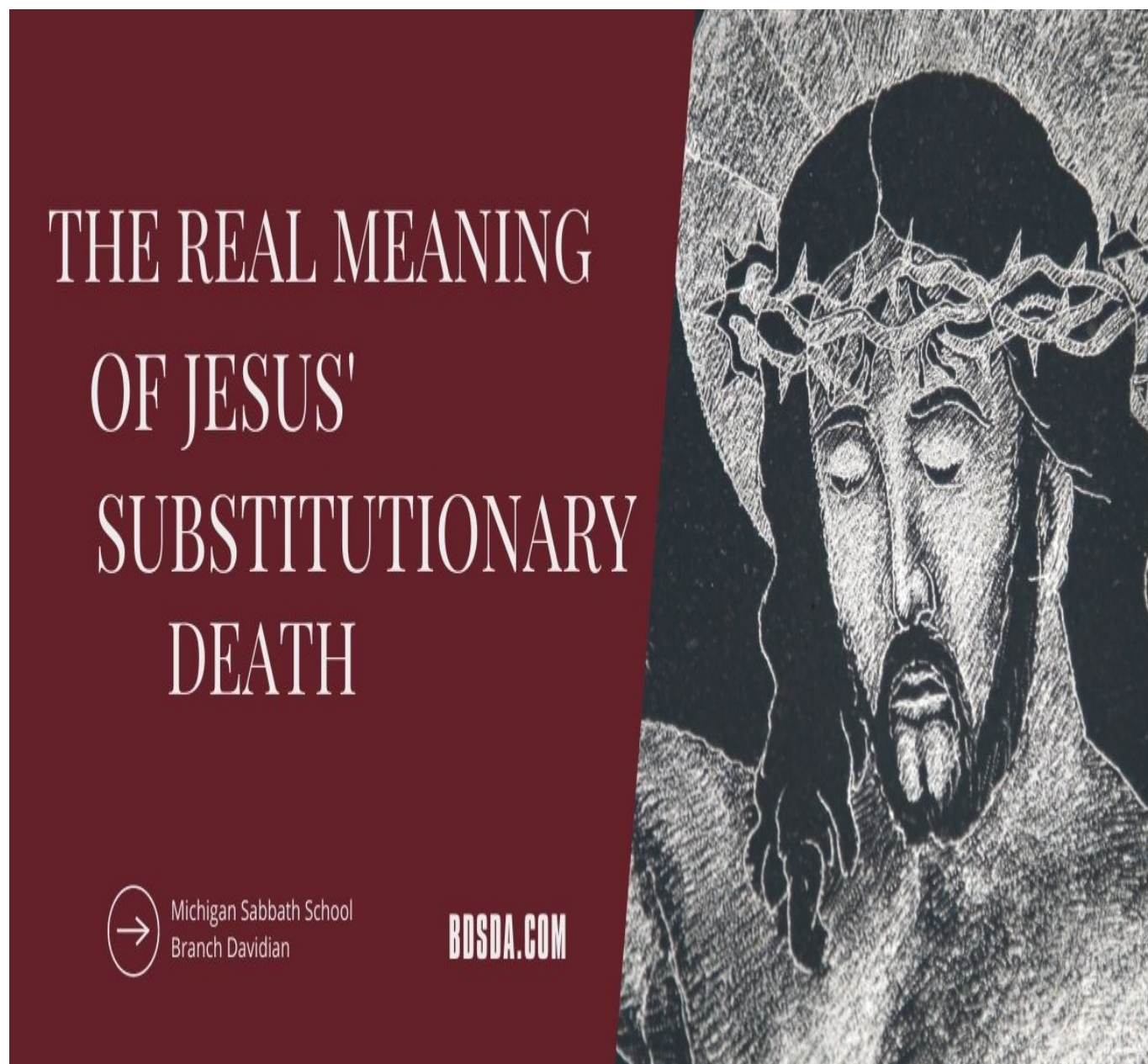


The Real Meaning of Jesus' Substitutionary Death

Description



A study related to the SDA
Sabbath School Lesson for 2021, 3rd Quarter
Rest In Christ
Week 5
by Mary Zebrowski
Edited by Trent Wilde

The lesson for week 5 is entitled “Come to Me...” and discusses the rest we can receive when we come to Jesus. Tuesday’s lesson is entitled, “I am Gentle and Lowly In Heart,” and discusses the virtues of Jesus’ meekness and humility, and Jesus’ portrayal as the “second Moses” in the gospels. But the lesson also points out that although Jesus has many similarities to Moses, He is different from Moses too. Tuesday’s lesson states,

“...we need a Savior who can stand in our stead, not just as an Intercessor [like Moses] but as our Substitute. Intercession is important, but it is only God hanging on the cross as our Sin Bearer, as the One who paid in Himself the penalty for our sin, who can save us from the legal consequences that our sins would, justly, bring on us. This is why, however great the example Jesus was for us, it would all be for nothing without the Cross and the Resurrection.” Sabbath School Quarterly Lesson, Tuesday, July 27, 2021

Here, the lesson points out that Jesus isn’t just an intercessor between God and humanity like Moses was; rather, he is also our substitute. But what exactly does it mean for Jesus to be our substitute? Many think that by dying on the cross and taking the punishment we deserve, Jesus thereby exonerated us from any responsibility we have for our sins – past, present, and future. In other words, since Jesus took the punishment for us, so long as we accept his death as a substitute for our own, any past sin, present sin, or future sin, will not bring on us the penalty of death. While this is how people usually understand Jesus’ substitutionary death, we will see that there is good scriptural reason to call it into question.

Today we are going to talk about the truth of the sacrifice of Jesus and it will become apparent that many Christians, SDAs included, actually do not understand the sacrifice of Jesus very well at all. We didn’t, that’s for sure! One reason for this is that the meaning of sentences can often be understood in more than one way, especially when they are wrested from their surrounding context, and Satan has done his best to promote the wrong understanding.

SDA pioneer J.H. Waggoner said,

“...there is no real difference between the utter rejection of a text and the denial of its evident meaning.” J.H. Waggoner, *The Spirit of God*, p. 20.4

We are going to talk about the nuances of Jesus’ sacrifice and the reasons He came to earth as a human. A nuance, of course, is a subtle difference in meaning. But these subtleties are very crucial in many cases, and especially when it comes to understanding the sacrifice of Christ. We can use context and truth to determine the proper nuance and the evident meaning of various scriptures.

For example, let's talk about sin-bearing. When Jesus came to earth, He did "bear our sin," but not in the way most people think. When the scriptures say that Jesus bore our sins, the nuance, or meaning, in the context is that he 'bore with' or 'endured' our sins, not that he took responsibility for them or had them infused into him as though our sins were non-physical objects that could inhabit bodies. One of the key texts is 1 Peter 2:18-25. It describes Jesus bearing our sins using, as a parallel, slaves bearing or enduring the abuses of an evil slave master. This is the way Jesus bore our sins. Since we have gone over this text in depth in another video, we'll move on, but see our video, "Jesus Came to 'Bear With' Our Sins, Not to Take Responsibility for Them!" Jesus came to suffer the effects of our sin because this was the only way He could be among us. Let's face it, in order for Jesus to come and live among us to personally show us how to live the law of God, and to personally show us the character of the Father, He necessarily had to subject himself to our sins. Jesus was a missionary for His Father. It is just a fact that in order to be with us, to give us an example of how to live, He had to subject himself to our sin, or "bear" our sins.

We can know this, first of all, from the nature of the stated purposes of Jesus' coming, which do not include taking responsibility for our sins or taking the punishment for us while we continue sinning. (see Mark 1:38; Luke 4:43; Isaiah 61:1-3; Hebrews 2:17-18; 1 SAT 241.1; AH 132.2, and many, many more). You will not find in Ellen White's writings, or in the bible, a positive statement claiming that Jesus came to take the responsibility for our sins. Any idea of this sort is merely an inference or assumption made without sufficient evidence.

People often misunderstand the reason Jesus came to earth as a human. People assume, again, without a positive statement in scripture, that Jesus needed to be a human so that His death on the cross would satisfy some sort of legal requirement of God that demanded a perfect, spotless human sacrifice to "pay" for all the sins committed by the rest of humanity – as if two wrongs make a right – as if one more murder, one more sin, if committed against a sinless human, would appease God or appease justice and make things all better.

Of course, when stated this way, we can easily see the error of this idea. But Satan uses subtlety and incorrect nuance in the interpretation of scripture to make this idea seem scriptural and wonderful, when in fact it is unscriptural and reprehensible.

The truth is that Jesus, amazingly, came in the likeness of sinful human flesh (Romans 8:3) so that he could really know what it is like to be "us" in every way. He did this so He could be our merciful and faithful High Priest! He *wanted* to be made human so he could best know how to help us overcome temptation to sin. What kind of love is that? As positive evidence for this, let's look at Hebrews 2:17-18, which reads,

17 Therefore, in all things He had to be made like *His* brethren, that He might be a merciful and faithful High Priest in things *pertaining* to God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people.

18 For in that He Himself has suffered, being tempted, He is able to aid those who are tempted.

So again, as we can see from the context here, the reason Jesus came in fallen human flesh was so he could know what it was like to have sin-affected flesh with all its cravings and desires and thus to experience temptation like we do, so He could better understand how to help us overcome sin. “To make propitiation for our sins,” or to “make reconciliation for the sins of the people,” is done by helping us overcome sin when we are tempted. It is not that we are exonerated from guilt while still sinning. This verse does not say that, and nowhere in the bible does it say anything like that. To the contrary, there are many, many positive statements that we will not be exonerated from the guilt of any sin that is not overcome (see Romans 2:6-8; 2 Corinthians 5:10; Colossians 3:25; James 2, etc.). Furthermore, to just be exonerated while still sinning wouldn’t accomplish anything in reality if you think about it. The gospel is not about changing how God sees you and your sin, it is about changing you so you do not sin anymore! (See “The Lost Gospel of Christ,” by Trent Wilde).

Another nuance concerning Jesus’ humanity that is not often understood, is that by coming in the likeness of sinful human flesh (Romans 8:3), He could show us that it is possible to have sinful human flesh and still not give in to sin. This is actually how His sacrifice saves us. We can look to Him as an example, and have faith that if He can do it, we can surely do it too. Jesus had the help of the Holy Spirit, and we are given the same Spirit to help us in the exact same way. Satan wants us to think Jesus had some different deal while in human flesh, but that is a lie – which is clearly opposed to scripture and Ellen White’s writings (See her book, Confrontation).

Jesus also came as a human in order to directly show us an example, the ultimate example, of the end result of sin. Plain and simple, it is death (Romans 6:23). Jesus did not need to die – he said his work was finished before he even went to the cross (John 17:4). He was trying to bring in the kingdom of Heaven to earth at that time. But unfortunately, although He had finished His work, humanity wasn’t finished hating Him – hating righteousness. (See our video, “Did Jesus Have To Die?“).

Our sin caused an innocent, loving man – a man that was kindly and humbly trying to teach us to obey the commandments, to show us that we ****can**** keep the commandments, to show the character of His Father, to show that the commandments are not burdensome, not even for humans in sinful flesh – to be tortured and killed. We all know he was killed because of the jealousy of the religious leadership, and the fears of the Roman government. It was indeed a time when church and state combined, in this case, to kill Jesus.

Finally, let's discuss the nuance of Jesus being our substitute. Again, most think that what it means for Jesus to be our substitute goes something like this: In order to balance the cosmic scales of justice, someone just had to die since the crime of sin had been committed. But for some reason, in this justice system, the punishment for crime does not have to be executed on the perpetrator. Jesus received the divine death penalty so that the criminals could go free just so long as they believe that his death was to take the place of their own. And his death didn't just satisfy the penalty required by the law for the crimes for which they were initially convicted; it satisfied the penalty for even their future crimes so that even if they commit a crime again, they will not incur the death penalty so long as they continue to acknowledge Jesus' death as a substitute for their own. – This is how Jesus' substitutionary death is usually understood. But this is not the teaching of scripture. According to scripture, we are not judged according to whether we believe that Jesus' death satisfies our justly-deserved death penalty. No, we are judged according to our works (See Psalm 62:12; Romans 2:6; 2 Corinthians 5:10; 1 Peter 1:17; Colossians 3:25; James 2; COL 316, etc.). Jesus is our substitute, but in order for his death to be a substitute for our death, we actually have to make his death serve the purpose that our own death would serve in relation to our sins. In other words, if we die, we stop sinning. This is one solution to the sin problem – for all sinners to die. But obviously, that isn't a solution for the sinner. The other solution, the one provided by our crucified Savior, is for us to learn the lessons of the cross; that is, that it is never worth it to sin since sin brings about death, even the death of the innocent. Also, that truth and love are able to keep even a human with fallen human nature from giving into temptation, even under the severest of circumstances, like crucifixion. By learning these lessons of the cross, the sinner can become convicted to repent and depend on God moment by moment, thus overcoming every temptation. They stop sinning because of the cross and thus the death of Jesus brings the end of their sins just like their own death would have if they themselves had died. Jesus' death thus stands in relation to their sins exactly where their own death would have stood. His death is thus a substitute for their own. This is what it really means for Jesus' death to be substitutionary. His death substitutes our death as the means of ending our sins and from henceforth, his ways of righteousness substitute our ways of sinfulness in our actual day-to-day life. The false view of substitution makes Jesus stand as our substitute for God's eyes while we are left still suffering in our own sins. The true view of substitution reveals Jesus' death to us as the means of ending sin in our lives, and it reveals his sinless way of life as the only way for us to live once we are crucified with Christ. Thus, His substitution dramatically transforms our lives in the here and now. It is *for* us to change *us* rather than being *for* God to cloud his vision of our sins. God sees things as they really are and if we become new creatures in Christ, that is what He sees. This is why we can be judged by our works and yet still be saved by faith in Christ rather than by our own works. Our works are sinful, but when we by faith abandon sin and embody Jesus' sinless ways, we cease our own works and instead work the works of Christ. There is no other way to be just in the eyes of God.

Ellen White said,

“Well, now, does not God love us? He will take every soul of you to heaven that He can; but He will not take a sinner there. If you choose to keep on in sin day after day, and not keep His commandments—why, Satan originated sin in heaven. And there was war in heaven; Christ and His angels fought, and Satan and his sympathizers in the heavenly courts fought, and Satan was emptied out of heaven.” Ms229-1902.20

Basically, she is saying that if God did not allow Satan and his sympathizers to stay in heaven because of their sin, He is not going to allow us to be there either if we harbor sin in our hearts. Jesus' death does nothing for us if we don't learn the lessons of His life.

This brings us back to something we quoted earlier from the Sabbath School lesson. It says,

”...however great the example Jesus was for us, it would all be for nothing without the Cross and the Resurrection.”

Framing things in this way reflects a misunderstanding of the Cross. In reality, the cross is part of Jesus' example that we are to follow. In fact, it is the ultimate example of putting others ahead of ourselves and resisting every temptation even in the worst of circumstances.

The cross is not about Jesus taking responsibility for our sins. Its function is not to satisfy God as though God just needed someone to die. Its function is to persuade us of the horrible nature of sin and of the tremendous love of God. It is in learning these lessons that we are saved from sin.

Ellen White gives us more perspective on this. She said,

“The Spirit was to be given as a regenerating agent, and without this the sacrifice of Christ would have been of no avail. ... It is the Spirit that makes effectual what has been wrought out by the world's Redeemer. It is by the Spirit that the heart is made pure. Through the Spirit the believer becomes a partaker of the divine nature. Christ has given His Spirit as a divine power to overcome all hereditary and cultivated tendencies to evil, and to impress His own character upon His church.” DA 671.2

We have the Spirit to help us understand the sacrifice of Christ. Notice that Jesus' sacrifice in and of itself is of no benefit to us if we don't allow it to purify our hearts through the help of the Spirit. Sin is sin, both before the cross, and after the cross, from eternity past to eternity future, no matter who you are, or what you believe, or what denomination you are a part of, sin is sin.

But take heart! Ellen White said,

“The sinner may put his will on the side of God's will, and may become a laborer together with God. All who truly accept of Christ will go forth to gather with him, and their sins will be left in the broad road, abandoned for the sake of Christ, and through his power. The path to heaven is a path of holiness; and he who walks in it, walks in the light as Christ is in the light. In following Christ, the light of the world, he will not fail nor be discouraged; for divine strength will be given that he may walk circumspectly, firmly, making advancement in the divine life.” RH February 10, 1891, par. 5

If this has touched your heart today, we invite you to visit our youtube channel, “Branch Davidian SDA” to learn more about how to overcome temptation like Jesus did.