

BIBLICAL INSIGHTS #56:

DID CHRIST BECOME A SINNER WHEN HE DIED FOR OUR SINS?

By John Temples

We all know that Jesus took our sins upon Himself on the cross; but exactly how did He take on those sins? Did He *literally, actually* take our sins into Himself, becoming guilty of sin in the process? Many believe so, and many Bible commentators affirm such. Here are some examples of such views:

- In his commentary on the Epistle to the Galatians, Martin Luther wrote: “All the prophets of old said that *Christ should be the greatest transgressor, murderer, adulterer, thief, blasphemer that ever was or ever could be on earth*. When he took the sins of the whole world upon himself, *Christ was no longer an innocent person. He was a sinner* burdened with the sins of a Paul who was a blasphemer; burdened with the sins of a Peter who denied Christ; burdened with the sins of a David who committed adultery and murder, and gave the heathen occasion to laugh at the Lord. In short, Christ was charged with the sins of all men, that he should pay for them with his own blood. The curse struck him. The Law found him among sinners. He was not only in the company of sinners. He had gone so far as to invest himself with the flesh and blood of sinners. So the Law judged and hanged him for a sinner.”
(<https://www.1517.org/articles/was-the-son-of-god-a-sinner>)
- TV preacher Benny Hinn said, “He [Jesus] who is righteous by choice said, ‘*The only way I can stop sin is by me becoming it*. I can’t just stop it by letting it touch me; I and it must become one.’ Hear this! *He who is the nature of God became the nature of Satan when he became sin*.” (Benny Hinn, Trinity Broadcasting Network, Dec 1, 1990; quoted on www.thecripplegate.com)
- “*The Most Sinful Person who ever lived was Jesus on the cross!* There He endured the hell my sins deserved: Separation from His holy God and Father; Abandonment by the just Judge; Wrath from the righteous Ruler of the planets, stars and universe. His loving co-creator and co-ruler of all that exists poured out on Jesus His holy fury against wickedness. At Calvary the

Lord punished all the sins of all the people of all the ages—in Christ!” (Alex Wilson,
<https://www.wordandwork.org/2011/12/for-our-sakes-he-became-poor-2/>)

There are several Bible passages that seem to say that Jesus became a sinner in actual nature--but we need to examine them critically and harmonize them with every other Bible passage on the subject. Here are the three main passages we will look at:

- 1 Peter 2:24--“Who Himself *bore our sins in His own body* on the tree....”
- Galatians 3:13--“Christ has redeemed us from the curse of the law, *having become a curse for us* (for it is written, ‘Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree’).”
- 2 Corinthians 5:21--“*For He [God] made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us*, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.”

If these were the only Bible statements we had on the subject, we might indeed conclude that the Lord actually became personally guilty of all the sins of mankind. But consider these opposing statements:

- Hebrews 4:15--“For we do not have a High Priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but was in all points tempted as we are, *yet without sin.*”
- Hebrews 9:14 says that He offered Himself “without spot to God.”
- Peter said that X “committed no sin, nor was guile found in His mouth” and that He was “a lamb without blemish and without spot” (1 Pet 2:22, 1:19).

There is a fundamental rule of Biblical interpretation which states that the Bible does not contradict itself; therefore, if our interpretation of a given passage (or set of passages) causes one passage to contradict another plain passage of Scripture, then our interpretation is faulty.

SO WHICH IS IT?

As He died, did Christ actually become a sinner--take on a sin nature--or did He die as a substitute, paying the price for our sins while remaining sinless? This is a vital question, because it strikes at the very nature of Christ and His atoning death.

In this article we affirm that Jesus did NOT become a sinner on the cross--He remained sinless throughout the whole ordeal, bearing our sins vicariously (that is, as a substitute). We will accordingly explain all three of the passages cited above which seem to teach a sinful nature for the Lord, including 2 Corinthians 5:21.

THE BIBLE MAKES IT CLEAR THAT JESUS WAS SINLESS BEFORE, DURING, AND AFTER THE CRUCIFIXION

The Bible writers repeatedly testify to this fact:

- Hebrews 4:15, quoted before, states that Christ was tempted in all points as we are, yet without sin.
- Hebrews 9:14 says He offered Himself “without spot to God.”
- 2 Corinthians 5:21, the very text used by most of the Christ-as-sinner advocates, begins by saying “He knew no sin.”
- Peter called Him a Lamb without blemish and without spot in 1 Peter 1:19.
- Isaiah 53:6 says “the Lord has laid on Him the iniquity of us all.” That says God laid our iniquity “on” Him, not “in” Him. Our sin was put on His account; He paid our bill even though He did not owe it.
- Isaiah 53:12 says He made intercession for the transgressors--something which would be a hard thing for Him to do if He was one of them.
- 1 John 3:5 says, “And you know that He was manifested to take away our sins, and in Him there is no sin.” The word “is” is present tense, signifying ongoing action or state of being; implying that He had no sin before, during, or after His death on the cross.
- 1 Peter 1:18-19 says, “You were redeemed...with the precious [not sin-contaminated] blood of Christ, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot.” When was Jesus acting as a Lamb? When He was being offered as a sacrifice for our sins. This passage affirms that, even in the act of dying, Jesus was without blemish.

SO WHAT DOES PETER MEAN WHEN HE SAYS HE BORE OUR SINS IN HIS OWN BODY (1 PETER 2:24)?

I call your attention to the word “bore” in 1 Peter 2:24--Christ “bore” our sins. This word is from the Greek verb *anaphero*, which means “to bear, to take up, to carry away, to take a load upon oneself to remove it.” Matthew uses a closely related word in Matthew 8:17, quoting Isaiah: “He Himself took our infirmities and *bore our sicknesses*.” This was in reference to the Lord’s healing people of physical infirmities. When Jesus “bore” the sicknesses of the people, does it mean that He got sick and contracted all the diseases of the people He was healing? No; it only means He “took the people’s diseases away.”

So when Peter says Christ “bore” our sins, it does not mean that He became a sinner, but that He took up and carried away our load of guilt. The Old Testament sin-offering lamb did not become a sinful lamb when it “bore” the sins of the Jews; Jesus did not get sick when He “bore” the diseases of the people; and He did not become a sinner when He “bore” our sins on the cross.

WHAT ABOUT GALATIANS 3:13?

”Christ has redeemed us from the curse of the law, *having become a curse for us* (for it is written, ‘Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree’).”

How did Christ “become” a curse? The key to understanding this is the parenthetical statement, “...for it is written, ‘Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree’” (The quote is from Deuteronomy 21:22-23.) ”Being “hung on a tree” was a treatment reserved for the vilest of criminals. The Jews did not crucify criminals; rather, they stoned them. But the worst and vilest criminals suffered the additional indignity of having their bodies hung on a tree for all to see.¹

So if you heard that So-and-So had been “hung on a tree,” you would conclude that he was guilty of heinous crimes, *whether He was actually guilty or not*. So Christ was treated in His death AS IF He were a criminal, not that He actually was one.

¹ To see an instance of this being carried out, see Joshua 8:28-29.

Albert Barnes has an excellent explanation of this in his comments on Galatians 3:13: “Jesus was NOT sinful, or a sinner, in any sense. He did not so take human guilt upon him, that the words sinful and sinner could with any propriety be applied to him. They are not applied to him any way in the Bible; but there the language is undeviating. It is that in all senses he was holy and undefiled.... The sense of the passage before us is, therefore, that Jesus was subjected to what was regarded as an accursed death. He was treated in his death AS IF he had been a criminal. He was put to death in the same manner as he would have been IF he had himself been guilty of the violation of the Law.”

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So Christ “became” a curse IN APPEARANCE ONLY, not in reality. A Greek scholar has this to say on this verse: “*Christ was in no sense accursed by God in his crucifixion.* The statement does not refer to Christ's enduring the curse in our stead, but solely to the attitude in which the law placed Christ by subjecting him to the death of a malefactor.”

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“EXHIBIT A”--2 CORINTHIANS 5:21

”For He [God] made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.”

Remember, we must interpret this passage in the light of all the other passages we have studied, which emphatically assert that at no time was Christ ever a sinner in His true nature. And notice, as we previously pointed out, that this verse begins by stating that “Christ knew no sin.” Whatever the rest of the verse means, it must agree with this. If Jesus had at any time become a sinner or taken on a sin nature, then Paul would have been guilty of contradicting himself.

The key to understanding this passage is the fact that the same Hebrew and Greek word can be translated both “sin” and “sin-offering.” Hosea 4:8, speaking of

the wicked Jewish leaders, says, “They eat up the sin of my people.” How could they “eat up” sin? Obviously, sin is not an edible commodity. The passage means they ate up the sin offerings of the people (took for themselves the animals brought for sacrifice).

Brother Wayne Jackson points out that the root word for “sin” occurs 595 times in the Old Testament, and in some forty percent of those references, it means not sin, but a sin offering. He further says, “The expression ‘made to be sin,’ likely signifies, ‘made to be a sin-offering,’ in harmony with the common Old Testament idiom.... The Scriptures do not teach that Christ died as a sinner. That theory is an error that results from not understanding the figurative language used in the sacred writings.”

(<https://www.christiancourier.com/articles/955-did-christ-die-as-a-sinner-upon-the-cross>)

There is a wonderful illustration of this principle of “substitution without contamination” in the book of Philemon. Paul writes to Philemon, a brother in Christ, in behalf of Onesimus, a runaway slave belonging to Philemon. He says in verses 18 and 19, “If he [Onesimus] has wronged you or owes you anything, put that on my account.... I will repay....” Paul is saying to Philemon, “If Onesimus owes you money, regard me as owing you--*I am willing to be regarded as a debtor even though I am not one.*” Similarly, in 2 Corinthians 5:21, Christ is pictured as saying, “Even though I have no sin, *I am willing to be regarded as a sinner as far as punishment is concerned*, to reconcile people to God.”

2 Corinthians 5:21 could therefore be legitimately translated, “For He [God] made Him who knew no sin to be a sin-offering for us....”

We have gone through a lot of study and reasoning to arrive at a simple but critically important conclusion: JESUS CHRIST DID NOT AT ANY TIME LITERALLY BECOME A SINNER, even in the act of dying for our sins. To say otherwise is to seriously misunderstand Bible language and the atoning nature of the Lord’s death. In regard to Christ and sin, the Bible teaches IMPUTATION, not INFECTION. Our Lord died FOR sin, not IN sin. On the cross, Jesus bore the punishment of our sins, not the sins themselves.

I find these words from John Pedersen to be a fitting close to this study: “Christ was not made a sinful being on the cross. His blood was not guilty blood. The sins of His people were imputed to Him and He bore the guilt and penalty and shame of their sins, but He Himself remained ever righteous and pure and spotless. Were this not so, washing ourselves in His blood would seal our condemnation instead of being our salvation and our righteousness, and all the biblical references to the aforementioned would be a mockery. We are not cleansed by guilty blood. When He died, Christ was not guilty in Himself. He died on account of the sins of His people, ever loving them, ever holy, pure, and righteous in His motives and in His being. To attribute sinful guilt to Christ’s person is blasphemy and completely undermines the whole doctrine of Christ’s cross-work as One who died ‘the Just for the unjust’, in bringing and reconciling His people to God.”

[\(https://www.facebook.com/1456943074592237/posts/open-letter-to-don-fortner-di-d-christ-become-sinful-in-saving-sinnershello-prede/1911157492504124/\)](https://www.facebook.com/1456943074592237/posts/open-letter-to-don-fortner-di-d-christ-become-sinful-in-saving-sinnershello-prede/1911157492504124/)

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POSTSCRIPT: WHAT ABOUT THE FACT THAT GOD THE FATHER “FORSOOK” JESUS ON THE CROSS? DOES THAT NOT PROVE THAT HE WAS A SINNER?

The reference is to Matthew 27:46 (cf Mark 15:34): “Now from the sixth hour until the ninth hour there was darkness over all the land. And about the ninth hour Jesus cried out with a loud voice, saying, ‘Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani?’ that is, ‘My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?’” The traditional explanation is that the Father turned away from Christ because He was at that time under the condemnation of God, totally contaminated with sin--the sins of the world of all time.

We are standing on holy ground when we contemplate and try to explain the words of Christ on the cross, so let no one boast that he can fully understand what was in the mind of Jesus as He was dying for us. But let me offer a possible meaning that I have not found in any commentary; I have no scholarly reference to

back me up. I do not believe that the Father turned away and withdrew His presence from the Son because of displeasure or because He (God) could not stand to look at sin. After all, Christ's death on the cross was the intent and will of the Father (cf Isaiah 53:10).

It is my view that God had to withdraw from Christ at that point so that He (Christ) could die! As long as divinity remained in the body of Christ ("In Him dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily," Colossians 2:9), He could not die. No one can "kill" God! Christ needed a physical body in order to die. Therefore, God "prepared" one for Him (Hebrews 10:5). As a man in that physical body, in the act of dying, Jesus was experiencing something He had never experienced before: the absence of the Father's divine presence. In His humanity, He cried out in agony. But He surely understood that it must be so--as long as His God-hood remained in Him, he could not die. --jt