
PSA Series – Does God’s Own Character Require Him to Punish Sin?

Description

In [the last article in this series on Penal Substitutionary Atonement \(PSA\)](#), we looked at the first pillar of PSA, which is: “*Man’s sin deserves God’s wrath*”. In this article, we’ll look at the second pillar of PSA, which is:

According to PSA, because God is perfectly righteous, just, and holy, He cannot simply leave sin unpunished, even if the sinner repents; to remain true to His own holy character, He ***must*** punish sin.

(All 4 pillars are listed in [the series intro](#), so please look there if you want to see the rest of them.) We will examine that second pillar in this article in exhaustive detail, including the arguments both for and against it. And I do mean “exhaustive detail”; this article is almost 17k words long, and hopefully not a word of “fluff”; it won’t be a short read.

However, we need to address two things to clarify them before we get started.

Two points of clarity first

There are two things that we should clarify before we begin because they can color the whole debate if not addressed. One is a “straw man” argument against PSA, and the other is almost a “straw man” defense of PSA. (and yes, I realize how odd that sounds.)

One “Straw Man” objection first

Some argue against PSA by saying that if God is required to punish sin, that means that something is compelling God. They then object to PSA by saying that nothing is more powerful than God, therefore, God can’t be compelled to punish sin.

That isn’t an accurate representation of the PSA position.

PSA says that God’s own nature requires Him to do this, so it’s not like “justice is more powerful than God”. PSA says that God’s nature is perfectly just, so He always behaves justly, which (*according to PSA*) means He always punishes sin. Nothing “compels God” according to PSA. According to PSA, God always punishes sin because doing so is simply Him being consistent with His own holy, righteous, and just character.

That objection dealt with, we’ll move on to the other point of clarity.

God “must punish” vs “God doesn’t have to punish, but always chooses to.”

Some in the PSA camp say that God’s character doesn’t require Him to punish all sin, but instead say that He will always choose to punish sin even though His character doesn’t require Him to. **That is a distinction without any real difference because the cause and result are the same.** The difference between “*God’s own character requires Him to punish sin*” and “*God’s character means that He always chooses to punish sin*” is minuscule; it’s practically non-existent.

Honestly, PSA defenders seem to mostly suggest this as a defense against the “straw man” attack above. It’s a way to “rescue” PSA from the “justice forcing God” straw man above.

However, this “rescue” is not only unnecessary, it’s a distraction because — at the risk of sounding simple — if God’s nature is to always punish sin, then God’s nature is to always punish sin. It doesn’t matter if He always punishes sin because His character “forces” Him to or because His character means He will always choose to.

The determining force here is still God’s own character.

Again, it doesn’t matter if God’s character makes Him punish sin, or if His character makes Him always choose to punish sin; His character is still the determining factor.

Again, that’s a distinction without any real difference.

Additionally, the verses on the topic don’t make a distinction and apply to both positions. We’ll look at them soon, but the verses used to support PSA’s #2 pillar apply equally to both positions, and thus they can be treated the same. **The vast majority of PSA supporters seem to espouse the “God must punish sin” position, so we’ll engage with that.** However, the arguments — both for and against — also apply equally to the both positions.

Now we’ll move on to examining this core pillar of PSA in detail.

Evidence that God’s Character Does Require Him to Punish Sin

I spent a fair bit of time looking for verses that say God must punish sin, including many articles from PSA advocates. Interestingly, most of them tended to accept this pillar as a fact so obvious that it didn’t need to be proven. Not all, but most. However, I did find a few verses that are used to support this pillar, and we’ll look at them now.

There are four verses and they are below in two different translations, but there’s something to notice first. **All of the bold underlined words below are the same Hebrew word.** That makes the first verse below (*Exodus 23:7*) different because it uses a different word.

We'll look at them all now in two different translations, and then look at each in detail.

Exodus 23:7

NKJV: Keep yourself far from a false matter; do not kill the innocent and righteous. For **I will not justify the wicked.**

NASB95: Keep far from a false charge, and do not kill the innocent or the righteous, for **I will not acquit the guilty.**

Job 10:14

NKJV: If I sin, then You mark me, And **will not acquit me of my iniquity.**

NASB95: If I sin, then You would take note of me, And **would not acquit me of my guilt.**

Nahum 1:3

NKJV: **The LORD** is slow to anger and great in power, And **will not at all acquit the wicked.** The LORD has His way In the whirlwind and in the storm, And the clouds are the dust of His feet.

NASB95: **The LORD** is slow to anger and great in power, And **the LORD will by no means leave the guilty unpunished.** In whirlwind and storm is His way, And clouds are the dust beneath His feet.

Exodus 34:6-7

NKJV: 6 And the Lord passed before him and proclaimed, "The Lord, the Lord God, merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abounding in goodness and truth, 7 keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, **by no means clearing the guilty**, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children and the children's children to the third and the fourth generation."

NASB95: 6 And the LORD passed before him and proclaimed, "The LORD, the LORD God, merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abounding in goodness and truth, 7 keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, **by no means clearing the guilty**, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children and the children's children to the third and the fourth generation."

We'll look at these verses one-at-a-time after a quick comment. **Did you notice that there was only one verse in one translation that talked specifically about punishment?** Again, every **bold underlined** word in the quotes above is the same Hebrew word, but 5 out of 6 times, it was translated so that it had nothing to do with punishment.

We'll look at the original words in a minute, right after we discuss an important point that requires careful reading to notice.

Do the "pillar" passages for PSA's 2nd pillar actually refute PSA?

We'll take Nahum 1:3 as the example passage because the NASB 95 translates it "unpunished", and for now we'll assume that the underlying Hebrew word (*which we'll look at deeply in a moment*) does indeed mean "unpunished". The verse says in part "*the LORD will by no means leave the guilty unpunished.*" If you take that literally, it seems to refute PSA.

Why?

Consider that **the verse doesn't say that God will leave the sin unpunished, it says that God will not leave the sinner unpunished.** (*The guilty.*)

Here's the whole verse again:

Nahum 1:3 The LORD is slow to anger and great in power, And **the LORD will by no means leave the guilty unpunished.** In whirlwind and storm is His way, And clouds are the dust beneath His feet.

(*Sharp-eyed readers will notice that "the guilty" is italicized, indicating a translator addition for clarity. Read in context, that's the correct understanding so it's not reasonable to insert "the sin" instead of "the guilty". Virtually every translation has either "the guilty" or "the wicked" there because of that.*)

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According to this verse, does God leave the sin unpunished, or the sinner unpunished? (Again, assuming that “unpunished” is a good translation since the NKJV translates it differently; we’ll look at that soon.) All four verses have the same basic phrasing, and that phrasing is about the sinner, not the sin.

Personally, I don’t see any of these verses as an argument to say that God must punish the sin. You could argue that it means that God must punish the sinner, but not that God must punish the sin.

If your stance is that God must punish the sinner, then where does that leave the sinner? What about the Gospel?

The PSA school of thought will likely respond that Jesus was punished instead of the sinner, but that’s not what Nahum 1:3 says. Assuming that “unpunished” is a good translation, (which we’ll examine soon) it’s the sinner who won’t go unpunished.

Now, the NKJV’s translation says something different, saying: “And will not at all acquit the wicked.” As you’ll see soon, “acquit” means to “declare righteous” in this context. Thus, the NKJV’s translation says God will not declare the wicked to be righteous... because they’re not.

Shocker, God won’t lie.

The NKJV’s translation allows for a remedy for the wicked/guilty since it’s about accurately ascribing guilt, not punishment. However, the NASB 95’s translation — if you take the text at its plain meaning — not only strikes at the core of PSA, but it also seems to make Jesus’s work on the cross... confusing. **If God must punish the sinner — not the sin, but the sinner — then we’re all in trouble.**

Big trouble.

(Note: Please notice that PSA considers the sin and the sinner as two very different things. It’s almost like — according to PSA — the sin is something outside of yourself that you can give to someone else. (Jesus according to PSA) This tends to be read into every passage, like Nahum 1:3 above. However, I generally don’t see this “sin outside of yourself” concept in the Bible. Sin is generally deeply personal and attached to the sinner. This isn’t an argument against PSA at all, it’s just something to bear in mind.)

Anyway, now we’ll look at the verses and the Hebrew words used in them.

Exodus 23:7

As usual, context is important so we’ll get the wider context of the passage. As a general background, these are commands in the Mosaic Law and they appear to have an overall judicial context.

Exodus 23:1-9

1 You shall not bear a false report; do not join your hand with a wicked man to be a malicious witness.

2 You shall not follow the masses in doing evil, nor shall you testify in a dispute so as to turn aside after a multitude in order to pervert justice;

3 nor shall you be partial to a poor man in his dispute.

4 If you meet your enemy's ox or his donkey wandering away, you shall surely return it to him.

5 If you see the donkey of one who hates you lying helpless under its load, you shall refrain from leaving it to him, you shall surely release it with him.

6 You shall not pervert the justice due to your needy brother in his dispute.

7 Keep far from a false charge, and do not kill the innocent or the righteous, for I will not acquit the guilty.

8 You shall not take a bribe, for a bribe blinds the clear-sighted and subverts the cause of the just.

9 You shall not oppress a stranger, since you yourselves know the feelings of a stranger, for you also were strangers in the land of Egypt.

The word translated "acquit" there is "x'Ö, x'Ö-x§" ([tsadeq](#)), and here's what the lexicon says about the definition when it's in the hifil form, which it is in that verse (*which you can double-check [here](#); notice the parsing guide under the word.*)

1 do justice, in administering law 2 Samuel 15:4; Psalm 82:3.

2 declare righteous, justify, with accusative (x")x'Ö-x'Ö'Ö¼x™x§ Deuteronomy 25:1; 1 Kings 8:32 2Chronicles 6:23; x"Ö, x©Ö, x•xçExodus 23:7 (E) Isaiah 5:23; Proverbs 17:15; Justify accusers, by recognizing charge as just Job 27:5.

3 justify, vindicate the cause of, save, with accusative, Isaiah 50:8 (of God), with xœÖ° of object Isaiah 53:11 (of servant of x³x™).

4 make righteous, turn to righteousness, Daniel 12:3, compare Aboth Daniel 5:26,27 Bev.

Notice, there's nothing in this word that refers to punishment. This is about a judicial sentence and a command not to "declare righteous" a wicked man. I think it was translated "acquit" because when you acquit someone, you say that he isn't guilty, which is what you would be saying if you declared a wicked man to be innocent. Perhaps it's not an ideal translation, but it's certainly not bad.

This is reinforced by the word translated “guilty”. It’s the word “שׂוֹאֵף” ([fasha](#)) and it means:

263 **adjective wicked, criminal**; absolute שׂוֹאֵף Genesis 18:23 +; plural שׂוֹאֵפִים Isaiah 13:11 +; construct שׂוֹאֵף־עַמִּי Psalm 75:9 3t. feminine singular שׂוֹאֵפָה Ezekiel 3:18 (strike out Co), Ezekiel 3:19 (שׂוֹאֵף־עַמִּי Co);

1 usually as substantive, **one guilty of crime, deserving punishment**; sometimes also **wicked**;

2 **guilty of hostility** to God or his people, **wicked enemies**:

3 **guilty of sin**, against either God or man, **wicked**:

So the way to understand this verse seems to be:

Exodus 23:7 (modified)

7 Keep far from a false charge, and do not kill the innocent or the righteous, for I will not declare a guilty/wicked (*man*) righteous.

Notice the parallelism with the beginning of the verse. Making a false charge against the innocent is contrasted with clearing the guilty. **Again, this isn’t about punishment, but rather about accurately ascribing guilt.**

God will not lie by saying that a wicked man is righteous, and this idea is repeated many times throughout scripture. Here’s another verse that actually uses the same words as the Exodus verse. I’ve added the Hebrew words so you can see just how parallel these two verses are:

Exodus 23:7: Keep far from a false charge, and do not kill the innocent or the righteous, for I will not **acquit(tsadeq)** the **guilty(rasha)**.

Proverbs 17:15: He who **justifies(tsadeq)** the **wicked(rasha)** and he who condemns the righteous, Both of them alike are an abomination to the LORD.

(And by the way, keep this Proverbs verse in your mind for when we talk about “imputation” in a later article in this series.)

Thus, this verse doesn’t seem to teach that God *must* punish sin. It says that God will accurately ascribe innocence and guilt. That’s quite different than saying that God must punish sin.

Job 10:14

As before, we’ll look at the verse in context. I’ve grayed out the verses that don’t bear directly on our

verse, but left them so you can see the wider context.

Job 10:9-17

9 Remember now, that You have made me as clay;
And would You turn me into dust again?

10 Did You not pour me out like milk
And curdle me like cheese;

11 Clothe me with skin and flesh,
And knit me together with bones and sinews?

12 You have granted me life and lovingkindness;
And Your care has preserved my spirit.

13 Yet these things You have concealed in Your heart;
I know that this is within You:

14 If I sin, then You would take note of me,
And would not **acquit** me of my **guilt**.

15 If I am wicked, woe to me!
And if I am righteous, I dare not lift up my head.
I am sated with disgrace and conscious of my misery.

16 Should *my head* be lifted up, You would hunt me like a lion;
And again You would show Your power against me.

17 You renew Your witnesses against me
And increase Your anger toward me;
Hardship after hardship is with me.

Now, the word translated “guilt” is perfectly translated so there’s no need to look at it deeply. If you’re interested, the word is “אָוֹן” ([avon](#)) and we dissected it in great depth in my article: [How To Do a Word Study of a Greek or Hebrew Word in the Bible](#); please see that article for details.

However, the word translated “acquit” is worth looking at since it’s a different word than the one used in the Exodus and Proverbs passages above. It’s the word “נָקָה” ([naqah](#)), and here’s what it means generally first, and then also when in the Piel form, which is the word’s form in all of the verses used to support PSA

[נָקָה] verb be empty(?), **clean**

And when it’s in the Piel form:

1. **hold innocent**, acquit,

2 **leave unpunished**:

Now, since the definition in the lexicon (*Brown-Driver-Briggs in this case*) is quite short and without a lot of detail, **we're going to look at every place that the word is used in the Bible.** Thankfully there are only 44, and we'll look at all of them below. Normally I would quote them from the NASB 95, but overall I think the NKJV has these verses more correct as it concerns "naqah", so **the following quotations are all from the NKJV.** Also, I've highlighted the verses we're studying.

I've divided the uses into two sections.

- The first section has it translated as something other than "punishment"
- The second section has it translated so punishment is in view.

First section

Genesis 24:8 And if the woman is not willing to follow you, then you will be **released** from this oath; only do not take my son back there.

Genesis 24:41 You will be **clear** from this oath when you arrive among my family; for if they will not give *her* to you, then you will be released from my oath.

Exodus 20:7 You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain, for the LORD will not hold *him* **guiltless** who takes His name in vain.

Exodus 21:19 if he rises again and walks about outside with his staff, then he who struck *him* shall be **acquitted**. He shall only pay *for* the loss of his time, and shall provide *for him* to be thoroughly healed.

Exodus 34:7 keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, **by no means clearing** *the guilty*, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children and the children's children to the third and the fourth generation. *Note: the word is used twice in this verse, almost certainly repetition for emphasis.*

Numbers 5:19 And the priest shall put her under oath, and say to the woman, If no man has lain with you, and if you have not gone astray to uncleanness *while* under your husband's *authority*, be **free** from this bitter water that brings a curse.

Numbers 5:28 But if the woman has not defiled herself, and is clean, then she shall be **free** and may conceive children.

Numbers 5:31 The man, moreover, will be **free** of guilt, but that woman shall bear *the consequences of* her guilt.

Numbers 14:18 The LORD is longsuffering and abundant in mercy, forgiving iniquity and transgression; but He **by no means clears** the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and fourth generation. *(Note: the word is used twice in this verse, almost certainly repetition for emphasis.)*

Deuteronomy 5:11 You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain, for the LORD will not hold *him* **guiltless** who takes His name in vain.

Judges 15:3 And Samson said to them, "This time I shall be **blameless** regarding the Philistines if I harm them!"

1 Samuel 26:9 But David said to Abishai, "Do not destroy him; for who can stretch out his hand against the LORD's anointed, and be **guiltless**?"

1 Kings 2:9 Now therefore, do not hold him **guiltless**, for you *are* a wise man and know what you ought to do to him; but bring his gray hair down to the grave with blood.

Job 9:28 I am afraid of all my sufferings; I know that You will not hold me **innocent**.

Job 10:14 If I have sinned, You will take note of me, And will not **acquit** me of my guilt.

Psalms 19:12 Who can understand *his* errors? **Cleanse** me from secret *faults*

Psalms 19:13 Keep back Your servant also from presumptuous *sins*; Let them not have dominion over me. Then I shall be blameless, And I shall be **innocent** of great transgression.

Proverbs 6:29 So *is* he who goes in to his neighbor's wife; Whoever touches her shall not be **innocent**.

Isaiah 3:26 And her gates will lament and mourn, And she will sit **deserted** on the ground.

Jeremiah 2:35 Yet you say, "Because I am **innocent**, Surely His anger shall turn from me." Behold, I will plead My case against you, Because you say, "I have not sinned."

Jeremiah 49:12 For this is what the LORD says: "Behold, those who were not sentenced to drink the cup will certainly drink *it*, so are you the one who will be held **completely blameless**? You will not be held **blameless**, but you will certainly drink *it*. (*Note: the word is used three times in this verse; one of which is doubled for emphasis "completely blameless".*)

Joel 3:21 For I will **acquit** them of the guilt of bloodshed, whom I had not **acquitted**; For the LORD dwells in Zion. *Note: the word is used twice in this verse, almost certainly repetition for emphasis.*

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Nahum 1:3 The LORD is slow to anger and great in power, And will **not at all acquit** the wicked. The LORD has His way In the whirlwind and in the storm, And the clouds are the dust of His feet. (Note: the word is used twice in this verse, almost certainly repetition for emphasis.)

Zechariah 5:3 Then he said to me, "This is the curse that goes out over the face of the whole earth: Every thief shall be **expelled** according to this side of the scroll; and, Every perjurer shall be **expelled** according to that side of it."

Second section:

Proverbs 11:21 Though they join forces, the wicked will not **go unpunished**; But the posterity of the righteous will be delivered.

Proverbs 16:5 Everyone proud in heart is an abomination to the LORD; Though they join forces, none will **go unpunished**.

Proverbs 17:5 He who mocks the poor reproaches his Maker; He who is glad at calamity will not **go unpunished**.

Proverbs 19:5 A false witness will not **go unpunished**, And he who speaks lies will not escape.

Proverbs 19:9 A false witness will not **go unpunished**, And he who speaks lies shall perish.

Proverbs 28:20 A faithful man will abound with blessings, But he who hastens to be rich will not **go unpunished**.

Jeremiah 25:29 For behold, I begin to bring calamity on the city which is called by My name, and should you **be utterly unpunished**? You shall not be **unpunished**, for I will call for a sword on all the inhabitants of the earth," says the LORD of hosts. (Note: the word is used three times in this verse; one of which is doubled, almost certainly for emphasis "utterly unpunished".)

Jeremiah 30:11 For I am with you," says the LORD, "to save you; Though I make a full end of all nations where I have scattered you, Yet I will not make a complete end of you. But I will correct you in justice, And will not let you **go altogether unpunished**." (Note: the word is used twice in this verse, almost certainly repetition for emphasis.)

Jeremiah 46:28 Do not fear, O Jacob My servant," says the LORD, "For I am with you; For I will make a complete end of all the nations To which I have driven you, But I will not make a complete end of you. I will rightly correct you, For I will not **leave you wholly unpunished**." (Note: the word is used twice in this verse, almost certainly repetition for emphasis.)

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Some general commentary first and then we'll get into specifics. The NASB 95 translates a few of the verses in the first section to mean "unpunished" or something substantially similar. However, as you can clearly see, it doesn't need to be translated that way to make perfect sense.

In the second set, "unpunished" does certainly seem to be a legitimate understanding of the Hebrew word "naqah". Many of those could also be translated to mean "be guiltless" or something similar, but "unpunished" certainly does fit most of them well. **Overall, the sense of "unpunished" seems valid in some of the places where "naqah" is used. It appears to be a less common secondary meaning, but it certainly seems valid.**

(Note: given what I know of the structure of Hebrew and the word's definition, I personally think that "clean/cleansed/guiltless" is the intended sense. Hebrew words are often "word pictures", and the word picture here is "cleansed", which metaphorically means "free of guilt". If you read those passages again with this understanding, they all work. So instead of "go unpunished", it would be "be guiltless". But we'll proceed like "unpunished" is a legitimate definition because there's a decent case that it is.)

Now, it's worth noting that **of the verses used to support PSA, the word "naqah" is translated "unpunished" (or anything similar) in only one of them.** That verse is Nahum 1:3, which we'll look at now.

Nahum 1:3

I've included the ESV below because it's slightly more literal in this verse. That was a surprise to me because the ESV (*Extremely Substandard Version*) intentionally mistranslates so often (*details/evidence in [my article on Bible translations](#)*), but thankfully it doesn't here.

Nahum 1:3

NKJV: The LORD is slow to anger and great in power, And will not at all **acquit the wicked**. The LORD has His way In the whirlwind and in the storm, And the clouds are the dust of His feet.

NASB95: The LORD is slow to anger and great in power, And the LORD will by no means leave the guilty **unpunished**. In whirlwind and storm is His way, And clouds are the dust beneath His feet.

ESV: The LORD is slow to anger and great in power, and the LORD will by no means **clear the guilty**. His way is in whirlwind and storm, and the clouds are the dust of his feet.

As you saw above, the basic meaning of the word "naqah" is "to be clean" or "be cleansed". **We still use this phrasing today when we talk of someone being "cleared of all charges"**

, and by that, we mean that the accused man is innocent and not guilty. Thus, I think the ESV has absolutely nailed the translation here, better than the NKJV and even the NASB 95 (“*Even a blind hog finds an acorn once in a while.*”)

Notice that only one translation of one passage has “unpunished”.

The word could indeed mean “unpunished” there, so it’s not necessarily a mistranslation. However, that translation is *almost* without precedent. The other verse that could establish precedent is this one: (*and it’s restatement in Deuteronomy 5:11*)

Exodus 20:7 (*In the Ten Commandments*)

NASB 95: “You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain, for **the LORD will not leave him unpunished** who takes His name in vain.

NKJV: “You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain, for **the LORD will not hold him guiltless** who takes His name in vain.

Notice that the translation differs here as well. In fact, the NASB 95 seems to be in the minority with “unpunished” here and in Nahum 1:3. That doesn’t matter very much since it often stands alone as the most accurate translation, though it’s obviously not always the best in every verse.

Personally, I think the NASB 95 is veering into interpretation instead of pure translation.

That is, the word means “cleared” in the sense of “not guiltless” in this context, and the NASB translators thought that since the person in question is “not guiltless”, he would “not be unpunished”.

That is only my suspicion.

This is a debatable passage.

The proper understanding could go either way, and the context of the verses in question doesn’t make it clear. **It’s also possible that the word means both.** Definitely not certain, but possible.

(*A brief rabbit trail for a moment: I have been translating the New Testament from Greek to English and I’m about 70% done.* It’s interesting to note that you run into this “over-translation” problem in the New Testament too. *The NASB 95 does it less than most translations, but it occasionally does it.*)

To sum up these verses, there are two points to consider:

Point #1: If one holds to “unpunished” in Nahum 1:3, then the entire foundation of this pillar of PSA (*and thus potentially the rest of PSA*) rests on the translation of a single word in a single verse. Further, that one word in that one verse is using a secondary definition for which there’s a solid case that it’s an incorrect understanding. That doesn’t prove it wrong, but it does seem... suspect.

Point #2: If “*the LORD will not leave him unpunished*” is the correct understanding in Nahum 1:3, then remember that it’s the sinner, and not the sin we are talking about. Again, that strikes

at the core of PSA.

This appears to be a “*Damned if you do, damned if you don’t*” problem for PSA, but **only** if you hold “unpunished” as the correct translation.

If you think “will not clear the wicked” (*of the charge against him*) is the proper understanding, it creates zero problem for PSA’s #2 pillar. None at all.

Consider:

- If “naqah” does indeed mean “unpunished” in Nahum 1:3, then it’s *the sinner*, not *the sin*, that will not go unpunished. That creates a serious problem for not only PSA, but all of Christianity.
- If “naqah” means “not clear” in the sense of not declaring a wicked man innocent, then the verse doesn’t support PSA at all.

Either way, PSA runs into serious problems and isn’t supported by these verses.

Based on the evidence above, and also on the problems already discussed if “unpunished” is the correct understanding, “not guiltless” or “not clear” (*in the sense of declaring righteous*) appears to be the proper understanding. This isn’t ironclad, but seems likely.

However, there is one more verse used to support this second pillar of PSA, though it’s not commonly used for reasons that will become obvious.

Romans 6:23

Much like the anti-PSA crowd sometimes quotes “*Mercy triumphs over judgement*” in James 2:13 as a catch-all trump card against PSA (*which we’ll look at lower down*), I occasionally see the following verse used as a PSA catch-all trump card. Neither verse actually does what those who quote them want though.

Romans 6:23

For **the wages of sin is death**, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

I see why this verse is used to support PSA, but it doesn’t support it clearly.

There is no mention of “punishment”, but rather “wages”. If you’ve read my article: [How To Do a Word Study of a Greek or Hebrew Word in the Bible](#), you’ll know that the idea of a man “*carrying the consequences of his (moral) crookedness*” (*typically translated “bear his iniquity”*) is a common Old Testament way of talking about the “wages” of sin. There’s an excellent video by The Bible Project embedded in that article explaining this concept, which I recommend you watch.

Now, you could argue that God is the one “paying out” these wages, and therefore death is punishment, and therefore God punishes all sin with death. That’s not entirely unreasonable, but then would you also accept “*Mercy triumphs over judgement*” (*in James 2:13, which we’ll look at later*)

as “proof” that God doesn’t have to punish sin?

Those two verses are about the same level of clear, which is to say **both** are unclear.

This will probably upset people on both sides of the aisle, but please read those verses again; where’s the clarity? Especially in light of the Old Testament understanding of a man “*carrying the consequences of his (moral) crookedness*”, “punishment from God” isn’t a clear statement in Romans 6:23. It’s certainly no clearer than “Mercy triumphs over judgement” in James 2:13. (If I had to pick which is clearer, I would actually pick James because it’s actually talking about judgement from God.)

So Romans 6:23’s “the wages of sin is death” isn’t a good PSA proof text. In fact, I would say that provides almost no evidence for PSA.

Other verses used to support PSA pillar 2

There aren’t any. (That I’ve found.)

None.

I didn’t find any others and I looked rather hard. Again, I might’ve missed some because most PSA advocates usually simply take this for granted and thus spend little or no time proving it.

We’ve run out of verses we can use to say that God **must** punish sin.

Effectively, we have only 2: Nahum 1:3 and Romans 6:23. However, Nahum suffers from translation uncertainty by insisting on using uncommon (*and debatable*) secondary definitions when the primary definition makes perfect sense and is undisputed. Additionally, understanding Nahum 1:3 as “unpunished” talks about *the sinner* not being unpunished, not *the sin*. Romans 6:23 simply isn’t clear, and it’s a bad idea to base a foundational doctrine on verses that are unclear.

If you think I’ve missed a verse that clearly argues that God **must** punish sin, please leave a comment.

I will be happy to edit this article to discuss it. Now, we’ll turn to the other side of the debate.

Evidence that God’s Character **Does Not** Require Him to Punish Sin (i.e. He can forgive without punishing)

We’ll first go through a few passages, then talk about the meaning of “forgive”, then look at Jesus’s parables, then address “Mercy triumphs over judgement” in James 2:13. We already said that James is unclear, but it deserves a section anyway.

Ezekiel 18:21-25

Probably the strongest passage to argue against PSA is Ezekiel chapter 18. **I recommend that you read the entire chapter because the argument against PSA puts it front and center, so it will come up many more times in this article series.** Thus, being familiar with the chapter will be a good thing, both in this article and in future articles as well.

Here's the most relevant part of the chapter, but not the only one.

Ezekiel 18:21-25 (NASB 95)

21 “But if the wicked man turns from all his sins which he has committed and observes all My statutes and practices justice and righteousness, he shall surely live; he shall not die.

22 “All **his transgressions which he has committed will not be remembered against him**; because of his righteousness which he has practiced, he will live.

23 “Do I have any pleasure in the death of the wicked,” declares the Lord God, “rather than that he should turn from his ways and live?”

24 “But when a righteous man turns away from his righteousness, commits iniquity and does according to all the abominations that a wicked man does, will he live? All his righteous deeds which he has done will not be remembered for his treachery which he has committed and his sin which he has committed; for them he will die.

25 “Yet you say, **“The way of the Lord is not right.”** Hear now, O house of Israel! **Is My way not right?** Is it not your ways that are not right?”

In Ezekiel chapter 18, God is correcting the Israelites for their belief that punishing the sons for the sins of the father is morally right and proper. Again, this chapter stands at the center of the arguments against PSA, and I would recommend that you read the entire chapter for that reason.

Regardless, the text above seems clear.

If a man is wicked and then repents and turns from his wickedness, the wicked man's sins “*will not be remembered against him*” by God. Notice that God doesn't “forget” that the man sinned, nor does God say the man was righteous when he was wicked; He merely doesn't take the man's sins into account. This is notable because the requirement is repentance/turning from wickedness (*the two concepts are linked biblically*).

In this passage, no punishment is required for the man's sins to “not be remembered against him”.

That seems to strike at the core of PSA.

Why?

Because it seems to indicate that God can “not remember a man's sins against him” without requiring punishment.

Â From this passage, it seems that a man's repentance/turning from wickedness is what God requires in order to not hold the man's sins against him.Â (*Which presupposes faith and turning towards God if you read the passage in context.*)

Additionally, verse 25 makes it clear that this is "the way of the Lord".Â God seems clear that He Himself does this.Â The phrasing "the way of the Lord" seems to indicate that this is a *normal* thing for God.Â It's "His way" to behave like this.Â To use a military term, it appears to be God's "SOP" (*Standard Operating Procedure*).

Ezekiel 18 isn't the only passage that says this either.

There are others as well.

Romans 4:7-8

Notably, this is in the section of Romans that talks about grace and faith's role in salvation.

Romans 4:7-8

1 â€œBlessed are those whose lawless deeds have been forgiven, and whose sins have been covered.

2 â€œBlessed is the man whose sin the lord will not take into account.â€•

(Paul is quoting Psalm 32:1-2)

Here again, we have God acknowledging the man's sin, but then not taking it into account.Â Yes the man sinned, and God won't "acquit him of sin" (say *he didn't sin*), but even though the man is guilty, those sins aren't "remembered against him" nor are they "taken into account" by God.

Now, the Greek word translated "take into account" is "Î»Î¼Î½Î¶Î·Î¼Î±Î±Î±" ([logizomai](#)), and it means:

3049 logizomai (the root of the English terms "logic, logical") â€œproperly, compute, "take into account"; reckon (come to a "bottom-line"), i.e. reason to a logical conclusion (decision).

And from Thayer's Greek Lexicon:

1. (rationes conferre) **to reckon, count, compute, calculate**, count over; hence,
 - a. **to take into account**, to make account of: Î¼Î½Î¶Î·Î¼Î±Î±, Romans 4:3,(4); metaphorically, to pass to one's account, to impute (A. V. reckon)
 - b.Â equivalent toÂ **to number among, reckon with**

c. **to reckon or account, and treat accordingly**

2. (in animo rationes conferre) to reckon inwardly, count up or weigh the reasons, to deliberate (A. V. reason)

3. by reckoning up all the reasons to gather or infer; i. e.,

a. **to consider, take account**, weigh, meditate on

b. to suppose, deem, judge: absolutely,

c. to determine, purpose, decide

So “take into account” is a perfect translation of the Greek word there.

This seems like a clear statement that God simply doesn't “take into account” a man's sins sometimes, or God doesn't “remember his sins against him”. **The context in Romans 4 tells us that He's talking about those who have faith in God.** It's thus reasonable to assume that such a man has repented and turned from his wicked ways, as in Ezekiel 18.

And as they say on infomercials: “But wait, there's more!”

1 Corinthians 13:4-5

This is obviously the famous “love passage” in the Bible. **Before you read the following, remember that God is also the righteous judge of the universe.** We'll look at the interplay between those two ideas in a moment.

1 Corinthians 13:4-5

4 Love is patient, love is kind and is not jealous; love does not brag and is not arrogant,

5 does not act unbecomingly; it does not seek its own, is not provoked, **does not take into account a wrong suffered,**

The Greek word translated “take into account” is the same Greek word from Romans 4 that we just looked at. Lest we forget, the Bible also says this of God:

1 John 4:7-8

7 Beloved, let us love one another, for **love is from God**; and everyone who loves is born of God and knows God.

8 The one who does not love does not know God, for God is love.

Under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, Scripture records that one of God’s defining attributes — possibly *the* defining attribute — is “love”. According to 1 Corinthians 13:5, love “does not take into account a wrong *suffered*”.

Logically then,

- **If** “love is from God”
- **And** “God is love”
- **And** love “does not take into account a wrong *suffered*” (*at least sometimes*)
- **Therefore**, God must at least *be capable* of “not taking into account a wrong *suffered*.”
 - Extending that logic out only slightly from deduction to inference, He must also actually do this if the phrase “God is love” is to be true.

Put simply: **If “God is love”, and love “does not take into account a wrong *suffered*”, then by definition, God must (*at least sometimes*) not take a wrong *suffered* into account.**

(And again, we’ll look at the flip side of His justice in a moment.)

PSA says that God literally cannot do that.

Penal Substitutionary Atonement says that God must punish sin, and thus he’s actually *unable* to “not take into account a wrong *suffered*”; it says that God must punish *all* sin without even a single exception because of His holy character/nature.

Now, the obvious response from the PSA school is this: “God will not take someone’s sins into account after the punishment is complete.”

Think about that for a moment.

No really, please do.

I’ll wait.

...

...

...

Is that what the verse really means?

(We’ll consider if biblical forgiveness can include forgiveness after punishment later in this article.)

Does 1 Cor 13:5 really mean that one of the things that love does is fully punish someone for something, and only then not take that wrongdoing into account? In a personal relationship, that might look like you damaging my car (*even on accident*) and then I inflict similar damage to your car before I can “not take into account the wrong *suffered*”. Or how about in marriage? If my wife wrongs me, should I “get back at her” before I don’t take into account that wrong?

How does that even make sense?

But we're talking about God's justice here, so we'll move onto a legal analogy in a courtroom. At sentencing, the judge decides not to "take into account" a man's crimes by sentencing him to the full punishment for those crimes, saying that after he's served his sentence, those crimes won't be taken into account. How can someone say that the judge didn't take the man's crimes into account? That wouldn't make any sense.

Now, the PSA school will likely reply that God doesn't take our sins into account because Jesus was punished in our place, but that doesn't help. According to PSA, our sins were taken into account when Jesus died on the cross. According to PSA, Jesus was punished for our sins in our place as a substitute. How then can God have "not take into account a wrong suffered," when He took it into account and fully punished it?

Does that make sense?

It sounds like gibberish and "word salad" with no substance. Additionally, it seems to completely redefine the normal understanding of things to fit PSA's theological framework.

We'll come back to a related point much lower down, but for now, we'll move on to the next verse.

Isaiah 55:7

This verse is one of the best examples of the multitude of "God will forgive" verses in the Old Testament. Pretty much everything we say about this verse applies to the (*many*) others as well, but we'll only look at this one for space's sake.

Isaiah 55:7

Let the wicked forsake his way And the unrighteous man his thoughts; And let him return to the LORD, And He will have compassion on him, And to our God, For He will abundantly pardon.

It doesn't merely say "pardon", but rather "abundantly pardon". The word translated "abundantly" is "רָבַח" ([rabah](#)), and it's perfectly translated. The word translated "pardon" is "סָלַח" ([salach](#)), and it means:

[סָלַח] verb **forgive, pardon** (אָמַר סָלַח לְאָדָם id., Late Hebrew סָלַח לְאָדָם **forgiveness**)

If you look up how it's translated, every single use in the NASB 95 is translated as some form of "forgive" or "pardon". **Every single one.** In this verse, a large majority of translations — including both the best ones *and* the most popular ones — translate it "pardon" here, and essentially all the rest translate it "forgive". This is largely true of the word's usage all throughout the Old Testament in other translations as well, and the lexicon lists forgiveness and pardon as the only definitions.

Given that, we'll look at what "pardon" and "forgive" mean.

Forgiveness and Pardon

We'll start with forgiveness. Here's the definition of "forgive" (*the verb*) from the Merriam-Webster dictionary:

1: to cease to feel resentment against (an offender) : **PARDON**

forgive one's enemies

2: **a:** to give up resentment of or claim to requital (see REQUITAL sense 1) for

forgive an insult

b: to grant relief from payment of

forgive a debt

[Source.](#)

Notice that in definition #1, it references "pardon". Here's the definition of "pardon" (the verb) from the Merriam-Webster dictionary:

1: **a:** to absolve from the **consequences** of a fault or crime

b: to allow (an offense) to pass **without** punishment : FORGIVE

c: to relieve of a penalty improperly assessed

2: TOLERATE

[Source.](#)

I found this from the Legal Aid Society of Cleveland, which explains it pretty well and seems to apply to most (*possibly all*) pardons.

A pardon is forgiveness by the governor for a crime committed. A person who is pardoned cannot be further punished for the forgiven offense and should **not be penalized for having a record of the offense**. [State ex rel. Atty. Gen. V. Peters, 43 Ohio St. 629, 650 (1885)]. But, the Ohio Supreme Court also has said that just because the governor grants someone a pardon, **the pardon does not automatically entitle the person to have their criminal record sealed**. [State v. Boykin, 138 Ohio St.3d 97, 104, 2013-Ohio-4582, ¶27].

[Source.](#)

Notice the phrase “*not be penalized for having a record of the offense*”, which means that the record of the offense remains. **A pardon doesn’t eliminate the crime, it eliminates the *punishment* for the crime.** The distinction is crucial and — as we’ve already seen — **this aligns perfectly with the Bible**. Ezekiel 18 says that the sins won’t “be remembered against him” and Romans (*quoting Psalms*) says that the sins/crimes won’t “be taken into account”. Nowhere does it say the record of the crime is eliminated, but rather, the crime/sin isn’t taken into account against us, the sinners/criminals.

To sum it up, this is what forgiveness and pardon mean:

- **To forgive** is when you acknowledge that a wrong was done to you, but you will not penalize the person who wronged you for that wrong.
- **To pardon** is when a legal official acknowledges that a person committed a crime, but then decrees that the man will not be punished for that crime. (*Often that includes removal of penalties for the crime as well; more on that in a minute.*)

Forgiveness and pardon are essentially the same thing, but one is a personal relationship term and the other is a legal term. (*I’m pretty sure that’s why the same Hebrew word is used for both, since they’re effectively the same thing.*)

In many places, the Bible says something like the following:

Matthew 16:27

“For the Son of Man is going to come in the glory of His Father with His angels, and WILL THEN **REPAY EVERY MAN ACCORDING TO HIS DEEDS**.”

We will be judged by our deeds, but by God’s grace through faith, we have received a full pardon for all our wicked deeds, meaning that they won’t “be remembered against us” nor “taken into account” in the judgement. Thus, only righteous deeds are left to be judged. That’s good news!

Okay, back to PSA and the next argument against this core pillar:

Does “forgive” really mean “forgive”?

Perhaps the heading should be: **Does “pardon” really mean “pardon”?** Remember, we’re

looking at pillar #2 of PSA: “God’s Own Character *Requires* Him to Punish Sin”. If we take the normal, accepted, and common use of “pardon” and “forgiveness”, then according to PSA, God is actually *incapable* of forgiveness. That is, according to PSA, God *must* punish sin; He can’t *not* punish it. That in turn means that He is unable to issue pardons or forgive.

Let me say that again.

If we take the normal, accepted, and common use of “pardon” and “forgiveness” — including the normal, accepted, and common use of the Greek and Hebrew words — then according to PSA, God is actually *incapable* of issuing a pardon, and He’s *incapable* of forgiving. He simply can’t do it.

Think about it.

PSA says that God *must* punish sin, and that it would be inconsistent with His character to not punish sin. If that’s true, it means that God is actually *unable to* and *incapable of* both forgiveness and pardons.

However...

There are 2 responses to this claim by the supporters of PSA.

The first response is to say that God absolutely can forgive/pardon without punishment, He just won’t. While this is something of a response, it has all the same troubles as saying that God must punish sin, so it doesn’t help the PSA case at all.

The second response is articulated reasonably clearly by Mike Winger. He’s a prominent Christian and his series on PSA on YouTube has garnered a lot of views, so I’ll quote him on this. This was at the end of one of his PSA videos where he was taking questions about PSA from the live chat (*it was recorded live*).

Note: I copy/pasted this from the auto-transcript and added punctuation and capitalization to make it more readable. (*The auto-transcript really butchered the last name of the fellow who asked the question though.*)

David miss city says: “how do you respond to the question that if Jesus paid the price for our sins, then God didn’t really forgive because his wrath was still poured out, it’s just that Jesus took it, where forgiveness means that the crime is pardoned and no penalty is dealt. Some say that PSA is incompatible with forgiveness because the crime was not pardoned, it’s just that Jesus paid for it instead of man.”

So actually David I’ll get into this again with the objections that the more sober-minded objections to PSA in a later video, but **my short answer real quick is most pardons — and now we’re saying: “hey we’re hitting our human standing of law we’re trying to say God wouldn’t do it that way because we don’t, we wouldn’t do it that way, we wouldn’t call that forgiveness” — but actually most legal pardons — most of them, the majority — they happen after a sentence is fulfilled.** So someone serves the sentence and then

they receive the pardon for what they've done. **This is how it normally happens and so that's consistent, that's consistent. Forgiveness can be given after a person has made amends** "okay I forgive you". That can happen. The trick is you didn't make amends, Jesus did and so God is just and forgives you at the same time.

[Source](#). (Starting about 59:25)

Now, pardons can indeed be given after a sentence has been served, and we'll talk about that in a moment. However, the claim that "most" or "the majority" of pardons happen after a sentence is completed is patently absurd on its face, and there's no data to support that (*I looked, and being charitable, he was answering "off the cuff", not presenting a well-researched, thoughtful answer. He didn't repeat this claim in the video where he dealt with this objection and had time to prepare.*)

However, Mike Winger does have some points worth considering.

Or rather, I found some things worth discussing while looking into pardons.

Sometimes, pardons are indeed given after a sentence is finished. It's rare, but it happens. Usually, the point is to remove a disability resulting from the crime/conviction. For example, in the United States, a convicted felon can't hold certain jobs (*usually jobs related to law enforcement, that require security clearance, or that involve the care of children*). However, certain types of pardon can remove this legal disability and allow the previously convicted felon to hold these jobs again.

This is still a punishment.

To stay with our example, preventing felons from having certain jobs is still punishment for the crime. In fact, it's an unending punishment for which the only remedy is a pardon. (*Does that sound familiar...*) **Now here's the important part: a pardon after the sentence is finished still serves to end punishment.**

Staying with our human example, the convicted felon's "sentence" actually has two parts, we just don't think of the second part very much. The first part is the prison time. The second part is the permanent removal of the ability to hold certain jobs. Both are punishments, and both can be ended with a pardon. After someone has served his prison time, he's still being punished because he can't have certain jobs. **So even when a pardon is given after a prison sentence has been fulfilled, that pardon is still removing a punishment: the prevention of you holding certain jobs.**

It's the same with forgiveness.

Let's say that you steal my car, are caught by the police, tried, convicted, sentenced, and you serve your sentence. Once you finish, you come to me and I refuse to even talk to you. Setting aside what I should do, that's still a "punishment" of sorts. I refuse to talk to you. Now, once I forgive you, that "punishment" is removed and we'll talk again.

Forgiveness indicates "letting go" of the offense.

Funnily enough, that's exactly what the Greek word translated "forgive" means, and notice that it's also translated "pardon" as well. It's the Greek word "ἀφῆσις," ([aphesis](#)) and it means:

The Parable of the Unforgiving Servant

This is found in Matthew chapter 18. For context, the passage on Church Discipline is immediately before this one.

Matthew 18:21-27

21 Then Peter came and said to Him, “Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me and I forgive him? Up to seven times?”

22 Jesus said to him, “I do not say to you, up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven.

23 “For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves.

24 “When he had begun to settle *them*, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him.

25 “But since he did not have *the means* to repay, his lord commanded him to be sold, along with his wife and children and all that he had, and repayment to be made.

26 “So the slave fell *to the ground* and prostrated himself before him, saying, “Have patience with me and I will repay you everything.”

27 “And the lord of that slave felt compassion and released him and forgave him the debt.

The word translated “forgave” is the same word we looked at above, which means to “let go” of an offense. However, the word translated “released” is “ἀπολύω” (apoluō), and it means:

630 ἀπολύω (from 575 /ἀπό, “away from” and 3089 /λύω, “to loose, release”) “properly, to let go; release (discharge), dismiss. This term implies the release (annulment) of an existing bond.

And here are the relevant entries in Thayer’s Greek lexicon:

3. to let go free, to release;

- a. a captive, i. e. to loose his bonds and bid him depart, to give him liberty to depart:
- b. to acquit one accused of a crime and set him at liberty:

c. indulgently to grant a prisoner leave to depart:

d. **to release a debtor, i. e. not to press one's claim against him, to remit his debt: Matthew 18:27; metaphorically, to pardon another his offences against me: Luke 6:37 (ἰ, ἀζ τῖ, ἀ¼•ἰ¼ἰ±ἰ•ἰ, ἰἰ±ἰ, ἀ¼€ἰ€ἰζἰ»ἰἰμἰfἰ, ἰ±ἰ¹, 2 Macc. 12:45).**

The English word "remit" is pretty uncommon these days so here's Merriam-Webster's definition:

2

a: to release from the guilt or penalty of
remit sins

b: to refrain from exacting
remit a tax

c: to cancel or refrain from inflicting
remit the penalty

d: to give relief from (suffering)

[Source.](#)

Again, this seems entirely consistent with everything we've seen, but not with PSA's definition of "forgive".

However...

The PSA school might respond by pointing out how the parable ends, so we'll look at that.

Matthew 18:28-35

28 ⌘œBut that slave went out and found one of his fellow slaves who owed him a hundred denarii; and he seized him and *began* to choke *him*, saying, ⌘œPay back what you owe.⌘™

29 ⌘œSo his fellow slave fell *to the ground* and *began* to plead with him, saying, ⌘œHave patience with me and I will repay you.⌘™

30 ⌘œBut he was unwilling and went and threw him in prison until he should pay back what was owed.

31 ⌘œSo when his fellow slaves saw what had happened, they were deeply grieved and came and reported to their lord all that had happened.

32 “Then summoning him, his lord said to him, “You wicked slave, I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me.

33 “Should you not also have had mercy on your fellow slave, in the same way that I had mercy on you?”

34 “And his lord, moved with anger, handed him over to the torturers until he should repay all that was owed him.

35 “My heavenly Father will also do the same to you, if each of you does not forgive his brother from your heart.”

Now, did the lord of the slave reinstate the debt? It certainly seems so, and that can do interesting things to our concept of forgiveness. Regardless, I don’t think it matters very much to the specific topic at hand. Why? Because in the parable, the man’s debt would’ve stayed forgiven (*normal definition*) and canceled if the wicked slave hadn’t behaved wickedly.

That’s the whole point of the parable.

In order to reinstate a debt that has been canceled, the debt must have been canceled in the first place. Thus, the debt’s reinstatement is a tacit admission that the debt was canceled in the first place.

Notice that the debt was simply canceled with no punishment involved. None. This is according to the plain reading of the text, and also after looking at the Greek words used. The lord decided not to “take into account the man’s debt” and he didn’t “remember his debts against him”. This sounds exactly like what we’ve been seeing everywhere we’ve looked, and it doesn’t line up with PSA very well at all.

But lest you think this parable is talking about something else, two other parables teach the exact same thing.

The Parable of the Prodigal Son

You know the story and it’s rather long, so I’ll just quote the relevant bit.

Luke 15:20-24

20 “So he got up and came to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion for him, and ran and embraced him and kissed him.

21 “And the son said to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and in your sight I am no longer worthy to be called your son.”

22 “But the father said to his slaves, “Quickly bring out the best robe and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand and sandals on his feet;

23 and bring the fattened calf, kill it, and let us eat and celebrate;

24 for this son of mine was dead and has come to life again; he was lost and has been found.” And they began to celebrate.

Where is the punishment?

This parable contains no element of punishment whatsoever. In fact, the older brother is later rebuked for being angry because there was a celebration. This isn't the only parable with forgiveness without any punishment either.

(And as a side note, Christians named the parable badly. It's actually about the older brother's response to the younger brother returning home. If you back up, you'll see that Jesus told this parable to the Pharisees because they didn't like that Jesus was gathering “tax collectors and sinners”. They were the “older brother” that Jesus was correcting.)

The parable of two debtors

This is Jesus responding to Simon, a Pharisee who was upset because a “sinful woman” was cleaning Jesus's feet with her hair.

Luke 7:39-43

39 Now when the Pharisee who had invited Him saw this, he said to himself, “If this man were a prophet He would know who and what sort of person this woman is who is touching Him, that she is a sinner.”

40 And Jesus answered him, “Simon, I have something to say to you.” And he replied, “Say it, Teacher.”

41 “A moneylender had two debtors: one owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty.

42 “When they were unable to repay, he graciously forgave them both. So which of them will love him more?”

43 Simon answered and said, “I suppose the one whom he forgave more.” And He said to him, “You have judged correctly.”

44 Turning toward the woman, He said to Simon, “Do you see this woman? I entered your house; you gave Me no water for My feet, but she has wet My feet with her tears and

wiped them with her hair.

45 “You gave Me no kiss; but she, since the time I came in, has not ceased to kiss My feet.

46 “You did not anoint My head with oil, but she anointed My feet with perfume.

47 “For this reason I say to you, **her sins, which are many, have been forgiven**, for she loved much; but he who is forgiven little, loves little.”

48 Then He said to her, “**Your sins have been forgiven.**”

49 Those who were reclining *at the table* with Him began to say to themselves, “Who is this *man* who even forgives sins?”

50 And He said to the woman, “**Your faith has saved you**; go in peace.”

The phrase translated “graciously forgive” is a single word in Greek: “ἡμιχάρισμα” ([charizomai](#)), and it means:

Cognate: 5483 *xarizomai* (from 5485 /*xarizis*, “grace, extending favor”) “properly, to extend favor (“grace”), **freely give favor to grant forgiveness (pardon)**.”

5483 /*xarizomai* (“favor that cancels”) **is used of God giving His grace to pardon**. This is freely done and therefore not based on any merit of the one receiving forgiveness.

And now Thayer’s relevant definition, and **yes it’s used with a dative in Luke 7:42; notice definition b.**

often in Greek writings from Homer down; **to do something pleasant or agreeable (to one), to do a favor to, gratify;**

a. universally, to show oneself gracious, kind, benevolent:

b. **to grant forgiveness, to pardon:** 2 Corinthians 2:7; **with a dative of the person,**

c. **to give graciously, give freely, bestow:**

b. above), Luke 7:42f; ἡμιχάρισμα ἡμιχάρισμα, graciously to restore one to another who desires his safety (e. g. a captive (R. V. grant))

We’ve looked at rather a lot of different Greek words now (*plus Hebrew*) and none of them seems to support PSA’s definition of “forgive”. A simple reading of the parables doesn’t seem to support that either.

Now, that’s the last of Jesus’s parables that touch on this clearly, but let me “steel man” (*the opposite of “straw man”*) the PSA position. I’ve had to come up with many of these counter arguments myself because I simply cannot find anyone — PSA supporter or not — who has dug deeply into these

things. So, this is how I think a thoughtful PSA adherent would respond to Jesus's parables.

(Possible) response from PSA: "The parables only show us one perspective; ours. Behind the scenes, God requires punishment, but the parables only reveal part of the picture; the part we needed to know at the time.

That is, God decided to communicate only *part* of the plan of salvation in these parables, not the whole plan. The part He communicated focused on the "free forgiveness", when behind the scenes, it was only free from our perspective though, because Jesus was still our substitute.

That's the only response I can think of, and it does sort of work. However, **that response only works well when applied to Jesus's parables, not the rest of what we've seen.** It's a reasonable counter to Jesus's parables, even if I personally think it's somewhat unsatisfying. It's plausible, but again only works well on Jesus's parables.

Additionally, the woman's sins "have been forgiven".

The phrase "have been forgiven" is a single word in Greek, and it's "ἀφίημι" ([aphiemi](#)), which we looked at above. More interestingly though, it's in the Greek perfect tense (*which you can confirm [here](#), notice the parsing guide under the words, and click on it to get to the abbreviations list.*) Here are two good explanations of what the perfect tense means:

The perfect tense expresses perfective action. **Perfective action involves a present state which has resulted from a past action. The present state is a continuing state; the past action is a completed action.**

[Source.](#)

And another website puts it this way:

Any Greek student is familiar with **the basic idea of the perfect tense: completed action. The tense is used to describe an action or process that (1) has been completed and (2) has produced results that are still in effect** at the time of writing.

[Source.](#)

The perfect tense means something was done in the past (*completed action*), which then resulted in an "ongoing state" which continues to the present day. So the woman's sins were forgiven in the past, prior to Jesus speaking (*even if only moments prior because of her faith*).

So that means this woman's sins were forgiven before Jesus went to the cross.

And this isn't the only place that Jesus does this either.

Matthew 9:1-2

1 Getting into a boat, Jesus crossed over *the sea* and came to His own city.

2 And they brought to Him a paralytic lying on a bed. Seeing their faith, Jesus said to the paralytic, “Take courage, son; **your sins are forgiven.**”

Now, this is the present tense (*specifically the present indicative, which you can confirm [here](#), and which means an action that occurred right then*), so from the moment Jesus said it, it was true.

That’s at least two people whose sins were forgiven before the cross.

And notice, these aren’t parables.

These were both real people to whom Jesus really said these things, and thus their sins really were forgiven.

Now, the PSA school of thought will probably reply that God “forgave them” (*PSA definition*) based on Christ’s work on the cross. However — and we’ll look at this verse in much more detail in a future article — PSA adherents usually teach against that using a verse in Romans.

Romans 3:24-25

24 being justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus;

25 whom God displayed publicly as a propitiation in His blood through faith. *This was* to demonstrate His righteousness, because **in the forbearance of God He passed over the sins previously committed;**

26 for the demonstration, *I say*, of His righteousness at the present time, so that He would be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.

Now, every single PSA teacher that I’ve heard says that “passed over” means that God waited to deal with our sin until after the cross because if He didn’t, he would’ve had to pour out His wrath on us. (*Maybe not all say this, but it appears to be the majority position.*)

However, how does that work with “Your sins have been forgiven”?

PSA adherents will say that God forgives us based on what Jesus did — past tense — on the cross, but what about the people Jesus forgave *before* the cross? According to PSA, God waited until after the cross to deal with sin — which they get from Romans 3:25 — so He didn’t have to pour out His wrath on us. **However, the sinful woman from Luke 7 and the paralytic from Matthew 9 were forgiven before the cross.**

If God waited until after Jesus died to deal with our sin as every PSA adherent that I’ve heard says — based on Romans 3:25 — then what about the people forgiven before the cross?

- If God could “forgive” (*PSA definition*) based on Jesus’s work before Jesus died on the cross, then how does PSA understand Romans 3:25?
- If God waited until after the cross to deal with sin, then how does PSA explain Jesus forgiving sins before the cross?

Now, a possible response from PSA is: “God exists outside of time, so for Him, “after the cross” is at every point in time.”

I suppose that’s not a bad response.

I don’t think it lines up well with Romans 3:25, but I suppose it’s not an impossible stretch either. It certainly seems to require coming to the passage and viewing it through a presupposed worldview/lens. Perhaps PSA’s understanding is accurate, but it seems to require presupposing a lot of things.

Now that we’ve discussed the parables, we need to talk about forgiveness and pardon again for a moment.

Additional discussion on “forgiveness” and “pardon”

We have spent rather a lot of time defining forgiveness and (*legal*) pardons and looking at the underlying words. **To sum up everything that we discussed:**

- PSA says that a pardon/forgiveness means not taking a sin into account after the sin has been fully punished.
- The normal/common definitions of the Greek, Hebrew, and English words all say that it involves not punishing someone for his sin/crime. (*Or cutting the punishment short.*)

Thus, we have a question of definition:

When the Bible says “forgiveness/pardon”, does it mean after punishment or not?

To answer this question, we’ll head back to Ezekiel chapter 18. Again, there’s a good reason that it’s a primary anti-PSA passage.

Ezekiel 18:21-22 (NASB 95)

21 “But **if the wicked man turns from all his sins** which he has committed and **observes all My statutes** and **practices justice and righteousness**, he shall surely live; he shall not die.

22 “All **his transgressions which he has committed will not be remembered against him**; because of his righteousness which he has practiced, he will live.

In this passage, God gives 3 conditions before the man's sins "will not be remembered against him".
They are:

1. **Turns from all his sins.** This is repentance. The first item is repentance, which includes turning from wickedness. This is always the first step in sinners truly turning to God.
2. **"Observes all My statutes".** This is faith, or perhaps "faith in action". In order to see/observe God's statutes and then consider them worthy of obedience, you must believe that He exists and should be obeyed.
3. **"Practices justice and righteousness".** This is obedience. Obedience to God is a necessary component of following Him.

It's repent, believe, and obey.

Notice that "punishment" is missing from the list.

It's nowhere to be found.

Not anywhere.

Nowhere does God lay punishment down as a prerequisite before the sins "will not be remembered against him". A plain/simple reading of Jesus's parables and the forgiveness passages that we've looked at reveal the same thing. All of the Greek and Hebrew words we've looked at — plus even our English words — all have the same meaning and they don't include — nor even really allow — for "forgiveness/pardon" to happen *after* punishment. Even pardons issued after a completed prison sentence end the punishment, specifically the ongoing penalties that prevent felons from holding certain jobs, etc.

Everything we've seen so far supports the normal/standard/common definition of forgive/pardon, not PSA's definition.

That greatly undermines the case for PSA.

Why?

Because it turns every single verse about God's forgiveness into an anti-PSA verse.

That's a *lot* of verses.

We've been through a half dozen different Greek and Hebrew words now, plus passages like Ezekiel 18, and none of them left room for PSA's understanding of a pardon/forgiveness. Not one. In order to believe PSA, we would need to ignore the definition and usage of the Greek and Hebrew words translated forgive/pardon, and also ignore the parables and the teaching passages as well. Again, the response from the PSA school would be that it's forgiveness/pardon after punishment. That is perhaps plausible, but it does disagree with the normal definitions of those words.

Perhaps more importantly, it disagrees with the clear teaching in Ezekiel chapter 18. Ezekiel chapter 18 seems to clearly teach that punishment is **not** required. Jesus's parables support this, and so do

the word definitions.

In fact, forgiveness/pardon after punishment seems to be without precedent in the entire Bible...

...maybe.

There's a "but".

There's one possible exception, and that would be the various "sin offerings" in the Old Testament.

Here's the sin offering for when a common man sins:

Leviticus 4:27-31

27 Now if anyone of the common people sins unintentionally in doing any of the things which the LORD has commanded not to be done, and becomes guilty,

28 if his sin which he has committed is made known to him, then he shall bring for his offering a **goat**, a female without defect, for his sin which he has committed.

29 He shall lay his hand on the head of the sin offering and **slay the sin offering** at the place of the burnt offering.

30 The priest shall take some of its blood with his finger and put it on the horns of the altar of burnt offering; and all the rest of its blood he shall pour out at the base of the altar.

31 Then he shall remove all its fat, just as the fat was removed from the sacrifice of peace offerings; and the priest shall offer it up in smoke on the altar for a soothing aroma to the LORD. Thus the priest shall **make atonement** for him, and **he will be forgiven**.

32 But if he brings a lamb as his offering for a sin offering, he shall bring it, a **female** without defect.

Now, if you believe in Penal Substitutionary Atonement, you would say that the goat of the sin offering was slain in the man's place as his substitute. Thus, the punishment happened in the slaying of the female goat, and then afterward the forgiveness happened.

That's actually not a bad argument... sort of. The problem is that it ignores the New Testament... sort of.

Hebrews 10:1-4

1 For the Law, since it has *only* a shadow of the good things to come *and* not the very form of things, **can never, by the same sacrifices which they offer continually year by year, make perfect those who draw near.**

2 Otherwise, would they not have ceased to be offered, because the worshipers, having once been cleansed, would no longer have had consciousness of sins?

3 But in those *sacrifices* there is a **reminder** of sins year by year.

4 For it is **impossible** for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins.

Slaying the female goat of the sin offering wasn't "punishment" because it couldn't be since "it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins". Verse 3 above tells us that the sacrifices were a "reminder of sins year by year".

Was the sin offering an example of punishment happening, and then forgiveness being given after the punishment?

I don't see how.

Why?

Because again, "it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins". **Even according to PSA, the sin offering didn't do anything other than remind them of their sins.**

However, the PSA school will likely respond that it's the **picture** that counts. That is, goats couldn't, but Jesus could. So the goat being slain and the forgiveness happening after the goat's "punishment" was foreshadowing — **a picture** — of Christ being slain and our forgiveness happening after His punishment.

That's not a bad argument.

Not at all.

In fact, it's a pretty good argument.

*(At this point, this article might sound like me having a back-and-forth debate with myself on the topic, even after a **lot** of editing. There's a reason for that...)*

Thus, PSA neatly sidesteps the problem of word definitions and allows for the *possibility* — not the certainty, but the *possibility* — that in God's plan of salvation, forgiveness/pardon can happen after punishment. That would be without precedent in the entire rest of the Bible, but the PSA position will simply say that it's without precedent because there couldn't be precedent for Jesus's death.

Now, this is a rabbit trail worth following, but not in this article. The next article in this series will be about "atonement" and what it means, and a further discussion of this requires the context of that article. Thus, we will drop this topic now and look at it more in the next article.

For now, we'll go back to the verses used to disprove PSA's #2 pillar, that God must punish sin.

Is "Mercy triumphs over judgement" Applicable?

Here is that verse with a lot of context around it.

James 2:8-17

8 If, however, you are fulfilling the royal law according to the Scripture, "YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF," you are doing well.

9 But if you show partiality, you are committing sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors.

10 For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles in one *point*, he has become guilty of all.

11 For He who said, "DO NOT COMMIT ADULTERY," also said, "DO NOT COMMIT MURDER." Now if you do not commit adultery, but do commit murder, you have become a transgressor of the law.

12 So speak and so act as those who are to be judged by *the* law of liberty.

13 For judgment *will be* merciless to one who has shown no mercy; mercy triumphs over judgment.

14 What use is it, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but he has no works? Can that faith save him?

15 If a brother or sister is without clothing and in need of daily food,

16 and one of you says to them, "Go in peace, be warmed and be filled," and yet you do not give them what is necessary for *their* body, what use is that?

17 Even so faith, if it has no works, is dead, *being* by itself.

This isn't a "slam dunk" for the anti-PSA crowd, even though some think it is. However, it should be added to the pile of evidence, weak though it is. Remember, we're discussing PSA pillar #2, which says that because of God's character, He must punish sin and He can't not punish it. That doesn't fit well with this verse, but it's not an impossible fit either.

Again, PSA could say that this is true of God's judgement of us, and that He's able to let "mercy triumph over judgement" with us because Jesus was already punished/judged in our place as a substitute. That works. I don't think it works very well, but it does work enough that I don't consider James 2:13 anything like a "slam dunk" for the anti-PSA crowd.

Other Issues Pillar #2 creates

There are a few other issues that PSA creates if one takes the time to think through the implications, and we'll go through these issues one at a time. **To be clear, none of these is an argument against PSA.** Or at least, not directly. This is more about understanding some of the logical outworkings of PSA's view of God.

Forgive as God forgave you?

Many verses that state this basic idea, and we'll look at two of the most concise and clear examples:

Ephesians 4:32

Be kind to one another, tender-hearted, **forgiving each other, just as God in Christ also has forgiven you.**

And also:

Colossians 3:13

bearing with one another, and **forgiving each other, whoever has a complaint against anyone; just as the Lord forgave you, so also should you.**

Now, we need to deal with a "straw man" argument from the anti-PSA crowd.

Some in the anti-PSA crowd say that in order for us to forgive "just as" God forgave us, then when someone wrongs us, we need to go find an innocent substitute and punish that person before we can forgive the one who wronged us.

That is patently false and not what PSA teaches.

Not at all.

Notice in Ephesians 4:32 how it says: "forgiving each other, **just as God in Christ also has forgiven you**". A thoughtful PSA supporter would say that Jesus was already punished for all sin, and thus we "forgive" others based on Jesus having taken that punishment. (*That's assuming the PSA definition of "forgive"*). Thus, while this objection has a lot of rhetorical force, it has very little substance; it's a

“straw man”.

Now, this explanation has the problem of using a radically different definition for “forgive” than is meant by Greek, Hebrew, or English words, but we’ve already covered that in detail. And it also has one other problem that might not be immediately apparent: **What about when unbelievers forgive?**

That brings up an interesting question that we’ll examine next.

Does PSA make man — especially non-Christians — more forgiving and more loving than God?

This heading isn’t intended to be inflammatory; it’s a legitimate question. During my life — and I’m sure yours as well — people have wronged me and I have forgiven them without requiring anything from them. I’ve sometimes forgiven them without their knowledge, and you probably have too. In fact, many of the Christians I know have done this.

In fact, I know plenty of non-Christians who do this, and even do it regularly.

While one could argue that Christians “forgive” (*PSA definition*) based on Jesus’s work on the cross, non-Christians don’t; they can’t. Non-Christians who forgive (*normal definition*) do so by “letting go of”/pardoning/forgiving someone without punishment at all.

However, according to PSA, that’s something that God cannot do.

(They say it’s because of His justice, which we’ll look at in a moment.)

According to PSA, God is incapable of “letting go of”/pardoning/forgiving/“not taking into account” the sins of others in the same way that virtually every Christian and even many non-Christians do. PSA says that God simply can’t do it, but mankind can, and even non-Christians can.

Does that make man — especially non-Christians — more forgiving than God Himself?

And yes, this is an honest question.

It would seem that if man can “let it go”/pardon/forgive/“not take into account” while God can’t (*or won’t*), then that makes man more forgiving than God. Again, non-Christians do this, so therefore, the most forgiving people are (*some*) non-Christians, then Christians, then God.

What?

What kind of bizarre world is that?!

Seriously?

Can you imagine a more backwards, upside down, and anti-Christian theology than to say that non-Christians can be more forgiving than God Himself? (*Okay, some think that God is evil, which is obviously worse, but you get the point.*) **However, this follows logically from this second core pillar of PSA.** It’s a nearly inescapable logical outgrowth of the doctrine, or at least I haven’t seen anyone

address it.

And it does get worse.

How?

It might also make man more loving than God Himself.

Recall the passage in 1 Corinthians 13:5 where Scripture says that love “does not take into account a wrong *suffered*”. Recall too that according to PSA, God is actually unable and incapable of *not* taking a wrong into account; according to PSA, He *must* take them *all* into account.Â However, Scripture clearly records that man is capable of doing not taking them into account.

Proverbs 19:11

A man’s discretion makes him slow to anger, And it is his **glory to overlook a transgression**.

The word translated “overlook” is “xçÖ, x’Ö-x” ([abar](#)), and here is the relevant entry from the Brown-Driver-Briggs lexicon, definition 1.j.

j. **pass over = overlook, forgive** xçÖ-xæxžÖ¶Ö¼Ö¿x©Ö-x•xç Micah 7:18 (+ xæÖ° person), **Proverbs 19:11**; with xæÖ° person only, Amos 7:8; Amos 8:2.

There’s that word “forgive” again.Â Notice that in this context, to “overlook” means that you see the fault/sin/crime, but choose not to consider it.Â This sounds exactly like Ezekiel 18’s “not be remembered against him”, and Romans 4’s “Not taken into account”.Â It also sounds extremely similar to the standard definition of a pardon/forgiveness, and also to the Greek word which means to “let go” of something, as well as the other words we’ve looked at, and Jesus’s parables too.

It doesn’t sound like PSA at all.

Further, this overlooking is a “glory” for a man.Â Wouldn’t this mean that man has a glory that his creator can’t share because — according to PSA — God can’t overlook a transgression?Â

Doesn’t that sound absurd?

(*Not to mention blasphemous.*)

PSA appears to create this strange universe where:

- Non-Christians can be more forgiving and loving than God Himself because:
 - Man — especially non-Christians — can forgive (*normal definition*) whereas God Himself can’t.
 - Despite Scripture saying “God is love” and that “love is from God”, God isn’t able to exhibit an aspect of love that man can exhibit. (*Not keeping a record of wrongs, as in 1 Cor 13:5.*)
 - **This makes man capable of showing love in a way that God can’t.**

-
- o Man has a type of glory that God cannot have. (Overlooking a trespass.)

Again I repeat: What kind of Bizarro World is that?

Now, I've never heard these arguments brought up in the debate, so I don't have a good response from the PSA school. However, playing devil's advocate, I think the response would be something like this:

"You are forgetting God's justice. Yes "God is love", but He is also the righteous and just judge of the world, and His position as judge explains all of these easily."

That's not a bad response.

However, does that response really change anything?

Please look at the list above and tell me if that response explains away any of the points. Does it make any of them untrue? Yes it adds nuance and context — almost always a good thing — but does it make any of them untrue?

And there's yet another interesting situation that PSA creates, which we'll look at now.

Should human courts imitate PSA's understanding of God's justice?

According to PSA's #2 pillar, God is required by His own Holy, righteous, and just character to punish sin. Now, setting aside that we don't have a verse that definitively states this and assuming that it's true for the sake of argument, this actually causes some rather interesting problems. Not necessarily for God's justice, but for man.

But first, a few verses for context:

Matthew 5:48

Therefore you are to be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

And also:

1 Corinthians 11:1

Be imitators of me, just as I also am of Christ.

And then remember:

John 5:22

“For not even the Father judges anyone, but **He has given all judgment to the Son,**

And a few verses about judgements in legal proceedings:

John 7:23-24 (*Right after Jesus healed someone on the Sabbath*)

23 “If a man receives circumcision on *the* Sabbath so that the Law of Moses will not be broken, are you angry with Me because I made an entire man well on *the* Sabbath?”

24 “Do not judge according to appearance, but **judge with righteous judgment.**”

It should be noted that Jesus was condemning the Pharisees, who had the legal authority to judge in religious matters.

And again in Deuteronomy:

Deuteronomy 16:18-20

18 “**You shall appoint for yourself judges and officers in all your towns** which the LORD your God is giving you, according to your tribes, and **they shall judge the people with righteous judgment.**”

19 “**You shall not distort justice; you shall not be partial,** and you shall not take a bribe, for a bribe blinds the eyes of the wise and perverts the words of the righteous.

20 “**Justice, and only justice,** you shall pursue, that you may live and possess the land which the LORD your God is giving you.

Please re-read the beginning of Deut 16:20 again. That’s quite the statement! I could quote many more verses where we are told to imitate God’s righteousness and justice, but I’m sure you know them already and can guess where this is going.

If God is perfectly just when He always punishes sin, that creates some... “interesting” applications for us in a courtroom.

Before we look at the logic, remember the command in Deut 16:20: “Justice, *and only* justice, you shall pursue”.

Consider:

- **if** God *always* punishes sin because He is perfectly just,
- **and if** we are required to imitate God's perfect justice (*in legal settings anyway*)
- **then** those in authority whose job it is to decide punishment (*courts for example*) should always punish.

If perfect justice declares that everyone must be punished for their sins/crimes — which PSA says — then a cop who lets someone off with a warning is not being just, and therefore he's sinning. Again, if perfect justice demands punishment for all crimes as PSA says, then a District Attorney who chooses not to bring charges or a judge who dismisses charges is being unjust and sinning as well.

Remember Deut 16:20: "Justice, and only justice, you shall pursue".

Obviously we aren't required to obey the Mosaic law. However, the New Testament explicitly says that it was written for our instruction:

Romans 15:4

For whatever was written in earlier times was written for our instruction, so that through perseverance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope.

So while we aren't required to obey the Mosaic Law, we can and should learn from it. In Deut 16:20 — and somewhat reiterated by Jesus in Luke 7:24 — God is clear that the goal of courts should be justice. In fact, "justice and only justice" is the goal according to Deut 16:20.

If justice means always punishing every sin as PSA asserts, then should our human courts imitate this?

If not, why not?

Again, if God's perfectly just character requires Him to always punish sin, and we should imitate His justice and character (*in a courtroom anyway*), then wouldn't a perfectly just human judge also always punish crime?

I realize that a lot of PSA supporters are probably rolling their eyes at this point, but **it's a legitimate question**. The biblical case is certainly there as we just saw, so why wouldn't that understanding be correct? If you strongly believe PSA and are shaking your head, please give it some thought and explain why that logic is wrong. **Just remember that we are talking about human courts, including non-Christian courts, so "because Jesus was punished for that sin/crime already" doesn't seem to apply...** or maybe it does. If you think it does, please leave a comment explaining why.

This also applies to human governors or presidents issuing pardons.

Again, if PSA is correct, then God completely and fully punishes every single sin before He can

“forgive” (*PSA definition*) the sinner.Â Therefore, wouldn’t a human governor or judge be sinning if he issued a pardon to someone?

As of now, I don’t see how a human judge, DA, or cop could not punish someone without sinning if PSA is accurate.Â

That wouldn’t be consistent.

Now, if God can forgive without punishing and still be just, then it makes sense that human courts or law enforcement can do the same (*at least occasionally*).Â But if God can’t do that, then why would human courts do that?

Anyone?

And to be clear, this is not an argument against PSA.Â (*At least, not directly.*)

Theology has implications that can affect how we live our lives obviously or subtly.Â This is simply an implication of PSA’s theology.

And consider: does the same principle apply to parenting?

If not, why not?

Parents are certainly told to discipline their children and God pictures Himself as our father.Â So if He always punishes us — His children — when we do wrong, then should parents always punish their children when they do wrong?Â

Maybe?

It’s an honest question.

Perhaps this is ridiculous, and perhaps it’s a stretch, but it seems a logical consequence of accepting PSA.Â Perhaps we aren’t supposed to imitate this aspect of God, but then you would need to say that we shouldn’t imitate God’s justice; that seems a hard argument to make.Â Perhaps you could say that such judgement is reserved for God alone and human courts/justice shouldn’t imitate that, but again, that seems a hard argument to make given the verses about justice we just looked at.

There are ways to explain it away, but it does bear consideration.Â (*And by the way, at this point I’m noticing that PSA requires rather a lot of “explaining away”.*)

One final thought

None of the following necessarily proves PSA false, nor is it intended to be an argument against it.

Or at least, not directly.

I started article this not knowing where I would land, and part of the reason I’m writing this series is to

help me think it through. The following is simply one of my thoughts that I'm writing down on a dreary Tuesday afternoon where I'm too tired to get any work done, but too wired to rest. Take it for what it is, the "ravings of an unhinged mind" as a mentor of mine used to say.

So here goes:

If you accept PSA as true, it requires a fairly large amount of mental gymnastics to make it work with all the verses and Greek/Hebrew words we've looked at. PSA at least *appears* to require a large amount of redefinition of words, and also holding two contradictory ideas to be true at the same time. For me — perhaps not for you, but for me — that creates a lot of cognitive dissonance:

Cognitive dissonance is a term for the state of discomfort felt when two or more modes of thought contradict each other. The clashing cognitions may include ideas, beliefs, or the knowledge that one has behaved in a certain way.

[Source](#).

Now, that's perhaps not unique in Christianity. For example, the Trinity: God is One, but God is Three. There is perhaps some amount of cognitive dissonance involved in believing in the Trinity, but at least with that I have illustrations — however imperfect — to help wrap my brain around it. Plus, the Trinity is clearly stated in the Bible many, many times. (See [this article](#) for some examples.)

PSA is different.

I have always disliked theological positions that require me to redefine and re-frame large portions of the Bible. If we believe that God can forgive without punishment, that's not necessary. I can read the entire Bible without redefining anything, and it doesn't require any "mental gymnastics" to understand the plain meaning of passages like Ezekiel 18, Romans 4, 1 Cor 13, Jesus's parables, and the passages about forgiveness too.

By contrast, believing PSA seems to require those mental gymnastics. I need to redefine words like forgiveness and pardon, and say that Jesus's parables — not to mention many passages of scripture — are so incomplete as to nearly be misleading. It requires me to constantly say: "I know it says XYZ, but it means ABC".

(I've done that on this website, but those "redefinitions" — as far as I can recall — are always based on the original words in the original languages, not trying to force my theology onto the text.)

That makes me skeptical of PSA.

It makes me even more skeptical of PSA because there's an alternative (*at least in this pillar*) that requires me to do none of that "twisting" in order to make it fit. If we believe that God can forgive without punishing, all of the mental gymnastics that PSA requires instantly go away and we can simply read the text.

Now, there are still two more pillars to cover and a whole boatload more research to do. Don't count PSA out just because it seems down now. It's always wise to hear *all* of *both* sides of a case before rendering a verdict. I have more reservations about PSA now than I did when I started, but I'll

withhold judgement until the research is complete.

I humbly suggest that you do the same.

Conclusion and Summary

PSA's #2 pillar is that God must always punish sin in order to be consistent with His own holy character/nature. There appears to be no verse that definitively states that God must punish sin, or even that He always will punish sin even if He doesn't have to. The closest verses to saying that are Nahum 1:3 and Romans 6:23.

Nahum suffers from relying on a secondary definition of "unpunished" when the primary definition of "clean/cleared" in the sense of "*cleared of all charges/innocent*" makes just as much sense. Additionally, even if "unpunished" is the correct understanding, that still doesn't support PSA because the verse states that the sinner will be punished, not the sin. **Thus, no matter which way you take the verse, it doesn't support PSA.**

Romans 6:23's statement that "the wages of sin is death" simply isn't a clear statement that God will always punish sin. Conversely, James 2:13's "Mercy triumphs over judgement" isn't a clear statement that God isn't required to punish sin.

Ezekiel 18's "will not be remembered against him" seems to provide powerful and nigh-irrefutable evidence that God isn't required to punish sin. I have literally never heard a convincing counter-argument to this seemingly crystal-clear teaching. Romans 4's statement about God not taking a man's sin into account, and also 1 Corinthians 13's statement that love doesn't keep a record of wrongs — while "love is from God" and "God is love" — also seems to provide evidence that God is at least capable of not taking man's sins into account if He chooses to. (*Usually on the condition of repentance and faith*).

All of the Greek and Hebrew words translated "forgiveness" seem to support this as well, and so do Jesus's parables about forgiveness. PSA says that forgiveness happens after punishment, but the sole bit of supporting evidence is — perhaps — the sin offerings in the Old Testament painting a picture of Christ's work on the cross. **We'll look at this in more detail in the next article.**

At least twice, Jesus pronounced someone forgiven before His death on the cross. While PSA's usual understanding of Romans 3:25 makes that impossible, there are ways around it.

Given all the above, and especially Ezekiel chapter 18, it seems clear that PSA's #2 pillar — that God must punish all sin — is not true because it's not consistent with the Bible's teaching on the topic

(To be clear, the only way to avoid punishment is repentance and faith. It's not like God just ignores unrepentant sin. If you wanted to argue that God always punishes sinners who do not repent — not sin, but sinners — I actually think there's a solid case to be made for that. However, that's beyond the scope of this series on PSA.)

Somewhat less importantly for determining doctrine, PSA's belief that God must punish sin results in

some strange problems being created.Â For example, it seems to indicate that non-Christians can be more loving and forgiving than God Himself, and more so than Christians as well.Â In fact, it makes non-Christians (*potentially*) the most loving and forgiving people, then Christians, then God.Â This seems entirely backwards and perhaps even blasphemous.

Additionally, if PSA #2 pillar is true, then it would seem that human courts should always fully punish sins and never issue pardons.Â It's also possible that parents should do the same with their children, always punishing them for every minor misdeed.Â These aren't necessarily arguments against PSA, but they do bear consideration.

Finally, PSA's second pillar seems to introduce some cognitive dissonance in many places, and it also requires some "mental gymnastics" to make all the passages we've looked at harmonize.Â Those issues completely go away if PSA's #2 pillar isn't correct.

Next, we'll move to a huge area of controversy in the next article: the definition of "atonement", and since it's closely related, we'll likely also define "propitiation".

Hopefully, that article will be coming soon-ish.