

Wheelersburg Baptist Church 2/29/04 Brad Brandt

Series: What *Really* Happened on the Cross?

Message: "Substitution: He Traded Places" 2 Corinthians 5:21 **

Main Idea: According to 2 Corinthians 5:21, a substitution took place at the cross two amazing exchanges.

I. At the cross, God gave our sin to Jesus.

A. What did *not* happen at the cross?

1. Some think Jesus died as a failure.
2. Some think Jesus died as a martyr.
3. Some think Jesus died as an example.

B. What did happen at the cross?

1. Jesus died as a substitute.
2. God treated Jesus as though He personally had committed every sin that would ever be committed by every person who would ever believe.

II. At the cross, God gave Jesus' righteousness to us.

A. Fact #1: Jesus lived a perfect life.

1. He did it because we couldn't.
2. He did it because we needed righteousness.

B. Fact #2: Jesus did it for us.

1. We are not righteous.
2. If we are in Christ, God treats us as though we are.

A Vital Question: Who benefits from the substitution?

1. Admit you don't deserve it.
2. Believe that Jesus did for you what you can't do for yourself.
3. Confess Jesus Christ to be your Savior and Lord.

The question of the hour is: Did Mel get it right?

This past Wednesday crowds began to pack out theaters across this nation to see the movie he produced, *The Passion of the Christ*. Thousands, even millions will eventually see this portrayal of the last twelve hours of Jesus' earthly life.

Did Mel get it right?

I saw the movie the night before it opened to the general public. Some critics ridicule the film as anti-Semitic, others as too graphic. There's no question it is intense. I found myself almost heaving with emotion at the end.

I left the theater with two thoughts in mind. One, for the most part Mel was right on—he followed the biblical

account and presented the story as it happened. I saw in living color the agony my Savior endured. My second thought came in the words of an old hymn—*the half has not been told*. That is, the movie barely scratched the surface in portraying the worst kind of suffering—the *spiritual* suffering—experienced by the Lord Jesus. And I'm not sure a movie could do that.

But God's Word can, and does.

There are four biographical accounts of Jesus' life—written by Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. These four "gospels" answer the question *what?* They show us vividly *what happened* to Jesus on the cross.

But if you want to know what *really* happened, you must move from the gospels to the epistles. If the gospels tell us *what happened*, the New Testament epistles tell us *why*.

Mel's movie shows what happened, and that's good for we need to know what happened. But my concern is that many left the theater without knowing *why*.

Again, we know the story well. Jesus lived, died, and lived again. But why? Most people know the facts, but what is the significance of it all? Why did it happen?

In the weeks ahead leading up to Resurrection Sunday, we're going to answer that question. We're going to examine five key words in five key passages in the epistles. Here's what really happened on the cross:

"Substitution: He Traded Places"

2 Corinthians 5:21

"Redemption: He Paid a Ransom"

Galatians 3:13

"Justification: He Made Sinners Right with God"

Romans 3:21-26

"Propitiation: He Endured the Wrath of God"

1 John 2:2; 4:10

"Reconciliation: He Removed the Hostility of Sin"

Romans 5:9-11

Our first word is *substitution*. He traded places. Our first text is 2 Corinthians 5:21. In the KJV, the verse contains 25 words; in the NIV, 23 words; in the Greek text there are but 15 words. It has been said that these 15 words are the most profound words in all the Bible. One Bible scholar commented, "The fifteen Greek words, carefully balanced, almost chiasmic, defy final exegetical explanation, dealing as they do with the heart of the atonement."

My goal this morning is not to be profound, but clear. We want to answer the vital question, "What is the significance of the cross of Jesus?" If you are a Christian, you need to know the answer to that question. If you are not a Christian, you too need to know. Why really happened on the cross? According to 2 Corinthians 5:21, a substitution took place at the cross involving two amazing exchanges.

I. At the cross, God gave our sin to Jesus.

"God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God." Beloved, before us is holy ground. This is sacred truth that ought to grip us in the very core of our being.

To appreciate this verse, we must understand its background. The human author is Paul. He is writing to Christians, many of whom he had personally led to Christ. The occasion for this letter was serious. Some critics had attacked Paul's right to be a leader and questioned his motive for ministry. 2 Corinthians is his letter of response to the critics and to those who believed them.

In chapters 2-6, Paul gives us perhaps the most helpful definition of what ministry is to be found anywhere in the Bible. Our text appears in this section.

In chapter 5, Paul explains that God has given to us the ministry of reconciliation. By the way, the New Testament doesn't speak of God being reconciled to men, but of men being reconciled to God. God didn't change. It's not that God is estranged from people, but that people are estranged from God. And what is it that makes reconciliation possible between people and God?

Verse 21 tells us. It's something that God did. Let that sink in. The basis for all reconciliation is what *God did*. In a letter aimed at taking down walls between people, we discover that the only subject able to tear down the walls is this--what *God did* for us.

He did two things according to our text, and here's the first exchange. At the cross God gave our sin to Jesus. "He made him who knew no sin to be sin for us."

My friends, I'm convinced that what happened at Calvary is perhaps the most misunderstood event in history. It's true. Churches are full of people this morning who believe that Jesus lived, and died, and came back to life, but misunderstand *why*. Scores of people are leaving movie theaters moved to tears because of the physical suffering they saw Jesus undergo, but their tears fall short of the God-given intent of the cross. So two questions are in order.

A. What did **not** happen at the cross? Our text says, "God made him who had no sin to be sin for us." That statement drives a stake through the heart of three common misconceptions about the cross.

1. *Some think Jesus died as a failure.* It was a case of good intentions gone sour. Jesus was a great man, and He did a lot of good, but He miscalculated the crowd.

Is that true? Did Jesus die as a failure? Absolutely not. The very words He proclaimed just before He died dispel such a myth. "It is finished (John 19:30)," was His announcement. Not, "I am finished," but "It is finished." He had done exactly what He had come to do! He did not die as a failure.

2. *Some think Jesus died as a martyr.* Such people would not classify Jesus as a failure, but still are confused by the cross. To them, Jesus' death was a tragic shame, a senseless waste of a good life. It should not have happened. Yes, Jesus was a great man, one who had so much to offer, but in the end He died as a martyr for His cause.

Did Jesus die as a victim, and was his death a senseless waste? No way. Indeed, throughout His public ministry Jesus repeatedly told His disciples He had come *to die*. His death was no accident. It was His intent to die. Why? We'll see shortly.

3. *Some think Jesus died as an example.* Many church-goers think this. There was a time in my life when I thought this. To such individuals, being a Christian is a matter of following the golden rule and doing what Jesus would do. To them, what happened on the cross was merely Jesus' greatest exemplary act, a beautiful demonstration of selfless love.

In my estimation here's the wrong conclusion that many will make having seen *The Passion of the Christ*. They'll conclude that the purpose of Jesus' death is to inspire us. In a world full of evil, we need role models. That's what Jesus is for us. At the cross He reminded us of what a good man does no matter how badly others treat him. He loves. And becoming a Christian means you respond to His example. You decide that from this point on you're going to live like Jesus lived.

Now is it true that Jesus is our example? Yes, but sinners need more than an example. WWJD is a fine motto, but only if you have the ability to follow His example. And that's our problem. We don't. We are sinners who constantly fall short of God's standard. To say that Jesus died merely as an example to show "good people" how to be live fails to recognize that there are *no good people* in God's sight, only sinners. It also misses the very heart of the cross.

B. What did happen at the cross? Take note. The cross was no mistake, no mere sentimental example. The cross was the fulfillment of the eternal plan of God. Simply put, on the cross an exchange took place. God gave our sin to Jesus. How? Let me state that in two ways, first in basic terms, then later in a more developed statement.

1. *Jesus died as a substitute*. "God made him who had no sin to be sin for us." Human words cannot express a more staggering truth than this. Let's examine each word ever so carefully.

"*He made him.*" Verse 20 indicates that "He" refers to God. God is the subject (I believe a reference to God the Father). Don't miss that. The cross was no tragic quirk of fate, but the purpose of God Himself. God, Who is the Maker, the owner, and the King of the universe, did this.

We won't appreciate the wonder of the verb to follow if we don't grasp the greatness of the subject. *God made him who knew no sin to be sin for us*. God did it.

This is mind-stretching and pride-crushing. In point of fact, it's beyond comprehension. How great is God? The Bible says He is so great that He calls the stars by name and keeps count of them (Ps 147:4; Isa 40:26). Astronomers tell us that the number of stars is 1-follow by 22 zeros. If we divided up the stars among the world's population of five billion people, each person would receive two trillion stars! And God Himself says He hold the universe in the palm of His hand. It's that great God who is the subject of our text.

"God *made* him." The verb is active. No one forced God's hand and coerced Him to do what He did. He acted according to His own purpose and good pleasure.

"God made *him who had no sin.*" Who is that? Who is this one who had no sin? Frankly, the field is pretty narrow, isn't it? There's only one possibility. In the Greek text, the word order is emphatic, "The one not knowing sin for us sin He made."

That's an interesting way to refer to Jesus, isn't it? Paul calls Him "the one who knew no sin." For 33 years, Jesus never committed one sin. Because of His supernatural conception, He was not conceived in sin, and because of His spotless life, He could be called "the One who knew no sin."

Think of that. Thirty-three years and not one sinful thought, not one careless word, not one selfish refusal to help a person in need. He was the second Adam, the One who came to undo what the first Adam did.

Isaiah 53:9 tells us there was no "deceit in his mouth." In John 8:46 Jesus asked, "Can any of you prove me guilty of sin?" Hebrews 4:15 puts it plainly, "For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are--yet was without sin." (1 Pet. 2:22)

A sinful Savior would be of no help to us. Sure, he could show us the way to God, but He couldn't take us there. This is what sets Jesus apart from all other religious leaders. Mohammed was not without sin, nor was Buddha, nor Joseph Smith. But Jesus was. If you doubt me on this point, I challenge you to investigate the original sources, the four biographical accounts of Jesus' life (again, that's the four gospels), and see the facts for yourself about the One who had no sin.

The text continues: "He made him who knew no sin *to be sin for us.*" Actually, the words "to be" are not present. In the Greek text, it literally reads, "He made the One who did not know sin *sin* for us." Hold on. What does it mean to say that God made Jesus *sin for us*?

Some of the "Word-Faith" teachers say that on the cross Jesus actually became sin, or that He sinned and then had to go to hell to expiate His sins. One well-known preacher states, "The righteousness of God was made to be sin. He accepted the sin nature of Satan in His own spirit. And at the moment that He did so, He cried, 'My God, My God, why hast thou forsaken Me?'"

Is that what happened? Did God make Jesus sin on the cross? No, that's blasphemy. Jesus did not sin on the cross. While on the cross, Jesus was as spotless as ever. He wasn't guilty of anything. In what sense then did God make Jesus to be sin? I can say it no better than the following, carefully worded statement. On the cross...

2. God treated Jesus as though He personally had committed every sin that would ever be committed by every person who would ever believe.

That's called *imputation*. While Jesus hung on the cross, God the Father imputed our sins to Jesus. Our sin was placed on Him. Though He was innocent, Jesus took our sin upon Himself. That's what substitution means. Though He had committed none of the sins, He chose to take them upon Himself. And then God exploded the fury of His wrath against Jesus Who while on the cross exhausted the wrath that we deserved.

Let that sink in as best you can. When the Father saw His Son on the cross, He saw us. He saw our vile sin which Jesus willingly took upon Himself. The Father unleashed the just fury a Holy God must exhibit towards sin. Jesus took our place. He became our substitute. He experienced what we should have experienced. He endured what we had coming to us which is why He cried, "My God, my God, why has Thou forsaken Me?"

May I say to you, "That isn't fair!"? It shouldn't have happened. It is not fair that the perfect Son of God would become a substitute for vile sinners like us, is it? He deserves praise, not the fire of His Father's wrath. It's unthinkable. Yet it's true.

In the words of P. P. Bliss, "My sin--oh the bliss of this glorious thought--my sin, not in part, but the whole is nailed to His cross, and I bear it no more. Praise the Lord, praise the Lord, oh my soul!" No, it is not *fair* that Jesus took my place. It's grace.

It's unthinkable that the perfect Son of God should die in our place. But what is even more unthinkable is that someone would actually reject the One who did this, and say, "Thanks, but no thanks, Jesus. I'm a good person. I don't need You." That, my friend, is *unthinkable*. But is that what you've done with Jesus? In truth, many have. Churches are full of people right now who know the facts, but spurn the significance of the facts. They know what Jesus did, but they refuse to admit why, and thus, have insulted the greatest display of love ever.

You ask, "What is the right response to His love?" It's not merely imitation. It's acceptance. "To all who *received Him*, to those who believed in His name, He gave the right to become the children of God (John 1:12)." To become a Christian you must accept Jesus Christ as your Savior. He must be your Savior first, then your example.

But there's more. The substitution that occurred at the cross included a second amazing exchange. First, God gave our sin to Jesus. Second...

II. At the cross, God gave Jesus' righteousness to us.

"He made Him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that we might be made the righteousness of God in Him." Imputation is a marvelous doctrine. Imputation is a word borrowed from banking which simply means, "to put to one's account." When you go to the bank, the clerk takes your money and puts that amount into your account. You can no longer see the money, but it's there and it is yours.

When Jesus died on the cross, all of our sins were imputed to Him—they were put to His account. God treated Jesus as though He had actually committed our sins. And since Jesus paid the penalty for our sins, God no longer holds them against us if we have trusted in Jesus.

That's imputation. And as great as that is, that's only half the story. In addition to God giving our sins to Jesus, something else happened at the cross, another exchange. God gave Jesus' righteousness to us. "God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God."

Let's probe this second exchange. It involves two facts.

A. Fact #1: Jesus lived a perfect life. Did you ever wonder why the Son of God didn't just come to earth as a grown man and die right away? He could have come Good Friday morning, died that afternoon, conquered the grave on Sunday morning, and returned to heaven that evening. But he didn't. Why did He live for 33 years? What was Jesus' purpose for *living*, specifically for living a perfect life? He did so for two reasons.

1. *He did it because we couldn't.* The Bible says, "There is none righteous, no not one (Rom. 3:10)." "For all have sinned and come short of the glory of God (Rom. 3:23)." And the penalty for sin is severe. "For the wages of sin is death (Rom 6:23)"—that's spiritual death, separation from God.

This is why Jesus lived a perfect life. He did it because we couldn't. Furthermore...

2. *He did it because we needed righteousness.* You see, to enter the presence of God two things must be true. One is you must have no sin—a holy God cannot tolerate sin in His presence. But the other is that you must possess righteousness. Not self-righteousness, but God's righteousness. You must attain the perfect standard of God's holy, moral law.

Answer this. Does God demand perfection? In a 1994 survey of attendees at the Christian Booksellers Convention, that question was asked. Time and time again, the answers given were, "Expect us to be perfect? Certainly not. That's not possible. He just expects us to do our best."

That's popular thinking, but is that true? My friend, if that's true then Jesus died in vain. If God simply overlooks sin and chooses to accept sinners the way they are, then why did He send Jesus? Jesus' death makes no sense.

But God doesn't overlook sin, *any* sin. James 2:10 states, "For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking it all." The reason Jesus lived a perfect life was because we couldn't. The reason Jesus lived a perfectly righteous life was because we need righteousness. That's why He came, to be our *substitute*. Simply put...

B. Fact #2: Jesus did it for us. "He made him who knew no sin to be sin for us, so that we might become the righteousness of God *in Him*." Here's why He did it. *For us*. To put it as simply as I can, He did for us what we couldn't do for ourselves. And the reason He did is twofold.

1. *We are not righteous.* I am not righteous. You are not righteous. Oh, you may do a lot of good things in the eyes of men, but a holy God is not impressed. Even if you did a million good things, you still lack the righteous perfection a holy God requires for admittance into His presence. Remember it was for one sin that He cast Adam and Eve from the garden.

I think of it this way. Suppose we lined up the world's population on the bank of the Ohio River this morning. Suppose that Kentucky represents heaven and that we're going to see who can jump to heaven (Kentucky). The first person ran as hard as he could and hit the water 17 feet from the shore. Others plopped in at less than 10 feet. The world record holder made it nearly 30 feet out into the water—and the crowd roared its approval recognizing what a good jumper that fellow is.

But wait. The goal was Kentucky. Who made it? No one did. When compared to each other, some do better than others. But all fall short.

We may convince ourselves that we are "good people," but that's because we're looking at each other. When we look at God, we see the standard that matters. And according to that standard, we are *not righteous*. But here's where substitution comes in again.

2. *If we are in Christ, God treats us as though we are.* "God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that *in him* we might become the righteousness of God." This is a mystery human minds cannot fathom. On the cross, God treated Jesus as if He'd lived your life so that He could treat you as if you had lived His life.

Has that truth ever gripped you? When on the cross, the Father treated Jesus as if He had personally committed every sin you and I will ever commit, and poured out the wrath we deserved on Him. What's more, because of the cross, the Father now treats us as though we are just as perfect and righteous and sinless as His own Son!

Again, that's *imputation*. Our sins were given to Jesus; His righteousness was given to us. If any doctrine is perspective-changing, this one is! The old slave preacher put it this way:

"We ain't what we ought to be,
and we ain't what we want to be,
and we ain't what we're going to be
but, thank God, we ain't what we was."

All because of two amazing exchanges. That's what *really* happened on the cross, my friend. A substitution occurred. The Son of God traded places with His people. "God made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, so that we might be made the righteousness of God in Him."

Perhaps you're wondering, "How can I be sure it's true? How can I know that what Jesus did on the cross is sufficient to save me?" The answer is what Jesus did three days later. The empty tomb is God's exclamation point at the end of the sentence that shouts to us, "It's true!"

My friend, God is satisfied with what His Son did on the cross. The question is, *are you?*

Some people have the notion that Jesus' substitutionary death means all people are now forgiven and righteous before God. That's called universalism, the belief that everybody will go to heaven because of what Jesus did. Not so, according to the Bible.

[A Vital Question: Who benefits from the substitution?](#)

The Bible teaches that God's salvation demands a human response. The people who will benefit from Jesus' substitutionary atonement are the people who respond in a very specific way, as spelled out in the Scriptures, enabled by God's grace. If you want to experience the benefit of Christ's substitution, you can today. Here's what you must do. The response is as simple as ABC...

1. *Admit you don't deserve it.* You don't, nor do I. In fact, what we deserve is the horror of the punishment Jesus endured on the cross. If you want to experience this amazing exchange, you must cry out to God and admit the truth that you don't deserve it. You must acknowledge that in God's eyes you are not a "good person," but a wretch (to use the word John Newton used to describe himself in *Amazing Grace*), a *sinner*. Until you recognize your sin you forfeit the salvation that could be yours, for Christ died, not for good people, but *for sinners*.

That's A. To experience the benefit of substitution, you must admit you don't deserve it. By the way, if you are a Christian it's still true. We don't deserve it. Now B...

2. *Believe that Jesus did for you what you can't do for yourself.* Do you know what keeps people from Christ? In a word, it's pride.

Dr. Gerstner describes the plight of the proud man in this way: "Christ has done everything necessary for salvation. Nothing now stands between the sinner and God but the sinner's 'good works.' Nothing can keep him from Christ but his delusion that he does not need Him--that he has good works of his own that can satisfy God. If men will only be convinced that they have no righteousness that is not as filthy rags; if men will see that there is none that doeth good, no, not one; if men will see that all are shut up under sin--then there will be nothing to prevent their everlasting salvation. All they need is need. All they must have is nothing. All that is required is acknowledged guilt. But, alas, sinners cannot part with their 'virtues.' They have none that are not imaginary, but they are real to them. So grace becomes unreal. The real grace of God they spurn in order to hold on to the illusory virtues of their own. Their eyes fixed on a mirage, they will not drink real water. They die of thirst in the midst of an ocean of Grace."

How about you, my friend? What are you clinging to today? Is it the mirage of your own righteousness or the precious cross of Jesus? Will you come to Christ today and trust in Him alone? The moment you do God will cleanse you from sin and clothe you with His righteousness.

There's no other way, dear friend. To experience the benefits of Christ's substitution, you must first admit you don't deserve it. Then you must believe that Jesus did for you what you can't do for yourself. We are saved by faith, not works.

A story from the life of John Paton explains what I mean by "faith." Paton, the pioneer missionary to the New Hebrides Islands, was once translating the NT into the language of the islanders. He could find no word, however, to translate 'faith.' One day, after long hours of work, he slumped in his chair exhausted. 'I'm so tired,' said Paton, 'I feel like resting all my weight on this chair.' Instantly, he sat straight up and yelled, 'Praise God, I've got my word.' That is it. Faith means putting all your weight upon God. It is complete trust and commitment. That's what you must do. Admit, believe, and...

3. *Confess Jesus Christ to be your Savior and Lord.* Verbal, public confession. As explained in Romans 10:9-10, "That if you confess with your mouth, 'Jesus is Lord,' and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved."

What really happened at the cross? Let there be no misunderstanding. A substitution took place. Indeed, *He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, so that we might be made the righteousness of God in him.*

Praise Him, praise Him, praise Him.