

2 Corinthians 5:21

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

For he hath made him to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in him.

Analysis

For he hath made him to be sin for us, who knew no sin—Ton mē gnonta hamartian hyper hēmōn hamartian epoiēsen (τὸν μὴ γνόντα ἁμαρτίαν ὑπὲρ ἡμῶν ἁμαρτίαν ἐποίησεν). This verse is theology's summit—the great exchange. Ton mē gnonta hamartian (τὸν μὴ γνόντα ἁμαρτίαν, "the one not knowing sin") describes Christ's absolute sinlessness. Ginōskō (γινώσκω, "to know by experience") indicates Christ never experienced sin internally or externally—morally perfect (Hebrews 4:15, 7:26; 1 Peter 2:22). Hamartian epoiēsen (ἁμαρτίαν ἐποίησεν, "He made sin")—God the Father made the sinless Son "sin." Not "a sinner" but "sin" itself—sin's embodiment, sin's full penalty, sin's curse (Galatians 3:13).

Hyper hēmōn (ὑπὲρ ἡμῶν, "for us, on our behalf") is substitutionary atonement's heart. Christ took our place under wrath, bearing sin's full judgment. Isaiah 53:6, "The LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all." The crucifixion's horror—darkness, divine abandonment ("My God, why have you forsaken me?")—resulted from Christ bearing infinite sin's weight. This is penal substitution: Christ punished in our place, satisfying divine justice.

That we might be made the righteousness of God in him—Hina hēmeis genōmetha dikaiosynē Theou en autō (ἵνα ἡμεῖς γενώμεθα δικαιοσύνη θεοῦ ἐν αὐτῷ). Purpose clause (hina, ἵνα, "in order that") reveals exchange's goal. Genōmetha (γενώμεθα, aorist subjunctive, "we might become") indicates transformation. Dikaiosynē Theou (δικαιοσύνη θεοῦ, "righteousness of God")—not merely righteous status but God's own righteousness imputed/imparted. En autō

(ἐν αὐτῷ, "in Him")—union with Christ is mechanism: His righteousness becomes ours, our sin became His. This is double imputation: our sin to Christ, His righteousness to us. Luther called it "the great exchange" (fröhliche Wechsel)—Christ takes our rags; we receive His robes. This grounds justification by faith alone (Romans 3:21-26)—we stand before God clothed in Christ's perfect righteousness, not our own filthy rags (Isaiah 64:6). This is substitutionary atonement's glory: God's justice satisfied, God's love demonstrated, sinners reconciled.

Historical Context

Penal substitutionary atonement became Reformation theology's cornerstone—Luther, Calvin, and Reformers insisted Christ bore God's wrath against sin. This countered medieval view of atonement as Christ's example or Christus Victor alone. Paul's theology insists: Christ's death was vicarious, substitutionary, penal—He bore punishment we deserved, accomplishing objective propitiation. This remains Christianity's scandal and glory: God punishing God to save sinners.

Related Passages

Romans 10:9 — Confession and belief for salvation

John 3:16 — God's love and salvation

1 John 4:8 — God is love

John 15:13 — Greatest form of love

Study Questions

1. Do you grasp the horror of Christ being "made sin"—bearing your specific sins, your guilt, God's wrath against YOUR rebellion?
2. How does being clothed in Christ's righteousness (not your own moral effort) transform your confidence before God and freedom from condemnation?
3. What would your life look like if you truly believed you possess "the righteousness of God" in Christ—perfect, permanent, complete?

Interlinear Text

τὸν	γὰρ	μὴ	γνόντα	ἁμαρτίαν	ὑπὲρ	ἡμῶν	ἁμαρτίαν
who	For	no	knew	him to be sin	for	us	him to be sin
G3588	G1063	G3361	G1097	G266	G5228	G2257	G266
ἐποίησεν	ἵνα	ἡμεῖς	γινώμεθα	δικαιοσύνη	θεοῦ	ἐν	
he hath made	that	we	might be made	the righteousness	of God	in	
G4160	G2443	G2249	G1096	G1343	G2316	G1722	
αὐτῷ							
him							
G846							

Additional Cross-References

1 Peter 3:18 (Righteousness): For Christ also hath once suffered for sins, the just for the unjust, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh, but quickened by the Spirit:

Romans 5:19 (Righteousness): For as by one man's disobedience many were made sinners, so by the obedience of one shall many be made righteous.

Galatians 3:13 (Creation): Christ hath redeemed us from the curse of the law, being made a curse for us: for it is written, Cursed is every one that hangeth on a tree:

1 Corinthians 1:30 (Righteousness): But of him are ye in Christ Jesus, who of God is made unto us wisdom, and righteousness, and sanctification, and redemption:

1 John 3:5 (Sin): And ye know that he was manifested to take away our sins; and in him is no sin.

Philippians 3:9 (Righteousness): And be found in him, not having mine own righteousness, which is of the law, but that which is through the faith of Christ, the righteousness which is of God by faith:

2 Corinthians 5:17 (Parallel theme): Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new.

Hebrews 4:15 (Sin): For we have not an high priest which cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities; but was in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin.

Romans 1:17 (Righteousness): For therein is the righteousness of God revealed from faith to faith: as it is written, The just shall live by faith.

Romans 4:25 (Righteousness): Who was delivered for our offences, and was raised again for our justification.

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