

THE MEANING OF CHRIST'S DEATH

Occasionally one hears children answer the question, "Why did Jesus die?" by saying, "He died to save our sins." There is obvious confusion here. He did not die to rescue our sins, but to rescue us from our sins.

This confusion probably results from different meanings of the word "for" in relation to Christ's death. The differences are not as simple as they seem on the surface, and confront us with the mystery of our salvation. For example, the New Testament sometimes says that Christ died for us, and at other times, that He died for our sins. Sometimes, as in the expression "Christ died for us" (Rm 5:8) the word "for" means, "TO BENEFIT." Paul wrote, "Through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us" (1 Ths 5:9-10). Similarly, Paul asked, "Surely Paul was not crucified for you?" (1 Cor 1:13). Because Jesus died to benefit us, we can also say, "He died because of us."

By means of His death and resurrection Jesus dealt with our sins. The meanings "because of" and "to benefit" are included in Paul's warnings, "Do not, by what you eat, destroy the person for whom Christ has died!" (Rm 14:15), and "The weak person is being destroyed by your knowledge, your fellow-Christian, for whom Christ died" (1 Cor 8:11). Sometimes the word "for", as in "for our sins" means, "BECAUSE OF." For example, Paul wrote, "Christ died for our sins as the Scriptures said He would" (1 Cor 15:3).

The benefit of Christ's death includes His becoming the substitute. Paul wrote in 1 Cor 5:15 both "He has died for all" and "who has died for them and has been raised." Here the meaning includes the important thought of substitution, "INSTEAD OF." He took the place of all sinners. For example, Paul also wrote, "Christ died for ungodly people" (Rm 5:6) and "someone might perhaps even dare to die for a good person" (Rm 5:7). A rarer Greek preposition meaning "instead of" expresses this substitution in 1 Tm 2:6, "who gave Himself as a ransom instead of all."

In Romans 8:3 the *KJV* translates "For what the law could not do, in that it was weak through the flesh, God sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, condemned sin in the flesh." The literal "and for sin" is the reading also in other translations, for example, Darby, *ASV*, and *ESV*. Fairly similarly, *ISV* and *NRSV* have "to deal with sin", and the *NKJV* has "on account of sin." *GNB* has "to do away with sin." In some recent editions of the *KJV*, where there are cross references, an alternative translation is suggested, "by a sacrifice for sin." *NIV*, *NASB95*, *HCSB*, and *GEW* have words like "as an offering for sin." "For what the Law could not do, because it was weak through the sinful human nature, God has done, by sending His own Son to be like sinful human nature, to be a sin offering. He has condemned sin in human nature" (*GEW*). We may ask where the word "sacrifice" comes from if it is not expressly in the Greek original in this verse.

The concept of "sacrifice" or "offering", which at first seems to be an addition, comes from the fact that the Hebrew Old Testament had two similar words (*chat'â* and *chatta't*) that meant either "sin" or "sin-offering". The same Hebrew word for "sin" as in Exodus 10:17, meant "sin-offering" in passages such as Exodus 29:14, 29:36; 30:10, in the whole section about sacrifices in Leviticus 4:3-16:27 and some other places. The Greek translation of the Old Testament called the *Septuagint* translated these two words by a fixed liturgical formula, with the Greek words "for sin", usually without the addition of words like "offering" or "sacrifice." The words "sacrifice" or "offering" were simply understood in this fixed formula, "for sin." We find this usage "for sin" in the summary statement in the *Septuagint* in Leviticus 7:37 to translate the Hebrew: "This is the Law for the burnt offering, for the grain-offering, for the sin-offering, for the guilt offering..." Similarly, the *Septuagint* uses this formula in Psalm 40:6 (in English Bibles; but Ps 40:7 in Hebrew; and Ps 39:6 in the *Septuagint*), "You have not taken pleasure in sacrifice and offering." The writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews used this fixed Greek formula "for sin" just as the *Septuagint* had used it when he quoted this Psalm verse in Hb 10:6, "You have had no pleasure in burnt offerings and sacrifices for sin." In Leviticus 6:30 the Hebrew read, "However, when any blood of a sin-offering is brought into the tent of meeting to make atonement in the holy place, the sin-offering shall not be eaten! It shall be burnt with fire!" Here the *Septuagint* had the literal words, "all the things that are for sin" (*Septuagint* Lv 6:23). In Leviticus 14:19 the Hebrew is correctly translated as, "The priest shall make the sin-offering to make atonement", where the *Septuagint* used the literal formula, "The priest shall make the things for sin and shall make atonement."

In other passages in Hebrews besides 10:6 the cultic formula of the *Septuagint* has also controlled the expression "for sin." In Hebrews 5:3 there is a double use of the word "for" in the original Greek. The first instance in the literal fixed expression, "for sins" needs to be translated as "sacrifices for sins": "For that reason, he is obliged to offer sacrifices [for sin] for his own sins." In Hebrews 10:18 and 10:26 we find the full expressions, "offering for sins" and "sacrifices for sins." In Hebrews 13:11, the shorter expression, the literal usage of the *Septuagint*, "for sin", means "as a sin offering." "For the bodies of the animals whose blood is brought into the sanctuary by the high priest as a sin offering are burnt outside the camp. Therefore Jesus also suffered outside the gate to make the people holy through His own blood" (Hb 13:11-12). In this light, when Peter connected "for" with "sins" in 1 Peter 3:18, he probably meant more than the concept of substitution: "Christ also suffered once for sins, the Righteous One for the unrighteous, to bring you to God" (1 Pt 3:18). We may understand Peter to mean, "Christ also suffered once as an offering for sins."

Paul also often used the language of the *Septuagint*, and it seems clear that what he meant was more than "for sin" in Romans 8:3. He used the words in the sense of the *Septuagint*, "as a sin-offering." A number of English translations have missed this point. However, this is in line with Paul's understanding of Jesus' death as a sacrifice to propitiate for sin, as in Rm 3:25, "God has publicly displayed Him as the atonement cover through faith in His blood." The shedding of Jesus' blood has made atonement as a sacrifice to take away sin.

Jesus had also understood the meaning of His approaching death as a sacrifice to remove sin in two important

passages in the Synoptic Gospels. “The Son of Man has not come to be served but to serve and give His life as a ransom for many” (Mt 20:28). “This is My blood of the Covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins” (Mt 26:28).

The understanding of Jesus’ death as a sacrifice for sin through His blood is also present in the fourth song about the messianic Servant of God, in Isaiah, in chapter 52-53. The Hebrew for “When You make His life a sacrifice for guilt” in v. 10 was again translated in the *Septuagint* with the simple literal formula, “When you give for sin,” where the meaning is “a sacrifice for sin.”

The grim condition of all human beings was that they were subject to sin and death, and the Law could not help them. It was weak because of their sinful human natures. The Law offered prohibitions, and gave sin its power to bring death. The Law condemned sin, but it had no power to save from sin. If there was to be rescue from sin it had to come from elsewhere, and salvation had to include rescue from the power of the Law to condemn. Although Christ was sinless, the mystery of His atoning work is that God made Him sin for us” (2 Cor 5:21). The sin of the world was placed on Jesus’ human nature, where the Son of God had taken our place, so that sin was put to death in His death. Jesus Christ’s victory over sin was propitiatory atonement, and His death was the sacrifice to take away sin. “The death that He died, He died to sin once” (Rm 6:10). His sacrificial death was the means by which He triumphed over sin, and brought the dominion of death to an end. Because of His sacrificial death, as sin reigned in death, so also grace has reigned, through righteousness, resulting in eternal life, through Jesus Christ our Lord” (Rm 5:21). His blood, in sacrifice, has stilled God’s accusing voice against us.