

What The Bible Teaches About Substitution

Introduction. In our last lesson we introduced the problem of the substitution theory. The following quotation will easily summarize the problems we confronted last time. The great Baptist preacher Charles H. Spurgeon said, "If Christ has died for you, you can never be lost. God will not punish twice for one thing. If God punished Christ for your sins He will not punish you. 'Payment God's justice cannot twice demand; first, at the bleeding Savior's hand, and then again at mine.' How can God be just if he punished Christ, the substitute, and then man himself afterwards?" (Boettner, *The Reformed Doctrine Of Predestination*).

The impossibility of apostasy is demanded from a belief that Jesus died as a substitute. To reject the impossibility of apostasy yet accept substitution is untenable. Certain beliefs and doctrines have logical consequences. Spurgeon is exactly right: if Jesus is our substitute, then God cannot hold any punishment against man, regardless of our actions for God would be unjust to punish twice for the same sin.

In this lesson we will examine the passages that the proponents of substitution advance to prove their concept. They merely assume substitution, but that substitution is not the message of the Bible at all.

I. ***New Testament Passages***

A. 2 Corinthians 5:21.

1. By perusing different versions, it is evident that there is nothing stated concerning Jesus dying in our place or becoming a substitute for us. Rather, the scriptures state that Jesus died "for us," "for our sake," and "on our behalf."
2. However, this passage is used to show that Jesus literally took our sins on Himself on the cross, therefore becoming our substitute. Is this what is meant when Paul said that Jesus was made to be sin? Are we to think that Jesus became sin Himself and was treated by God like a sinner? If Jesus was a blemish-free, spotless, holy, and righteous sacrifice, how could He actually and literally be sin or a sinner on the cross? If Jesus was without sin (Hebrews 4:15), how can we say that 2 Corinthians 5:21 is teaching He had sin?
3. The NIV has a footnote next to the word "sin" which says, "or to be a sin offering." The word can either mean "sin" or "sin sacrifice." In Hebrews 10:6-8, the words "sacrifices" are italicized because the original Greek word is not there. The translators added it for understanding. The word "offering" is added to the word "sin" in many other places (Leviticus 4:21, 25; 6:25; Isaiah 53:10; Romans 8:2-3).

4. Is there a reasonable way to understand how Jesus became sin without violating other plain passages of scripture? If sin is on Jesus and He dies with sin on Him, do we not realize the consequences of such a proposal? Jesus dying with sin on Him means He is not the perfect Lamb of God, but is a broken, blemished lamb that is unacceptable to God. The Old Testament required all sacrifices for sin to be perfect and without blemish. Jesus becomes the perfect sacrifice for our sins and could not have blemish on Him to be acceptable to God (Hebrews 7:26-27; 1 Peter 1:18-19). Christ is always described as our sin sacrifice and never as our substitute (Hebrews 10:9-10).

B. Galatians 3:10-13.

1. Is substitution taught in Galatians 3? The curse that all mankind bears is the curse of the law. The Old Testament offered no method of true forgiveness (Hebrews 10:1-4). Perfect lawkeeping was the demand of the law (Romans 3:20). Anyone who violated the law became cursed and all people violated the law of God. Therefore, all people bear the curse of the law. Now, carefully read the text. Does Paul say that Christ became a curse in our place? Does the passage teach that Christ bore our curse? No, it does not.
2. How did Christ become a curse for us? The passage does not say by bearing our curse, but that Christ became a curse by being hung on a tree. If we are to say there was a curse placed upon Jesus, we must recognize that the curse is not the same curse placed upon all humanity.
3. But the text does not say that God cursed Jesus. The "curse" Jesus bore relates to the command given in Deuteronomy 21:22-23. This is capital punishment for capital crimes. If a man did something deserving of death, he was to be put to death and he was to be hung on a tree for all to see. A. T. Robertson notes an important point: "Quotation from Deuteronomy 21:23 with the omission of *hupo theou* (by God), since Christ was not cursed by God." Paul does not quote the whole sentence of being cursed by God, because Jesus was not cursed by God.
4. Did Jesus commit sin deserving of death? Absolutely not. Jesus was not a sinner and did not violate any of God's laws. Jesus' death removed the power and authority of the law, thereby removing the curse upon us (Colossians 2:13-14; Ephesians 2:14-16; Hebrews 8:6-7; 10:1-10).
5. As far as becoming a curse, though innocent, Christ was treated in His death as if He had been guilty; that is, He was put to death as if He had personally deserved it. That this is the meaning is implied in the explanation which the apostle himself gives of His own

language. The Jews considered Jesus guilty, charging Him with blasphemy and therefore treating Him as worthy of death (Matthew 27:39-43). Jesus did not become a curse in our place. Rather, in the process of becoming our sacrifice for sins which removed our curse, the people perceived Jesus to be cursed by God.

C. 1 Peter 2:24.

1. If Jesus did not literally have the sins of the world placed upon Him, then what did Peter mean in 1 Peter 2:24? We must first notice what the text does actually say. It says He "bore our sins in his body," not on His body. So what did the body of Christ do? What does it mean when Peter said Jesus bore our sins?
2. The word "bore" means "to carry up, take up, offer up." We can see the meaning of this word throughout the scriptures (Hebrews 7:27; James 2:21; 1 Peter 2:5). This passage does not say that Jesus "carried" our sins "on" His body nor that our sins were "placed" on Him. The body of Jesus was offered up on an altar as a sacrifice or offering for sins.

II. ***Old Testament Passages***

A. Isaiah 53.

1. Vs. 3 tells us that "He is despised and rejected of men," but not by God. In vs. 4, the word "bore" means "to take up; to carry; to take away; to remove" (cf. Matthew 8:16-17). Jesus has taken away our sorrows and griefs. The text does not say that God afflicted Jesus, but that man considered Jesus afflicted by God.
2. What does it mean in vs. 6 that the Lord laid on Him the iniquity of us all? The word for "laid on" is used by translators as "intercession" in vs. 12 (cf. Romans 8:32; Ephesians 5:2). There is nothing in these words implying substitution. Rather, Isaiah 53:6 is simply saying the Lord delivered or offered up Jesus for the iniquity of us all.
3. Verse 8 does not require a substitutionary view either. "For the transgression of my people was he stricken" simply tells us that it was because of our sins that Jesus was needed as a sacrifice for sins.
4. Verse 10 states that His death was not a substitution but a sin sacrifice. The sacrifice of Jesus was well-pleasing to God, offered on our behalf to open the way of God's mercy for us.
5. Verse 11 says, "... for he shall bear their iniquities." The Hebrew word for "bear" means "to carry (literally or figuratively)." This is the same word used back in vs. 4 of Isaiah that Jesus "carried our sorrows."

6. Finally, verse 12 concludes with the word "bore" which means "to lift, to carry, to take." Again, the meaning is that Jesus took away our sins and offered up Himself as a sacrifice to the Lord.

B. A substitute for Isaac.

1. What about all of the Old Testament analogies we frequently use to show substitution? The offering of the ram instead of Isaac is a case of substitution. In fact, the Bible clearly states the ram as such (Genesis 22:13). Is it not interesting that the Bible has no problem declaring the ram a substitute for Isaac, but never declares Jesus to be a substitute for us?
2. Unfortunately, we are frequently told that Abraham represents God, Isaac represents us, and the ram represents Christ. Therefore, Christ became our substitute. However, the Bible does not make this analogy. Hebrews 11:17-19 depicts Abraham as God and Isaac as Christ. Isaac figuratively rose from the dead and returned to Abraham. In the same way, Christ rose from the dead and returned to the Father.
3. Furthermore, Isaac was scheduled to die on the altar. God had decreed that Abraham slay his only son. The ram became a substitute for Isaac. But we were not scheduled to die on the cross. If we had, we may be able to say that Jesus stepped in and took our place, dying instead of us. But the Bible never declares that Jesus took our place nor that we were to die on the cross.

C. The scapegoat.

1. The scapegoat was released into the wilderness after the sacrifice of atonement had been made for sins (Leviticus 16:22). The scapegoat symbolized to the people that their sins were being taken away through the activities on the day of atonement. The scriptures never liken Jesus to the scapegoat. Jesus is likened to the sacrifice.
2. Furthermore, the sins were not literally transferred to the scapegoat. The sins remained with the people (cf. Hebrews 10:1-4). The scapegoat simply symbolized God overlooking these transgressions until the true sacrifice of Jesus could come. In the same way, Jesus did not literally carry our sins on Him. Rather, Jesus' sacrifice, resurrection, and ascension shows that our sins have been taken away from us.

D. Laying on of hands.

1. It is often asserted that by laying on of hands, the sins of the one making the offering were literally taken away from the worshipper and placed on the animal (Leviticus 16:21). But again, we know that sins were not taken away under the Old Covenant (Hebrews 10:1-4).

2. To say that substitution was taking place with the animal and offerer proves too much. Substitution clearly did not take place between a sheaf of wheat and the offerer (Leviticus 23:11). Nor can we assume that laying on of hands transferred sins since there are many other instances where the laying on of hands took place, but had nothing to do with sins whatsoever.
- E. The firstborn of Egypt.
1. It is also suggested that the blood of the lamb in the Passover which was placed on the door was a substitute for the firstborn of Israel (Exodus 12:13). But how was this an act performed in the place of the firstborn of Israel? This lamb was no substitute for the sins of the Israelite firstborn, no penalty for sin was placed on the lamb that was slain, and the lamb did not take the place of anyone.
 2. But if it were so, then it proves too much because all the firstborn animals were also delivered in the Passover (Exodus 11:7). Whatever the purpose was for placing the blood on the doorway for the Israelites, it included shielding their animals as well. Was the blood of the Passover lamb a "substitute" sacrifice for the "sins" of animals as well? The blood on the doorway was simply for identification and thus protection from the wrath of the Lord, not some form of substitution.

Conclusion. The Bible says that Jesus was a sacrifice for our sins. The Bible never says Jesus was our substitute. What addition does substitution bring? Why is the theory of substitution needed? We have Jesus dying for our sins, removing them from us, and presenting us justified. Substitution is only necessary because it proves Calvinism; otherwise, it could be discarded. In our next lesson we will see what Jesus did do for us by the concepts of redemption and ransom.