

Week 10

Substitutionary Death

Key Verses

2 Corinthians 5:21 He made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.

+ Introduction

Ancient Romans loved a good boast. Take, for example, Julius Caesar's pithy report to the Roman Senate after a battle in modern Turkey: "I came. I saw. I conquered." A few decades later, Emperor Augustus entitled a long book about himself – *The Achievements of the Divine Augustus*. Self-promotion was so popular that the Roman author Plutarch wrote a short book on how to do it well: *On Praising Oneself Inoffensively*.

And yet one of Plutarch's contemporaries, a brilliant, well-born, well-educated, multi-lingual, citizen of that most powerful empire on earth once wrote to his friends: "*But may it never be that I would boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ....*" (Galatians 6:14).

What made the cross of Jesus Christ so significant? How could the shameful, scandalous execution of a rabbi out in the hinterlands of the Roman empire inspire boasting? To answer this, we must take a closer look at Scripture and at Jesus Christ. We have already considered the wonderful nature of Jesus Christ – fully man and fully God. This lesson will consider the nature of His death and why this death is at the heart of the Good News Christians want to "boast of" in every corner of the earth.

+ Death is the Penalty for Human Sin

In Genesis 2, shortly after creating humankind—and long before announcing the famous ten commandments—God gave His human image-bearers their first commandment:

GENESIS 2:16-17 "The LORD God commanded the man, saying, 'From any tree of the garden you may eat freely; but from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat from it you will surely die.'"

Certain death. That was the outcome of breaking God's command. In the Creator's wisdom and justice, humans forfeit their lives when they choose to "know evil." So, when Adam and Eve sinned against God by eating from that tree (Genesis 3:6), God announced that they would return to the dust from which they came (Genesis 3:19). Just as sin entered the human story, certain death entered as the penalty for sin.

After Genesis 3, the Bible shows that death has "spread" and "reigned" over humanity as a penalty for sin (Romans 5:12, 17). Every human has sinned, and each one is appointed to die and stand before God's righteous judgment of their sins (Hebrews 9:27).¹ The Bible calls death the "wages of sin" (Romans 6:23) and calls the judgment awaiting sinners after death an "eternal punishment" (Matthew 25:46).

Why such a stiff penalty? Why is eternal death the just "wage" or "punishment" for human sin – including yours and mine? Consider three reasons:

1. Death is just **because sin corrupts us as God's image-bearers**. Genesis 1:26 records that God made human beings *"in His own image."* Unlike the rest of creation, humans were made to represent God to His creation. They were to be like His children. Scripture even describes Adam as the "son of God" (Luke 3:38). But sin makes people look less like children of God and more like children of the devil (John 8:44; 1 John 3:10). God does not allow devils to run rampant over His creation (see Genesis 6:3), so He justly appoints death for sinners.
2. Death is just, **because sin corrupts our relationships with people and creation**. God made the universe and all that fills it. He created a natural order that – if followed – leads to life and flourishing for everyone and everything. Sin puts people "out of order" with one another and the world. We may or may not see it, but sin always disorders our relationships to other people and to creation. God sees it. He is all-wise, and He knows the cascading catastrophes that result from these disordered relationships, so He justly punishes sinners with death.
3. Most importantly, death is just, **because sin corrupts our relationship with God Himself**. Everyone has a relationship with God – even if it is a terrible one. The nature of that relationship is corrupted by sin. God is all-holy, and sin provokes His righteous wrath. This wrath is nothing like unpredictable human anger, which picks and chooses, rises and falls.² God's wrath is better understood as a steady blazing fire of holiness. It singses, burns, and eventually consumes people who sin against Him, culminating in eternal punishment.³ This is the just sentence of the all-wise, all-holy, Almighty God. As the adulterous murderer, David once sang to God:

*"Against You, You only, I have sinned
And done what is evil in Your sight,
So that you are justified when You speak
And blameless when You judge."
Psalm 51:4*

The deadly spread and seriousness of sin cannot be overstated. It plunges each of us into a crisis. Over the years, some have said the way to overcome this sin-crisis is through self-sacrifice – as if we could pay God to forgive sins. Others have said the way to overcome it is through self-improvement – as if we could grow beyond our sinful nature. Against these false claims, the Bible reveals that humanity's sin crisis can only be overcome through God's own self-substitution of His life for ours.

+ God is Merciful Toward Sinners

We have seen that God is a wise, just, and holy judge who rightly condemns sinful rebels. But this is not the end of the story because God is incredibly merciful and compassionate (Exodus 34:6). As we saw in Lesson 3, He is a loving, listening Father who pursues a relationship with His people. As a result of this, the prophet Jeremiah could declare: *"It is of the LORD's mercies that we are not consumed, because his compassions fail not"* (Lamentations 3:22, KJV).

If God's mercy explains **why** He is willing to continue in relationship with sinful people, substitution explains **how** God continues in that relationship.

Substitution is an easy-to-understand concept: it is one thing in place of another. When the teacher cannot come to school, a **substitute** goes in her place. When a basketball player's legs get tired from running the court, the coach sits him down and **substitutes** another player.

In the Bible, God reveals that He is willing to accept a **sinless substitute** in His relationship with sinful humans so that His wrath will not consume them.

This idea is developed throughout the Bible, but three particular places in the Old Testament reveal it:

1. In Genesis 15, God participates in a covenant ceremony with the patriarch Abram (later called Abraham). Abram laid a series of dead animal carcasses on the ground, planning to walk between them as a sign that any breach in their relationship should result in his death (because death is the penalty for human sin). But when the time came to walk through the carcasses and seal the covenant relationship, Abram was asleep! Instead of waking Abram up, God **Himself** passed between the carcasses in the form of a *"smoking oven and flaming torch"* (Genesis 15:17). The sinless God **substituted** Himself for sinful Abram in the ceremony, declaring that He would uphold the covenant alone – even if it meant paying for Abram's sin and failure.
2. In Leviticus 16, God instructs the Israelites in the wilderness (after two sinful priests had **died** by approaching God's holy presence) how to live in His presence by cleansing their sins. This cleansing was made annually by offering two goats – **sinless substitutes** – for the sins of the people. Although it is literally *"impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sin"* (Hebrews 10:4), these offerings depicted God's willingness to accept a sinless substitute on behalf of His sinful people. They also pointed toward a perfect, sinless substitute yet to come.

3. In Isaiah 53, God introduces this perfect substitute through the prophet Isaiah. He is called the "Servant of the Lord." At first, Isaiah describes the Servant as a great man, saying "He will prosper, He will be high and lifted up and greatly exalted" (Isaiah 52:13). But then, Isaiah describes the Servant's destiny:

*"... He was pierced through for our transgressions,
He was crushed for our iniquities;
The chastening for our well-being fell upon Him,
And by His scourging we are healed."
Isaiah 53:5*

Clearly, this Servant will pay for the sins of God's people as a **substitute**. Moreover, Isaiah describes Him as a **sinless** substitute, saying, "He was oppressed and He was afflicted, Yet He did not open His mouth; Like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that is silent before its shearers..." (Isaiah 53:7). Just like the sinless animals God accepted in Leviticus, this Servant would be a sinless substitute who would receive the penalty for sins.

These passages reveal God's merciful willingness to accept a sinless substitute in order to continue in relationship with people, but the shadow of death still hangs over each one. The dead animal carcasses, sacrificed goats, and a slaughtered Servant all point us back to God's unaltered, just verdict against human sin. Could this shadow of death ever be lifted completely?

✦ Jesus is Fully Man and Fully God, A Substitute for Sinners

The answer to that question depends entirely on Jesus. Because He is fully God and fully human, Jesus is the only one able to stand between God and humanity as a mediator (1 Timothy 2:5). And as a mediator, Jesus did something rather scandalous to resolve the sin-and-death crisis facing every person: He substituted Himself for sinners, laying His life down for them on the cross, paying the penalty for their sins.

We should know several things about Jesus as a substitute for sinners:

1. **He planned it in eternity.** The Bible says in Philippians 2 that although Jesus "existed in the form of God," He "did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men" (Philippians 2:6-7). Those verses describe the incarnation by which Jesus took on human nature. But the passage goes on to describe the reason why Jesus took on that human nature: "Being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross" (Philippians 2:8). So, He incarnated to die as a substitute for sinners. Without a doubt, Jesus' substitutionary death was according to the "predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God" (Acts 2:23), and "from the foundation of the world" (Revelation 13:8).

2. He previewed it on earth. In addition to the Old Testament previews mentioned above, God revealed that substitution was on His mind through the ministry of Jesus Himself. Take the following words of Jesus, for example:

- a. *"for this is My blood of the covenant, which is being poured out for many for forgiveness of sins."* (Matthew 26:28)
- b. *"For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many."* (Mark 10:45)
- c. *"But I have a baptism to undergo, and how distressed I am until it is accomplished!"* (Luke 12:50)
- d. *"...just as the Father knows Me and I know the Father, and I lay down My life for the sheep."* (John 10:15)
- e. *"For this reason the Father loves Me, because I lay down My life so that I may take it again."* (John 10:17)

3. He purposed it because He hates sin and has mercy for sinners – just like God. Some people distort the substitutionary work of Jesus by depicting God as an angry Father who punishes His Son in order to *"take out His wrath"* against sin. As we have already seen, God's wrath is real, but we need to remember that Jesus Christ – being fully God – also has wrath against sin. He hates it so much that He did everything necessary to fully punish our sins. He endured death after living a perfectly holy life. Jesus also feels great mercy toward sinners, and He did everything necessary to redeem sinners from death. He removed their guilt by taking it on Himself. This is why Scripture says: *"He Himself bore our sins in His body on the cross..."* (1 Peter 2:24), and *"[God] made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him* (2 Corinthians 5:21). Substitution enables sinners to be truly forgiven of sin and be counted righteous by God!

To illustrate this incredible truth, imagine you are in a courtroom on trial for your sin. You know you are guilty – the evidence is overwhelming. Then, when the time comes for the Judge to deliver his verdict, something shocking happens: the Judge rises from his bench, crosses to the defendant's chair where you sit and orders you to stand. He removes his black robes and orders you to exchange them with the orange prisoner's jumpsuit you have on over your clothing. Now you are wearing his robes, and he is wearing your prison clothes. He sits down in the defendant's chair and receives both the guilty verdict and the punishment for your sin – as your substitute.

This is the wonder of the cross of Christ. Through His substitutionary death, Jesus solves humanity's sin-and-death crisis once and for all. As a human, He received the just punishment for sin. As God, He justified sinners so that they would not receive such a punishment. God is both *"just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus"* (Romans 3:26).

The wonder of the cross does not end there. Through Jesus' incarnation, life, death, and resurrection, He "purchased" people **for God** (Matthew 20:28; 1 Timothy 2:6; 1 Peter 1:18-19; Revelation 5:9; Acts 20:28; 1 Corinthians 6:20). This idea of "purchasing" or "redeeming" signifies that Jesus

not only takes away sins, but He secures Christians for eternity. Moreover, Jesus unites believers to **Himself** by both taking their sins upon Himself and giving them His perfect righteousness and eternal life (Romans 4:25; Romans 6:5; 1 Peter 2:24; Philippians 3:9; 1 Corinthians 1:30). These wonderful realities are applied **through the Holy Spirit** so that a Christian can say they have a vital relationship with the Triune God because Jesus substituted Himself for them on the cross.

+ Christians Can Rejoice ... and Boast! (Application)

The opportunity to be free from sin's guilt – with no expectation of punishment by God – is so amazing that some say it is too good to be true. They continue to find ways of self-sacrifice or self-improvement to make themselves feel worthy of God's forgiveness. But the Bible's teaching on God's self-substitution through Jesus Christ proves that forgiveness is a gracious gift. God alone did what we could never do to redeem us, and we need only to place our faith (i.e., trust) in His power to do it.

Best of all, the substitutionary death of Jesus brings restoration in the three ways we mentioned before:

- 1. Jesus' death enables us to be justified before God** (Romans 4:25). We can have a life-giving relationship with God because the corrupting guilt of sin has been removed by Jesus. Even our future sins have been "covered" by the blood of Jesus' death so that there is no expectation of future punishment by God (Romans 8:1). When Christians sin (and they do) they seek God's forgiveness on the same basis that they received it when they were first saved: the substitutionary death of Jesus for their sins.
- 2. Jesus' death enables us to be reconciled in our relationships with people and the creation.** In Jesus' "Sermon on the Mount," He teaches that it is possible for people to forgive and be reconciled in their relationships to one another – even among bitter enemies. How? The power for human forgiveness flows from the forgiveness of God (Matthew 5:21-24; Colossians 3:13). The corrupting influences of sin are driven back because Jesus won our forgiveness on the cross – as our substitute.
- 3. Jesus' death enables us to flourish as God's image-bearers.** When Scripture announces that Jesus was made to "be sin" – as our substitute – "*so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him*" (2 Corinthians 5:21), we should hear the curse of Genesis 3 broken forever. To be "*in Him*" is to have His goodness and grace actively working in your life. Jesus was the only human who ever perfectly fulfilled the call to bear God's image, and now Christians are given the right to claim His righteousness as our substitute.

+ Conclusion

Christians will spend eternity marveling at the wonderful wisdom, justice, and mercy of God

revealed in the cross. In fact, many Christians have already put their marveling to words. Consider a few examples:

ROMANS 11:33 *"Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and unfathomable His ways!"*

"O sweet exchange! O unsearchable operation! O benefits surpassing all expectations! That the wickedness of many should be hid in a single righteous One, and that the righteousness of One should justify many transgressors!" (*Epistle to Diognetus, 2nd Century*)

"See the destined day arise! See a willing sacrifice!
Jesus, to redeem our loss, hangs upon the shameful cross;
Jesus, who but you could bear wrath so great and justice fair?
Every pang and bitter throe, finishing your life of woe?"
(*Venantius Fortunatus, "See the Destined Day Arise," 6th Century*)

"Amazing love! How can it be That Thou, my God, should die for me?"
(Charles Wesley, 18th Century, "And Can It Be, That I Should Gain")

"Bearing my shame and scoffing rude,
In my place condemned He stood;
Sealed my pardon with His blood,
Hallelujah, what a Savior!" (Philip P. Bliss, 19th Century, "Hallelujah, What a Savior!")

Even in eternity, God's creatures rejoice at the incredible work of Jesus dying as a substitute for sinners:

REVELATION 5:12-13 *"Worthy is the Lamb that was slain to receive power and riches and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing...To Him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb, be blessing and honor and glory and dominion forever and ever"*

Boasting in the fashion of Julius Caesar or Emperor Augustus probably went out of style sometime before the invention of the metal plow. But self-congratulations are still commonplace. Nowadays, people promote their "personal brand" on social media, line their back windshields with life-accomplishments, or indulge in a "humblebrag."

Christians know that they have no good reason to brag about themselves. Their life without Christ was headed for death. But since trusting in Jesus, Christians have a real reason to boast. We boast in God's work on their behalf. We boast in the cross and invite others to join us.

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¹ The only exception to this appointment might be those who are physically living at the time of Jesus' return. According to 1 Corinthians 15:51-52, those who are alive at the time of Christ's return will be "changed" into a resurrected body "in the twinkling of an eye." So, although death is appointed for them, God may intervene first.

² Most thinking Christians recognize that God's emotions cannot be like human emotions—even though Scripture occasionally uses the language of human emotions to speak of God. The doctrine of "divine impassibility" describes God's emotional life while considering his absolute sovereignty and unchangeable nature. It is one of God's many "perfections" (BFM II) that He has no "changeable emotions" (Malachi 3:6). So, His anger or wrath or nothing like human anger or wrath because they are not tainted with sin.

³ Compare Matthew 5:22, where Jesus announces that "everyone who is angry with his brother shall be guilty before the court; and whoever says to his brother, 'You good-for-nothing,' shall be guilty before the supreme court; and whoever says, 'You fool,' shall be guilty enough to go into the fiery hell."