, others meet it calmly. If the Son of God was amazed and terror-struck at the prospect of it, where was his firmness or magnanimity? We are even told, what in a common death would have been deemed most extraordinary, that in the depth of his agony his sweat was like great drops of blood falling to the ground. Nor was this a spectacle exhibited to the eyes of others, since it was from a secluded spot that he uttered his groans to his Father. And that no doubt may remain, it was necessary that angels should come down from heaven to strengthen him with miraculous consolation. How shamefully effeminate would it have been (as I have observed) to be so excruciated by the fear of an ordinary death as to sweat drops of blood, and not even be revived by the presence of angels? What? Does not that prayer, thrice repeated, "Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me," (Mt. 26:39), a prayer dictated by incredible bitterness of soul, show that Christ had a fiercer and more arduous struggle than with ordinary death?

Calvin is sailing way off course here. Agreed, it is absolutely true that **"Christ had a fiercer and more arduous struggle than with ordinary death"**. But Jesus, after all, was not facing ordinary death, in bed, with loved ones holding him and trying to comfort him. Instead, he faced betrayal, weak-kneed abandonment by practically all his loved ones, a mock trial in which he would face the total rejection of all the love that he had poured out with all his strength to his people, Israel, and the vicious ripping down of the loving ministry to which he had passionately and sacrificially given himself. Following that he could see hours of beatings, torture and physical abuse, the 39 lashes, and finally crucifixion, the manner of death from which we get the term "excruciating". Is it *really* effeminate to dread such an experience? For that matter, isn't the macho man who pretends not to fear what his enemies could do to his body simply fooling

himself? Jesus loved people so deeply that he knew what human suffering was about. He was "a man of sorrow, acquainted with grief." He had also seen crucifixion before, and his compassion made him know, really know, what it was to be crucified. It is one thing for a man to face death as the unknown (like the woman who has never experienced labor pains before), and pretend that he can face it without fear. It is another thing for a humble man—a man "experienced in grief", who has no need to prove his bravery to himself or anyone else—to face the horrors of human cruelty. Jesus knew proper self-love, and out of that true self-love loved and cherished the lost human family he had come to save. Having given himself to us without holding back, he now faced the brutal extinguishing of all his self-giving amidst hate and cursing. To be frank, I don't think Calvin shows any awareness of the real emotional and spiritual pain that Jesus suffered in Gethsemane.

Hence it appears that these triflers, with whom I am disputing, presume to talk of what they know not, never having seriously considered what is meant and implied by ransoming us from the justice of God. It is of consequence to understand aright how much our salvation cost the Son of God. If any one now ask, Did Christ descend to hell at the time when he deprecated death? I answer, that this was the commencement, and that from it we may infer how dire and dreadful were the tortures which he endured when he felt himself standing at the bar of God as a criminal in our stead.

Calvin carries on sailing in the same general direction, far out of sight of the land of Scripture. Sadly, he has turned the New Testament story of the Passion completely backwards. According to the Gospels, the hours between Gethsemane and his death were a period during which Jesus experienced abandonment by his closest friends and followers. During those hours he faced trial in an illegal, fraudulent court, and suffered rejection by the religious leaders of the people whom he loved. He explicitly assured his disciples, however, that he would not be abandoned by his Father (Jn 6:32). According to all the writers of the New Testament (see also Ps. 22; Isa. 53), Jesus stood at the bar of false *human* justice, and, precisely because he represented God, faced undeserved condemnation and murder at the hands of the human race. He was found *innocent* by God, found *pleasing* by God, found *obedient* by God (e.g. Jn 15:23-25; Acts 2:22; 3:13-15; Eph. 5:2; Heb. 5:7-10; 12:24; Rev. 1:7). The message of the New Testament is clear and consistent: God did not torment and condemn Jesus in our place—we tormented

and condemned Jesus in God's place. "The insults of those who insulted you [God] fell on me [Jesus]" (Rom. 15:3 quoting Ps. 69:9).

And although the divine power of the Spirit veiled itself for a moment, that it might give place to the infirmity of the flesh, we must understand that the trial arising from feelings of grief and fear was such as not to be at variance with faith. And in this was fulfilled what is said in Peter's sermon as to having been loosed from the pains of death, because "it was not possible he could be holden of it" (Acts 2:24). Though feeling, as it were, forsaken of God, he did not cease in the slightest degree to confide in his goodness. This appears from the celebrated prayer in which, in the depth of his agony, he exclaimed, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" (Mt. 27:46). Amid all his agony he ceases not to call upon his God, while exclaiming that he is forsaken by him.

Calvin is getting a bit afield from his subject here. He has been talking about Jesus' fear and emotional agony, which, he thinks, he could never have been vulnerable to if all he were facing were such things as beatings, lashes and death by crucifixion. To fear such physical experiences, Calvin feels, would be effeminate and cowardly. Nonetheless, having emphasized that Jesus feared (in order to support his idea that Jesus was tormented by God), he then has to go back and make it clear that Jesus didn't fear in any way that was incompatible with full faith. To this end he presses Psalm 22:1 into service, asserting that the Psalmist (and Jesus, echoing the Psalmist) feels abandoned but still prays in determined faith. Which is true enough. The only problem is that Calvin has just been setting up the scene so that Jesus feels not *abandoned by* God, but *confronted by the fearful intensity of God's wrath* as he stands in for sinners before the **"bar of God in our stead"**. He has no substantial Scriptural text to comment on to support his thesis—so he's really just slipping around at this point. Psalm 22:1 doesn't help him at all.

To the contrary, if you look at the whole of Psalm 22, and link it with Heb. 5.7, as it certainly deserves to be, then Jesus is seen crying out to God to save him from his terrible physical agony, *which he is suffering at the hands of hateful human beings* (Ps. 22:1-18). Jesus' prayer is heard (Heb. 5.7; cf. Ps. 22:24) in two senses. First, he has a mercifully swift death after he prays this, which releases him from his sufferings.^{[15\[n\]](#)} Secondly, Jesus' prayer is heard because his death admits him to Paradise and the loving arms of his Father (Lk. 23:43-46). On one hand, according to the old Hebrew concept, God "abandons" Jesus in the sense that he does not

rescue him from the power of his persecutors.^{[16\[n\]](#)} Yet in the new reality, which Jesus brings and works out as our Pioneer, the Father rescues Jesus by being with him *through* persecution and death, rather than by keeping him away from trouble. The great paradox, in relation to the Hebrew world-view, is that God's presence with you may lead you *into* suffering persecution, not victory. Isaiah 57:1-2, following on in the context of Isaiah 53, speaks of this rescue-through-death:

The innocent are dying, and no one ponders it in his heart;
Devout people are taken away,
and no one understands that the righteous are taken away in order
to be spared from evil.
Those who walk in integrity enter into peace; they find rest as they
lie in death.

The same is said of Jesus' followers in the Book of Revelation: "Write, Blessed are those who die in the Lord from now on! Yes, says the Spirit, so that they may rest from their labors. . ." (Rev. 14.13). As Jesus himself says from the cross in his dying moments, "Father, I am entrusting my spirit into your hands" (Lk. 23.46). He has accomplished the forging of a new pattern: to submit to persecution because of obedience to God is stronger than "winning" by human might.

Conclusion: What Calvin Leaves Out

We have seen that Calvin has no legitimate material to work with in the New Testament from which to build his "quenching of wrath" theology of the cross. He therefore concocts a kind of exegetical "stone soup". Starting with a very few New Testament phrases that add nothing of substance to what he intends to prove, he lifts them out of context, overwrites their natural meaning, and overpowers them with his own concepts until his intended result is achieved. Calvin has developed a fearsome message of an infinitely terrifying wrath of God that narrowly misses human beings but falls on Jesus instead. The clear thrust of his message is that if you accept his "gospel", you are safe from this unimaginable wrath, but if you don't, then you are toast.

We never see Jesus and Paul and Peter preaching the Gospel this way. They surely warn us on occasion that people must turn to God or perish—for to try to live in rebellion against the source of your life is suicide. They also affirm that God's

patience has a limit, and that those who show themselves fixed in unrepentance must at some point face irrevocable destruction. But underlying these kinds of affirmations is the foundational picture of God as the merciful one, the forgiving one, the one who reaches out in compassion and reconciliation to the estranged, to the rebellious, to the hostile. And without exception they portray the death of Jesus Christ on the cross as an expression of that compassionate movement towards us.

If anyone is in Christ, they are a new creation. The old has gone, the new has come. All of this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and gave us the ministry of reconciliation. Just as God was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself, not holding their sins against them, so he has also placed in us the message of reconciliation. Therefore on behalf of Christ we act as ambassadors, as though God were pleading through us. We are pleading with you—please be reconciled to God! For our sake he appointed Christ, who knew no sin, to be a sin offering, that we might become the righteousness of God in him. (2 Cor. 5:17-21)

Endnotes

^{1[n]} John Calvin (1509–1564), reformer and theologian, is known as the father of Reformed Theology and founder of the Presbyterian church. "According to Calvin, the Bible specified the nature of theology and of any human institutions. Thus, his statements on doctrine began and ended in Scripture, although he frequently cited the church fathers and important medieval Catholic thinkers. He sought to minimize speculation on divine matters and instead to draw on the Word of God" (from "Calvin, John", art. in *Encyclopedia Encarta 1999* [copyright Microsoft Corp., 1999], by Louis B. Weeks.

^{2[n]} See Ps. 14:1; 53:1

^{3[n]} Ps. 94:7; see also Job 22:12-14; Ps. 10:3-4, 11; 73:3-11.

^{4[n]} Appeals to the sacrificial system are not appropriate in this context. First, the sacrificial system was only designed to deal with unintentional ritual lapses, not with serious sin. Secondly, nowhere in all the OT explanations of sacrifice does it say that the sacrificial victim atones by absorbing God's wrath in the place of the sinner. Third, in cases where no sacrifice can be made (e.g. the sin of David

against Uriah), there is no talk of deflection of God's wrath. Instead, it is said that the moment of relenting from the sin, the act of repentance in and of itself, functions as the sacrifice. That is, repentance is expressed as the condition that releases the threat of wrath, and there is no mention of repentance occasioning the need or opportunity for a displacement of wrath onto a substitutionary victim.

^{5[n]} It is worth being aware that Calvin's reading does not result even if one accepts the change in logic that comes from Calvin's ignoring of the words, "how much more". For suppose we take out the "If A is true, then how much more must B be true" structure and replace it with a "Because of A, therefore B" structure. We would therefore read Paul as saying, "Because we are now justified by his blood, we will be saved through him from the wrath of God." Even if we make this mistranslation, we still have to interpret the statement in context of the immediately following statement: "For if while we were enemies [towards God] we were reconciled through the death of his Son, all the more, now reconciled, shall we be saved by his life." (Rom. 5:10). In both sentences the salvation from wrath is future, not past. The basis for the assurance of freedom from wrath is not expressed as "Because God deflected his wrath onto Christ, we are now free from wrath". The basis for the assurance of freedom from wrath is knowledge that we are justified, that we are reconciled. That is, we are no longer in enmity towards God, but in fellowship. That is why, even on Calvin's altered sentence logic, we now stand free from the fear of God's future wrath. So this raises, rather than answers, the questions, How did Christ's death justify us? How did Christ's death reconcile us? I answer, with Paul, Christ's death justifies us by answering all accusers who would insist that we should not be forgiven (Col. 2:13-15). He paid the price for our redemption from the just consequences of our wrongdoing. Secondly, Christ's death reconciles us because it is God's own choice to bring forth his power to break down our enmity through the gospel of the suffering of Christ (Isa. 52-53; Zech. 12:10; Jn 3:14; Col. 1:19-22).

^{6[n]} Rom. 5:8.

^{7[n]} Jn 3:16; cf. Eph. 2:1-10.

^{8[n]} Granted, there is a civil code that prescribes restitution where there is theft, and "life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound, bruise for bruise" (Exod. 21:24-25, where there has

been intentional or reckless harm of another). On the other hand, there is absolutely no scriptural justification for assuming that the reason for the legislation is that God in and of himself cannot forgive an offense without exacting punishment. In contrast to this, most interpreters would agree that the purposes of the *lex talionis* are (1) to provide a deterrent to persons whose only regard is for their own interests, and (2) to put fair and quantifiable limits on human or societal exacting of revenge.

^{9[n]} See, for example, Exod. 34:6; Pss. 51:16-17; Isa. 55:6-9; Ezek. 33:11-16; Lk. 15:1-32.

^{10[n]} Thus Jesus says that no one can enter the Kingdom of God without being born of the Holy Spirit. What is born of flesh is flesh, he says (Jn. 3:1-8). The creature that tries to exist on the life-principle of flesh without the Holy Spirit cannot survive so as to experience the eternal life of the Kingdom of God.

^{11[n]} See 1 Jn 2:1-2: "If anyone sins, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous, and he is the propitiation for our sins—and not ours only, but for the sins of the whole world." The context is legal here. Jesus is not the one who answers God's accusations. God is the impartial judge, and Jesus is our advocate, i.e. our defense attorney. When any party accuses us and demands our condemnation before God, Jesus pleads in our defense that he has already paid all penalties for what we have done. Jesus, rather than procuring God's willingness to forgive as such, provides the evidence that vindicates God's verdict of forgiveness before the court of all creation.

^{12[n]} Calvin, in this paragraph, opens side-topic, the idea that Christ's blood "purges our defilements". Since he does not pursue this concept, and it is not relevant to the main thrust of the present argument, I will leave it to one side.

^{13[n]} It is just possible that Peter is personifying Death such that it is Death whose birthpangs (Gr. *odines*) are loosed by God, not Jesus whose death-pangs are destroyed by God. The Greek verb *luo* can mean destroy, loose, release or undo. Thus if the *odines* (which can mean agonies or birthpangs) are those experienced by Jesus, then Peter is saying that God undid the agonies of death which he experienced, for death could not hold him. But if the *odines* are Death's birthpangs, then the picture is that death is like the earth's womb that God miraculously causes to give resurrection-birth to Jesus all at once, without labor

pains, i.e., without the long, grieving, near-despairing wait between death and resurrection at the last day. Death "could not hold him", it could not help but give back Jesus in resurrection, because God had commanded it to give birth to resurrection. Isaiah says, using very similar imagery,

Your dead will live;
My corpses will rise.
You who lie in the dust, awake and shout for joy,
For your dew is as the dew of the dawn,
And the earth will give birth to the spirits of the departed.
(Isa. 26:19)

As Paul says, "Christ has been raised, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. For since by a man came death, so by a man came also the resurrection from the dead. For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive, but each in the proper rank: Christ the firstfruits, then those who are Christ's at his coming, then comes the end. . ." (1 Cor. 15:20-24).

^{14[n]} One whose body is unjustly tormented by an enemy is surely being tormented in his "soul".

^{15[n]} In contrast, the two criminals crucified with him continue to suffer agony, and their legs have to be broken later in the day in order to put an end to their misery (Jn 19:31-35). It was not uncommon for those crucified to linger many hours before finally dying.

^{16[n]} The classic Hebrew/Jewish concept of God's presence and its relationship to victory assumes that if God is with you, then you are bound to be safe from harm and trouble. In that worldview, if I am being attacked and I am suffering harm and defeat, then God is not with me, by definition. So Jesus' position, in that narrow sense, is not just that of feeling abandoned. His position, according to classical Hebrew thinking, is that of being abandoned by God to the power of his enemies.