

# Christ's Substitutionary Sacrifice

A brief study of the Atonement



**Christ's  
Substitutionary  
Sacrifice**

The background of the box features a faint, repeating watermark of the text: "we thus... died for all... dead: and... all that they..."

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Tyndale House, Dorset Road, London, SW19 3NN, UK

5M/06/06

# Christ's Substitutionary Sacrifice: a brief study of the Atonement

**T**he American New Testament scholar A. T. Robertson made an unusual comment about the Greek New Testament. He said, ‘The real New Testament is the Greek New Testament. The English is simply a translation of the New Testament, not the actual New Testament’.<sup>1</sup> Whilst we believe he was overstating this, he was illustrating an important point. All New Testament translations—English, Spanish or in any language—are just that: translations. The New Testament was originally written in Greek; it is Greek (with the Hebrew of the Old Testament) that the Authorised Version translators claimed to be ‘the golden pipes, or rather conduits, wherethrough the olive branches empty themselves into the gold’,<sup>2</sup> and which the Westminster Divines said was ‘immediately inspired by God, and, by His singular care and providence, kept pure in all ages’.<sup>3</sup> The Greek New Testament is the same in every place or generation, and the Textus Receptus, representing the best manuscripts, is the standard unto which all translations are to be compared. Robertson’s comment is based on his understanding that no language is completely able to render consistently and completely what is found in the Greek.

## ■ The English language

The English language is a very rich, expressive, flexible and idiomatic language, and the Authorised Version is even today the finest, most accurate, most important and influential

## *Christ's Substitutionary Sacrifice:*

translation in English. Robertson states, 'It is impossible to overestimate the influence of the King James Version upon the language and life of the English-speaking world'.<sup>4</sup> Yet even English has difficulties with certain aspects of Greek grammar and syntax. The glory and majesty of the Greek can occasionally be veiled. One such veiling happens with the little English word 'for'. We will look at this one small English word and show the importance the Greek has to our Bible knowledge and understanding of the finished work of the Lord Jesus Christ, and at how some in our day ignore the truth therein.

Most people when they are reading the Bible read too rapidly and do not stop to consider and define the words they read. Robertson says:

The trouble with all translations is that one's mind does not pause long enough over a passage to get the full benefit of the truth contained in it. [Using] the Greek compels one to pause over each word long enough for it to fertilize the mind with its rich and fructifying energy. The very words of the English become so familiar that they slip through the mind too easily.<sup>5</sup>

The Society would maintain that it is the very uniqueness of the language of the English Authorised Version that helps greatly to guard against such a tendency.

Robertson's words are especially true of little words like 'for', which we tend to pass over.<sup>6</sup> However, 'for' is important, not least because it is a very flexible word which has many meanings and uses in the New Testament. As an English preposition, it has at least twenty-one dictionary definitions, among which are 'benefit', 'cause', 'reward', 'respect' and 'direction'. It can be used as a conjunction and even has a verbal definition. This can be seen by the following simple sentence:

**'For** this is **for** us and **for** our faith **for** now and **for** ever.'

The reader should note that each 'for' has a different meaning. These various usages are also seen in the Bible, and differentiating between these is helpful in understanding correctly what the Bible says; and like with all words in the Bible, 'for' must be interpreted according to the context in which it is found.

## ■ Substitution

In this article our interest is in the substitutionary meaning of the Greek word ὑπερ (*hyper*, often translated 'for' in the English Bible). The idea of substitution is not unique to the New Testament. In the Old Testament the idea of substitution goes all the way back to

the Garden of Eden. It is clearly seen later in the Bible in the sacrificial system given to the Jews. Perhaps the clearest statement in the Old Testament of the idea of substitution—and which points so strongly to that of the New Testament—is the great prophetic passage in Isaiah 53.6: ‘All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and the LORD hath laid on him the iniquity of us all’. John Gill writes of this:

**and the Lord hath laid on him the iniquity of us all;** that is, God the Father, against whom we have sinned, from whom we have turned, and whose justice must be satisfied; he has laid on Christ, his own Son, the sins of all his elect ones; which are as it were collected together, and made one bundle and burden of, and therefore expressed in the singular number, “iniquity”, and laid on Christ, and were bore by him, even all the sins of all God’s elect; a heavy burden this! which none but the mighty God could bear; this was typified by laying of hands, and laying of sins upon the sacrifice, and putting the iniquities of Israel upon the head of the scapegoat, by whom they were bore, and carried away.<sup>7</sup>

In the New Testament the word ‘for’ (ὕπερ) is found among other places in John 11.50–52, Galatians 3.13 and 2 Corinthians 5.14. Like the English word ‘for’, ὕπερ has several different meanings. Among them it can mean ‘for, in behalf of, for the sake of someone/something’; specifically it is used in verses dealing with substitution as ‘in place of, instead of, in the name of’ (2 Corinthians 5.14).<sup>8</sup>

The death of Christ was the death of all, because he was dying their death. In becoming the object of divine wrath against human sin, Christ was acting vicariously, viz., ὕπερ [usually transliterated *hyper*] *hemon* [us], not only “on our behalf” or “with a view to our good” but “in our place” (2 Cor. 5:21; Gal. 3:13). He assumed the liabilities of others in “being made sin” and “becoming a curse”.<sup>9</sup>

Even Greek syntax grammars admit the substitutionary use of ὕπερ in Classical Greek, the Septuagint, the papyri and in verses dealing with salvation in the New Testament.<sup>10</sup>

One of the clearest places which demonstrates the vicarious substitution of Christ is 2 Corinthians 5.14–15, ‘For the love of Christ constraineth us; because we thus judge, that if one died **for** all, then were all dead: and *that* he died **for** all, that they which live should not henceforth live unto themselves, but unto him which died **for** them, and rose again’ [bold indicates author’s emphasis]. The Greek can be translated literally as, ‘For the love of Christ is constraining us, because we judged this: that if one died **in place of** all [and he did], therefore all died: and he died **in place of** all, that they who live should not live for themselves, but for him who died and rose again **in their place**’ [bold indicates author’s emphasis]. In other words, Christ died not only ‘for’ or ‘on behalf of’ but ‘in place of’ these Corinthian believers and therefore in place of all believers in all ages in every place.

## ■ Penal Substitution

We see from Romans chapter three that the Lord Jesus Christ became the wrath-ending sacrifice to satisfy the holy anger of God which burned against sin. Jesus stood in the place of guilty sinners and the Lord laid upon Him the iniquity (guilt) of us all. This removal of guilt by the shed blood of the Lord Jesus Christ was to satisfy the justice of God which demanded perfect righteousness from us. Since we are all sinners we all come short of the glory of God (Romans 3.23). As question 152 of the Westminster Larger Catechism states, 'Every sin, even the least, being against the sovereignty, goodness, and holiness of God, and against his righteous law, deserveth his wrath and curse. . . and cannot be expiated but by the blood of Christ'. Question 33 of the Shorter Catechism says that 'justification is an act of God's free grace, wherein he pardoneth all our sins, and accepteth us as righteous in his sight, only for the righteousness of Christ imputed to us, and received by faith alone'. We were enemies of God, but God has brought us near to Himself by the finished sacrifice of Jesus. Thus, we have even been justified—declared not guilty and declared righteous—and reconciled to God, and have been adopted into His family.

This wonderful demonstration of the love of God should constrain us as it did the Corinthian believers. However the truth of this mighty sacrifice is not believed by all who 'name the name of Christ'—who claim to belong to Him.

## ■ Aberrant Views

Regrettably many people of the liberal or neo-orthodox persuasion do not believe in the vicarious, penal substitutionary sacrifice of Christ. They call themselves 'Christians' yet they reject what the Scriptures say about Christ's sacrifice. They form a religion which, although using Christian terminology, teaches doctrines which are alien to what the Bible says. For various reasons the Biblical understanding has been abandoned in favour of views which reject out-of-hand the teaching of the substitutionary sacrifice of Christ.

Many make this change by taking out of context the teaching that 'God is love'. They focus on 'love' and cannot believe that a loving God could ever be angry—love and anger are mutually exclusive. They find in the Cross and the loving, self-giving death of Christ a wonderful example of how loving Christians should live, which should inspire us to do good works as Jesus did. Others reject the sacrificial aspect of a literal blood atonement as being a part of a 'slaughterhouse religion', which again would be foreign to their concept of 'God is love'. All of this, they believe, makes the Cross and death of Christ more acceptable and reasonable to modern man and to themselves.

In past years this rejection of the truth of Christ's sacrificial death was the domain of those outside of evangelical Christianity. However, in recent years some people—several of whom are very prominent 'Christians'—who classify themselves as 'evangelicals' have left the clear teachings of Scripture. One such person is Steve Chalke. In 2004 Steve Chalke with Alan Mann wrote *The Lost Message of Jesus*,<sup>11</sup> in which they discuss among other things Chalke's views of the death of Christ and the atonement. The book has stirred a great deal of debate, with some evangelicals accepting Chalke as something akin to a prophet and others rejecting any claims he has to the Christian faith.

The Oasis Trust has published an article written by Chalke in which he provides more detail about his beliefs. Among other things he says:

In my view however, the real problem with penal substitution (a theory rooted in violence and retributive notions of justice) is its incompatibility, at least as currently taught and understood, with any authentically Christian understanding of the character of God or genuinely Christocentric worldview—given, for instance, Jesus' own non-violent, 'do not return evil for evil', approach to life. Hence my comment, in *The Lost Message of Jesus*, about the tragedy of reducing God to a 'cosmic child abuser'. Though the sheer bluntness of my imagery might shock some, in truth, it is only because it is a stark 'unmasking' of the violent, pre-Christian thinking behind such a Theology.<sup>12</sup>

In responding to criticisms he knew would come about the original statement in his book, he said, 'The fact is that the cross isn't a form of cosmic child abuse—a vengeful Father, punishing his Son for an offence he has not even committed. Understandably, both people inside and outside of the Church have found this twisted version of events morally dubious and a huge barrier to faith.'<sup>13</sup> It appears that Chalke was afraid someone might think poorly of God because of the perceived negative nature of the Cross and a God who would punish sin in His own Son as our substitute. It is sad that he thinks that penal substitution reduces God to a 'cosmic child abuser'. He does not see the Cross in the light of the Everlasting Covenant the Triune God made. The Lord Jesus Christ was not an 'abused child' or unwilling participant in our redemption. He **willingly** went to the Cross and offered Himself in our place (John 10.15,17; Galatians 1.4; Titus 2.14; Hebrews 12.2).

Mr. Chalke knew several things would happen about the publication of his views. From the way he writes it appears that he anticipated the way his views would be received. He knew that they would be controversial. He also knew that his views would upset both evangelicals and reformed Christians alike and that many would be offended to the point of open debate and division. Indeed, he was right: all of these things happened; as a result he sold more books.



## ■ What saith the Scripture?

One prayer that is necessary is that Christians both young and old will search 'the scriptures daily, whether those things [are] so' (Acts 17.11). For the answer to this aberrant view is to be found in the Bible.

1. Jesus was smitten of God:

'Surely he hath borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows: yet we did esteem him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted.' Isaiah 53.4

2. Jesus was wounded, bruised and chastised for us:

'But he *was* wounded for our transgressions, *he was* bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace *was* upon him; and with his stripes we are healed.' Isaiah 53.5

3. Jesus took upon Himself our iniquity:

'All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and the LORD hath laid on him the iniquity of us all.' Isaiah 53.6

4. Jesus took away our sins:

'The next day John seeth Jesus coming unto him, and saith, Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world.' John 1.29

5. Jesus gave his life (ὄπερ) for us:

'I am the good shepherd: the good shepherd giveth his life for the sheep.' John 10.11

6. Jesus, the Living Bread, gives His life (ὄπερ) for us:

'I am the living bread which came down from heaven: if any man eat of this bread, he shall live for ever: and the bread that I will give is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world.' John 6.51

7. Jesus became a curse (ὄπερ) for us and redeemed us:

'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' Galatians 3.13

8. Jesus died (ὄπερ) in our place:

'For the love of Christ constraineth us; because we thus judge, that if one died for all, then

were all dead: and *that* he died for all, that they which live should not henceforth live unto themselves, but unto him which died for them, and rose again.' 2 Corinthians 5.14–15

9. Jesus was made to be sin (ὕπερ) for us:

'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.' 2 Corinthians 5.21

10. Jesus the Just suffered (ὕπερ) for the unjust in order to bring us to God:

'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' 1 Peter 3.18

A great many verses could be cited to demonstrate the point the Bible makes about the substitutionary sacrifice of Christ. However, in the face of the evidence above, an old saying rings true: 'There are none so blind as those who **will** not see'.

## ■ Conclusion

We must be very clear about what our little word 'for' means in these verses. Too often it is bypassed, going unnoticed when we are reading our English Bibles. However, it has such an important function. When its meaning is understood from the Greek, it clearly and unmistakably identifies the death of Christ on the cross as one of substitution. The sacrifice of the Lord Jesus Christ was 'for' us in the sense of 'on our behalf' and 'in our place'. God the Father laid upon Him the iniquity of us all, and He took the guilt of our sin. In our place Jesus the Just and Righteous Substitute took the punishment for every sin we have committed or ever will commit: a propitiatory sacrifice made to satisfy the justice of a Holy God. Jesus then declared 'It is finished' (literally from the Greek this is, 'It has been finished and stands finished', John 19.30).

As the Old and New Testaments clearly say:

He shall see of the travail of his soul, *and* shall be satisfied: by his knowledge shall my righteous servant justify many; for he shall bear their iniquities. Therefore will I divide him *a portion* with the great, and he shall divide the spoil with the strong; because he hath poured out his soul unto death: and he was numbered with the transgressors; and he bare the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors. Isaiah 53.11–12

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2 Corinthians 5.14–15



## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> A. T. Robertson, *The Minister and His Greek New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI, USA: Baker Book House, 1983), p. 17.

<sup>2</sup> *The Translators to the Reader: Being a Reprint of The Original Preface to the Authorized Version of 1611* (London: Trinitarian Bible Society, 1998), p. 24.

<sup>3</sup> Westminster Confession of Faith, 1.8.

<sup>4</sup> Robertson, p. 18.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 21.

<sup>6</sup> There is an old test designed to determine one's proofreading skills, in which a person is asked to find the number of times the letter 'f' is used in a sentence. The sentence contains several longer words beginning with the letter, but also has several occurrences of 'for' and 'of'. Invariably, some or all of the uses of 'f' in these little words are missed.

<sup>7</sup> John Gill, *Exposition of the Entire Bible*, 'Isaiah 53.6' (e-Sword, 2005).

<sup>8</sup> Frederick William Danker, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd edition (Chicago, IL, USA: The University of Chicago Press, 2000), pp. 1030-31.

<sup>9</sup> Colin Brown, *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, 4 vols. (Grand Rapids, MI, USA: Zondervan Publishing House, 1971), 3.1197.

<sup>10</sup> see Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics* (Grand Rapids, MI, USA: Zondervan Publishing House, 1996), pp. 383-389.

<sup>11</sup> Steve Chalke and Alan Mann, *The Lost Message of Jesus* (Grand Rapids, MI, USA: Zondervan, 2003).

<sup>12</sup> Steve Chalke, *Redeeming the cross: The Lost Message of Jesus & the cross of Christ*, [www.oasistrust.org/temp/TheSpLostspMessagespofspJesusspspAtonement.pdf](http://www.oasistrust.org/temp/TheSpLostspMessagespofspJesusspspAtonement.pdf) (24 November 2005).

<sup>13</sup> Chalke and Mann, p. 182.

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- To publish and distribute the Holy Scriptures throughout the world in many languages.
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- To be instrumental in bringing light and life, through the Gospel of Christ, to those who are lost in sin and in the darkness of false religion and unbelief.
- To uphold the doctrines of reformed Christianity, bearing witness to the equal and eternal deity of God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit, One God in three Persons.
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Product Code: A118

ISBN 1 86228 276 5



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