

What Do You Mean by “For”?: Correcting a False Definition of the Gospel

In modern Christian parlance, three phrases are regularly heard as summations of the central Christian message: “Jesus died for your sins,” “Jesus died for all,” and “Jesus died to pay the penalty for your sins.” The latter is the easiest of the three to challenge, since no such text exists in Scripture. Jesus is never the subject of a verb capable of being translated “pay,” neither is the human condition ever described as the need for anyone to “pay a penalty” to anyone for anything.¹ By contrast, the New Testament contains several versions of the first two sentences above. No one in Christendom disputes that Jesus died,² neither does anyone deny that “all (humans) have sinned” (Rom. 3:23, 5:12). The issue is what the intervening preposition, commonly rendered “for,” is suggesting.

Jesus Suffering or Dying “for” Something or Someone

The following are all the verses in the New Testament which assert that Jesus “suffered” (πάσχω) or “died” (ἀποθνήσκω) “for” anything or anyone.³ All citations are from the English Standard Version, and all instances of “for” are translations of ὑπέρ with a genitive object, unless otherwise noted.

⁴⁵ For even *the Son of Man came* not to be served but to serve, and *to give his life as a ransom for many*. (Mark 10:45 = Matt. 20:28, ἀντί with a genitive; “to give his life” is δοῦναι τὴν ψυχὴν αὐτοῦ, literally, “to give his soul,” as in Jer. 45:5 [51:35 LXX] and Sir. 29:15, where it does not imply suffering or dying)

¹ λυτρόω, rendered “redeem” in its three NT occurrences (Luke 24:21, Titus 2:14, 1 Pet. 1:18), does not imply the offering of a payment, as its use to describe the Exodus (Ex. 6:6) demonstrates. Its cognate λύτρον, inconsistently rendered “ransom” in its two NT occurrences (Mark 10:45, Matt. 20:28), does indeed describe payments (fines for injuries caused by animals, Ex. 21:30; the census tax, Ex. 30:12), but never those which would secure someone’s release from captivity.

² Islam contends that Jesus was taken off the cross and allowed to ascend into heaven before he died: “They certainly did not kill him. Rather, Allah raised him up to Himself” (Quran 4:157-158). Secular skepticism doubts whether Jesus actually died, or even whether he was a real historical character.

³ These include passages in which ἀναφέρω, “carry up,” δίδωμι, “give,” παραδίδωμι, “deliver up,” and τίθημι, “lay,” are held to refer to Jesus’ death and are followed by a prepositional phrase beginning with “for.”

¹¹ I am the good shepherd. *The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.* (John 10:11; “lays down his life” is τίθησιν τὴν ψυχὴν αὐτοῦ, literally, “sets aside his soul,” similar to τίθησιν τὰ ἱμάτια, “sets aside [his] garments” in 13:4, when Jesus washed his disciples’ feet on Maundy Thursday)

¹⁴ I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, ¹⁵ just as the Father knows me and I know the Father; and *I lay down my life for the sheep.* (John 10:14-15; similar sentences, without any prepositional phrase beginning with “for,” appear in 10:17-18)

⁴⁹ But one of them, Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, said to them, “You know nothing at all. ⁵⁰ Nor do you understand that it is better for you that *one man should die for the people*, not that the whole nation should perish.” ⁵¹ He did not say this of his own accord, but being high priest that year he prophesied that *Jesus would die for the nation*, ⁵² and not for the nation only, but also to gather into one the children of God who are scattered abroad. (John 11:49-52)

¹³ Greater love has no one than this, that *someone lay down his life for his friends.* (John 15:13)

¹⁴ It was Caiaphas who had advised the Jews that it would be expedient that *one man should die for the people.* (John 18:14)

²² That is why his [Abraham’s] faith was “counted to him as righteousness.” ²³ But the words “it was counted to him” were not written for his sake alone, ²⁴ but for ours also. It will be counted to us who believe in him who raised from the dead *Jesus our Lord*, ²⁵ *who was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification.* (Rom. 4:22-25, διὰ with an accusative; in v. 25, “who was delivered up” is ὃς παρέδόθη)

⁶ For while we were still weak, at the right time *Christ died for the ungodly.* ⁷ For one will scarcely die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die— ⁸ but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, *Christ died for us.* (Rom. 5:6-8)

³² *He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all*, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things? (Rom. 8:32; “gave him up” is παρέδωκεν αὐτόν)

³⁴ Who is to condemn? *Christ Jesus is the one who died*—more than that, who was raised—who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding *for us.* (Rom. 8:34)

¹⁵ For if your brother is grieved by what you eat, you are no longer walking in love. By what you eat, do not destroy *the one for whom Christ died.* (Rom. 14:15)

¹⁰ For if anyone sees you who have knowledge eating in an idol’s temple, will he not be encouraged, if his conscience is weak, to eat food offered to idols? ¹¹ And so by your knowledge this weak person is destroyed, *the brother for*

whom Christ died. (1 Cor. 8:10-11, διὰ with an accusative)

³ For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that *Christ died for our sins* in accordance with the Scriptures. (1 Cor. 15:3)

¹⁴ For the love of Christ controls us, because we have concluded this: that *one has died for all*, therefore all have died; ¹⁵ and *he died for all*, that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for *him who for their sake died* and was raised. (2 Cor. 5:14-15)

²⁰ I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in *the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me*. ²¹ I do not nullify the grace of God, for *if righteousness were through the law, then Christ died for no purpose*. (Gal. 2:20-21; in v. 20, “who ... gave himself” is τοῦ ... παραδόντος ἑαυτόν, and in v. 21, “for no purpose” is δωρεάν, “without benefit”)

¹ Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children. ² And walk in love, as *Christ loved us and gave himself up for us*, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God. (Eph. 5:1-2; in v. 2, “gave himself up” is παρέδωκεν ἑαυτόν, and “offering” is προσφορά)

²⁵ Husbands, love your wives, as *Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her*, ²⁶ that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, ²⁷ so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish. (Eph. 5:25-27; in v. 25, “gave himself up” is ἑαυτόν παρέδωκεν)

⁹ For God has not destined us for wrath, but to obtain salvation through *our Lord Jesus Christ*, ¹⁰ *who died for us* so that whether we are awake or asleep we might live with him. (1 Thess. 5:9-10, περί with a genitive)

¹ For every *high priest* chosen from among men is *appointed* to act on behalf of men in relation to God, *to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins*. (Heb. 5:1; “to offer” is ἵνα προσφέρῃ)

³ Because of this *he is obligated to offer sacrifice for his own sins just as he does for those of the people*. (Heb. 5:3, περί with a genitive; “to offer” is προσφέρειν)

²⁷ He has no need, like those *high priests*, to *offer sacrifices daily, first for his own sins and then for those of the people*, since *he did this once for all*⁴ *when he offered up himself*. (Heb. 7:27; “to offer” is ἀναφέρειν, and “offered up” is ἀνενέγκας)

⁶ These preparations having thus been made, the priests go regularly into the first section, performing their ritual duties, ⁷ but into the second only the high

⁴ “Once for all” translates ἐφάπαξ in Rom. 6:10, Heb. 7:27, and Heb. 10:10, and ἅπαξ in Heb. 9:26, both of which mean “only once,” not “once on behalf of all”

priest goes, and he but once a year, and not without taking blood, which *he offers for himself and for the unintentional sins of the people*. (Heb. 9:6-7; in v. 7, “offers” is προσφέρει)

⁵ Consequently, when Christ came into the world, he said, “Sacrifices and offerings you have not desired, but a body have you prepared for me; ⁶ in burnt offerings and sin offerings you have taken no pleasure. ⁷ Then I said, ‘Behold, I have come to do your will, O God, as it is written of me in the scroll of the book.’” ⁸ When he said above, “You have neither desired nor taken pleasure in sacrifices and offerings and burnt offerings and sin offerings” (these are offered according to the law), ⁹ then he added, “Behold, I have come to do your will.” He does away with the first in order to establish the second. ¹⁰ And by that will *we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ* once for all. ¹¹ And every priest stands daily at his service, offering repeatedly the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins. ¹² But when *Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins*, he sat down at the right hand of God, ¹³ waiting from that time until his enemies should be made a footstool for his feet. ¹⁴ For *by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified*. (Heb. 10:5-14; in vv. 10 and 14, “offering” is προσφορά, and in v. 12, “offer” is προσενέγκας)

²¹ For to this you have been called, because *Christ also suffered for you*, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps. (1 Pet. 2:21 in Vaticanus; Majority texts read “suffered ὑπέρ us,” Alexandrinus reads “suffered περί you,” and Sinaiticus reads “died ὑπέρ you”)

¹⁸ For *Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous*, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit. (1 Pet. 3:18, where the second “for” is universally ὑπέρ, and the first is περί in Vaticanus and the Majority texts; original Ephraemi reads “died περί our sins,” Sinaiticus reads “died περί sins ὑπέρ us,” Alexandrinus reads “died περί sins ὑπέρ you,” and Athous Laurae reads “died ὑπέρ sins περί you” while omitting “the righteous for the unrighteous”)

Jesus Suffering or Dying resulting in a Salvific Benefit

The following are all the verses in the New Testament involving the verbs πάσχω or ἀποθνήσκω which assert that Jesus’ death confers some salvific benefit, apart from any preposition capable of being rendered “for.”⁵

⁵ These include passages which employ ἀναφέρω, “carry up,” θύω, “sacrifice,” and προσφέρω, “προσφέρω, “carry forward.” ἀποκτείνω, “kill,” and θνήσκω, the root of ἀποθνήσκω, sometimes occur in descriptions of Jesus’ death (as in Mark 8:31 and Acts 25:19, respectively) but never with a suggestion of a salvific benefit.

²³ And Jesus answered them, “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. ²⁴ Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but *if it dies, it bears much fruit.*” (John 12:23-24)

³⁰ Jesus answered, “This voice has come for your sake, not mine. ³¹ Now is the judgment of this world; *now will the ruler of this world be cast out.* ³² *And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.*” ³³ He said this to show *by what kind of death he was going to die.* (John 12:30-33)

³¹ Pilate said to them, “Take him yourselves and judge him by your own law.” The Jews said to him, “It is not lawful for us to put anyone to death.” ³² This was to fulfill the word that Jesus had spoken to show *by what kind of death he was going to die.* (John 18:31-32)

⁶ We know that our old self was crucified with him in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing, so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin. ⁷ For *one who has died has been set free from sin.* (Rom. 6:6-7; in v. 7, a footnote attached to “set free” states, “Greek *has been justified*”)

¹⁰ For *the death he died he died to sin*, once for all, but the life he lives he lives to God. ¹¹ So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus. (Rom. 6:10-11)

⁹ For to this end *Christ died and lived again, that he might be Lord both of the dead and of the living.* (Rom. 14:9)

⁷ Cleanse out the old leaven that you may be a new lump, as you really are unleavened. For *Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed.* (1 Cor. 5:7)

¹⁸ For because *he himself has suffered* when tempted, *he is able to help* those who are being tempted. (Heb. 2:18)

⁷ In the days of his flesh, *Jesus offered up prayers and supplications*, with loud cries and tears, to him who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverence. (Heb. 5:7; “offered up” is προσενέγκας)

³ For *every high priest is appointed to offer gifts and sacrifices*; thus it is necessary *for this priest also to have something to offer.* (Heb. 8:3; the first “to offer” is προσφέρειν, the second is προσενέγκη)

¹³ For if the blood of goats and bulls, and the sprinkling of defiled persons with the ashes of a heifer, sanctify for the purification of the flesh, ¹⁴ how much more *will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself* without blemish to God, *purify our conscience from dead works to serve the living God.* (Heb. 9:13-14; “offered” is προσήνεγκεν)

²⁵ Nor was it to offer himself repeatedly, as the high priest enters the holy places every year with blood not his own, ²⁶ for then *he would have had to suffer repeatedly* since the foundation of the world. But as it is, *he has appeared once for*

all at the end of the ages *to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself*.²⁷ And just as it is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment,²⁸ so *Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many*, will appear a second time, not to deal with sin but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him. (Heb. 9:25-28; in v. 26, “to put away sin” is actually the noun phrase “for the removal (εἰς ἀθέτησιν) of sin,” and in v. 28, the initial verbs are προσενεχθεῖς followed by ἀνενεγκεῖν)

¹² So *Jesus also suffered outside the gate in order to sanctify the people through his own blood*. (Heb. 13:12)

²⁴ *He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree*, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed. (1 Pet. 2:24; the initial verb is ἀνήνεγκεν)

¹ Since therefore *Christ suffered in the flesh*, arm yourselves with the same way of thinking, for *whoever has suffered in the flesh has ceased from sin*. (1 Pet. 4:1)

Analysis

1. There is a complete absence of the concept of Jesus suffering or dying “for” anything or anyone in the Synoptic Gospels or the Acts of the Apostles, except for the mistranslated text in Mark 10:45 (= Matt. 20:28). This fact alone undermines any theory of what is variously called vicarious satisfaction, substitutionary atonement, or penal substitution, for if the latter were essential to the Christian Gospel, Luke’s Gospel would not in fact contain the Gospel, and the sermons of Peter on Pentecost (Acts 2:14-36) and Paul at Pisidian Antioch (Acts 13:16-41) should not have been able to convert anyone.

2. Assertions that Jesus suffered or died “for” anything are exceptional in the New Testament. In Rom. 4:25, Jesus is said to have been “delivered up for our trespasses,” but the preposition διὰ with an accusative normally means “on account of,” such that Paul is simply saying that Jesus died because people sinned against him rather than because he himself sinned.⁶ The same idea is intended by the oft quoted phrase from 1 Cor. 15:3, “Christ died for our sins,” employing ὑπέρ with a genitive. Elsewhere the latter means either “on behalf of” (as in Mark 9:40, “whoever is not against us is for us,” Jesus’ reaction to a non-apostolic exorcist), or “because of” (as in 2 Cor. 12:8, “Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this,” namely Paul’s “thorn in the flesh”), similar to διὰ with an accusative. Contrary to the widespread belief that the first century Roman Empire was an all

⁶ The parallel assertion that Jesus was “raised for (because of) our justification” would then not mean that the resurrection resulted in God justifying believers, but that the resurrection occurred because believers justified Jesus, as by the centurion in Luke 23:47.

but universally despised totalitarian state, Paul's addressees would have assumed that anyone executed by Rome deserved their fate, thus Paul needed to assert that this was not true in Jesus' case.

3. Assertions that Jesus suffered or died "for" anyone in John's Gospel are of two types. A group of texts in chapters 10 and 15 quote Jesus saying that he is "setting aside his soul" for the benefit of believers. Contrary to the impression created by the debatable rendering "lays down his life," this phrase is not an exclusive reference to his death, and as the present tense indicates, it describes the entirety of Jesus' career, often called the "state of humiliation," in which Jesus denied himself many privileges and creature comforts, culminating in his death (a theme developed by Paul in Phil. 2:5-11). The specific benefit for believers is however not overtly stated here, beyond the obvious fact that the Good Shepherd would not mistreat believers as unworthy religious leaders had done in the past. But beginning with the citation in chapter 11 of Caiaphas' unwitting prophecy of Jesus' death (re-quoted in chapter 18), the purpose of Jesus' death was "to gather into one the children of God who are scattered abroad," resulting in communion between believers and their God. This is followed in the next chapter with assertions that Jesus by his death would "bear much fruit" and "draw all people to himself," thus multiplying those in communion with him. This theme is the exact opposite of the penal substitution theory, in that Jesus' death results in believers sharing something in common with him, as opposed to Jesus doing something unique to himself.⁷

4. An additional benefit of Jesus' passion is developed by Paul in Gal. 3:10-14, in which Paul declares that "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law." This passage is not referenced above because strictly speaking it does not derive a benefit from Jesus' death, but from the instrument of his death. Paul's intention here is widely misunderstood by those who define "the law" as the Ten Commandments instead of the entire law of Moses, and interpolate the penal substitution theory into the verb "redeem." But the mechanism of redemption here has nothing to do with placating divine wrath or paying penalties for sin as anyone's substitute. Indeed, in agreement with John's emphasis on Jesus' death as the basis for communion between himself and believers, Jesus does not replace

⁷ Defenders of penal substitution struggle to explain how Paul of all people can say "Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ" (1 Cor. 11:1), when their entire theory of the Gospel involves Jesus doing what no believer could ever imitate, namely "perfectly obeying the law" and "paying a penalty for sin." Indeed, anyone who dares to claim that they are in fact imitating Christ risks the retaliation, "Then you obviously don't need Jesus."

us in being “hanged on a tree,” but enters into the same place as us, namely the status of being cursed by Moses’ law.⁸ God then is faced with the prospect of breaking fellowship with Jesus due to his being cursed. To remain in fellowship with Jesus requires that God impose no further penalty on him, and to avoid becoming unjust, he must impose no further penalty on anyone else who has run afoul of Moses’ law. This, and not some “abrogation theory” in which it is alleged that Jesus “rescinded” or “repealed” Moses’ law, is why Christians need not worry about dietary restrictions and other requirements unique to Moses’ law; all mankind together with Christ is already cursed by Moses’ law, thus it is pointless to try to obey it.⁹ By contrast, Christians can and do perform the works of the law of Christ,¹⁰ and they do so without any fear of “works righteousness.” A person who loves God and neighbor, but accidentally eats clam chowder when he thought it was potato soup, is still cursed by Moses’ law, and for this reason is unable to claim any merit for any good he has done. He does not have to heed any of the numerous schemes of law expansion¹¹ in denigrating his works performed according to the law of Christ, much less seek endless absolutions for them based on a penal substitution theory.

⁸ Paul cites both the general curse for violating any part of Moses’ law from Deut. 27:26, and the specific curse for hanging on a tree from Deut. 21:23.

⁹ See Paul’s sermon at Pisidian Antioch, specifically Acts 13:38, for his assertion that Moses’ law could not be consistently obeyed even by Jews at that time, and that Jesus’ forgiveness is directed at sins as defined by Moses’ law.

¹⁰ This phrase, unique to Gal. 6:2, refers to the “law” as defined in Gal. 5:14, where Paul asserts that “the whole law is fulfilled in one word: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself,’ ” the latter originally spoken by the Lord to Moses in Lev. 19:18 and affirmed by Jesus in Matt. 22:35-40.

¹¹ Most notorious is the widespread misquotation of “love your neighbor as yourself” as “love your neighbor more than yourself.” David P. Scaer, “Sanctification: By Grace Alone,” in For the Life of the World (Fort Wayne: Concordia Theological Seminary Press, October, 1998), p. 9, claimed, “Jesus, in requiring that we love God with our whole being and our neighbors more than ourselves, was not giving us an impossible goal to awaken in us a morbid sense of sinfulness,” but he failed to show how this is not in fact an impossible goal, since he subsequently admits, “In actual practice our sanctification is only a weak reflection of Christ’s life.” For evidence of secular agreement with Scaer, see the motion picture The Book of Eli (Warner Bros. Pictures, 2010). At 1:32, Denzel Washington’s character asserts as the primary thing he learned from a Bible he was carrying, “do for others more than you do for yourself.”

5. None of the above passages support the idea that Jesus' death "wins" forgiveness by placating wrath or paying a penalty. Instead, a number of texts make far more basic and general statements of benefit, such as proving God's love (Rom. 5:8) and grace (Rom. 8:32), uniting Christ with all mankind (2 Cor. 5:14), sharing the life of Christ (1 Thess. 5:10), and enabling the imitation of Christ (1 Pet. 2:21). In view of Gal. 3:10-14, the sanctification which results from Christ's sacrifice discussed in several texts in Hebrews (especially 10:5-14) refers to the nullification of the effects of the curse of the law of Moses, not to the pardon of sins against the law of Christ. In Scripture, the latter is achieved not by anything Jesus did de novo, but by the procedures of repentance dating back to Genesis, which Jesus affirmed, centering on the amendment of previously sinful behavior. Thus Joseph's brothers are forgiven when they submit to Joseph instead of trying to harm him (Gen. 50:18-20), Nebuchadnezzar is blessed when he renounces idolatry (Dan. 4:34), and Paul is able to serve as an apostle when he ceases persecuting the church (1 Cor. 15:9-10). The most obvious evidence that violations of the law of Christ are not pardoned on the basis of Christ's crucifixion is found, ironically, in the account of Christ's crucifixion according to Luke (Luke 23:39-43). There a thief, thus a violator of "love your neighbor as yourself," is promised entrance into paradise by Jesus without any reference to the cross, the shedding of Jesus' blood, or the placation of God's presumed wrath. It is rather the thief's admission of guilt and agreement to the prescribed correction for his sin which results in his approval by Jesus. So shall it be for us all.

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