

For Us
...reflections on God's gift of himself

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In Christ we see God for us. Marjorie Hewitt Suchocki

My father had an interesting way of calling us to the phone. After shouting the name of whichever family member was needed, he'd bawl out, "It's for yoo-hoo!"

It's for you. Identifying the person that the action/contribution/gift is for, like a label on a Christmas present, to make sure it gets to the intended recipient.

God labels his gifts for us, making sure we know that he has us individually in mind. Most especially when he gives his greatest gift—of himself.

All too often we miss the point, from having heard the words too often. "Christ died for us," we intone, and immediately a host of theological baggage arrives ready to be unloaded, unpacked, and unwrapped.

Talk about needing a code book, for there's much that has to be deciphered. "In these words we have the incarnational mystery of substitutionary and proleptic atonement," says the scholar, preoccupied with defining and attributing and specifying. Not that any of that is essentially wrong; it may just get in the way. The problem may even be that we misunderstand what is really happening, and get the whole issue the wrong way round.

It's for us. That's the essential message. The direction of his act is usward, not Godward. Christ did not die for God, to fix things there. He died *for us*.

It's interesting how often we miss that major point. We can be so fixated on making sure we get the facts to fit our theoretical notions of how God makes salvation possible that we miss the actual sense of the message. The meaning of the words is lost in the theological noise, the cognitive static.

So let's look again at the texts. (Italicized for emphasis).

- You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man, though for a good man someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ *died for us*. Romans 5:6, 7 NIV.
- For God did not appoint us to suffer wrath but to receive salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ. He *died for us* so that, whether we are awake or asleep, we may live together with him. 1 Thessalonians 5:9, 10 NIV.

- For Christ's love compels us, because we are convinced that one *died for all*, and therefore all died. And he *died for all*, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who *died for them* and was raised again. 2 Corinthians 5:14, 15 NIV.

So the first question is what does this “for” mean? Just because our theological minds have been attuned to understand “in place of” does not mean this is the original meaning. In fact, far clearer meanings of “for” here would be “on behalf of,” or “because of.” The “for” is in our direction, it is “towards” us. In the same way when we give a gift and say “it’s for you” as we hand it over, God is directing the gift of himself to us.

It would make little sense to give a gift and say “it’s for you” and mean “it’s on behalf of you.” Yet that is the “usual” theological meaning imposed on these verses. Let’s look at more evidence:

- I do not set aside the grace of God, for if righteousness could be gained through the law, Christ *died for nothing!* Galatians 2:21 NIV.

On behalf of nothing? No, “for” meaning “reason” or “consequence”—nothing was accomplished. It makes little sense to read this text any other way. Christ was not “substituting” for nothing. Rather, it simply means that his death was *for* no purpose.

- For Christ *died for sins* once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God. 1 Peter 3:18 NIV.

Again, “for” here is to be understood as “because.” Christ died as a consequence of sins—being made sin who knew no sin, the righteous being made unrighteous and experiencing the inherent result of sin—separation from God, ruin and death. There is no hint of “replacement”—that Jesus died on behalf of us or our sins.

- Christ *died for our sins* according to the Scriptures. 1 Corinthians 15:3 NIV.

Dying for our sins—dying because of the effect that sin has, in other words. Why is it so difficult to read such verses and understand the word “for” in its normal sense of “because of”? Take another simple example:

- When Achan son of Zerah acted unfaithfully regarding the devoted things, did not wrath come upon the whole community of Israel? He was not the only one who *died for his sin*. Joshua 22:20 NIV.

He died as a consequence of his sin—sin was the causative factor. Where is the usually-assumed intent of “for” meaning “in place of”? “Replacing”? “Fixing it”?

No, on the contrary—Jesus is willing even to experience the consequences of our own sins. He becomes a curse *because of us*:

- Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse *for us*, for it is written: “Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree.” Galatians 3:13 NIV.

A major message of Jesus’ death is that *sin kills*. Sin has an inherent consequence. As God told the pair in the Garden, “You must not eat fruit from the tree that is in the middle of the garden, and you must not touch it, or you will die.” Genesis 3:3 NIV. Did Eve and then Adam die immediately they touched the fruit? Did they die from eating the fruit? Not directly. It was not a contact poison, a toxic substance. In fact, Eve describes the fruit very differently: “the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom.” Genesis 3:6 NIV. So the fruit itself is not necessarily to blame.

If, however, you believe the result of sin is a direct and imposed penalty of God—“you touch that fruit, I’ll kill you”—why did the pair not die on the spot? Didn’t happen that way. No, God is not the executioner. He did *not* say he would kill the sinner. He simply states that sin kills, and the sinner dies. Sin’s inevitable outcome is the opposite of the Life-giver: death and non-existence. While God has frequently punished his children for sinful disobedience, and his discipline surely is not pleasant, to make God into the Divine Slayer who metes out the ultimate sanction of the death penalty is to turn our heavenly Father into a vindictive tyrant of the worse kind.

As Ellen White writes: “God does not stand toward the sinner as an executioner of the sentence against transgression; but He leaves the rejectors of His mercy to themselves, to reap that which they have sown. Every ray of light rejected, every warning despised or unheeded, every passion indulged, every transgression of the law of God, is a seed sown which yields its unfailing harvest.” *Great Controversy*, p.36.

You reap what you sow. “The one who sows to please his sinful nature, from that nature will reap destruction; the one who sows to please the Spirit, from the Spirit will reap eternal life. Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up.” Galatians 6:8, 9 NIV.

Let’s be clear here. The payment is intrinsic, it is automatic. It is not an imposed penalty, but a simple consequence of action.

“Sin pays a wage, the wage is death.” Romans 6:23 Phillips.

“For the wage paid by sin is death; the gift freely given by God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.” Romans 6:23 New Jerusalem Bible.

“For the wages paid by Sin are death; but God’s free gift is the Life of the Ages bestowed upon us in Christ Jesus our Lord.” Romans 6:23 Weymouth’s New Testament

God is not hostile. He is not the Enemy. God is on our side, wanting to give us his free gift of eternal life. Nor is he trying to solve some internal conflict in himself, paying himself off through some mechanism that satisfies himself! There’s no need to imagine one attribute of God fixing it for another attribute.

The essence of the good news is that God is not against us. He is not a vengeful Deity intent on vindictive punishment, an angry and unsympathetic divine Being who is antagonistic towards us. If we should even believe this just a little, then we fall into the Devil's trap and believe his picture of God.

So what is the truth?

“What, then, shall we say in response to this?”—the saving, glorifying intentions of God for us. “If God is *for us*, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up *for us all*—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?” Romans 8:31, 32 NIV.

The fundamental message as demonstrated by Jesus is that God is on our side. He is not opposed, in fact he places himself squarely on our side, with us. He is *for us, for us all*.

Paul in Ephesians 2:1-9 NIV spells it out for all to know:

“As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature objects of wrath. But because of his great love *for us*, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved. And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus. For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast.”

We know what we're like. Hardly lovable. And certainly not doing, saying, or thinking the right things. A group of sinful, evil rebels who are a long way from being God's friends. So far gone that we're identified as dead in our wickedness. But God, because of his great love *for us* makes us alive through his rich mercy and graciousness. God gives his incredible gift of eternity with him, his gracious transforming of our lives, his saving resurrection from our sin-caused death—because of who he is. Not because of who we are—and not from anything we can do to help ourselves—it is all the gift of God. Who of us can boast?

“Whoever is not against us is *for us*,” said Jesus in Mark 9:40. In the same way, God is on our side. With us. God with us. Emmanuel, God made flesh and dwelling among us, full of grace and truth. This is God showing how *much* he is *for us*.

Philip wonders about this God, and thinks it would be essential to see him as he is. “Lord, show us the Father and that will be enough *for us*,” he says. We will be convinced if we can really know for sure that God truly is for us.

Wondering how more clearly he can make himself, how more plainly he can show God, Jesus asks, “Don’t you know me, Philip, even after I have been among you such a long time? Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, ‘Show us the Father’?”

For in total truth, Jesus reveals this “for us” God, stating bluntly that if we’ve seen him, we’ve seen the Father (see John 14:9).

He is the one who demonstrates the truth about God so we can understand it: “Christ Jesus, who has become *for us* wisdom from God—that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption.” 1 Corinthians 1:30 NIV. .

Sometimes, like Peter, we worry about what is coming to us, what the benefit will be *for us*. “Peter answered him, ‘We have left everything to follow you! What then will there be *for us*?’” Matthew 19:27 NIV. In other words, what will we possess? What is the *benefit* for us? The answer is in Luke 1:69 NIV: “He has raised up a horn of salvation *for us* in the house of his servant David.” The horn of plenty, the abundant salvation that God provides for us. Not as a “stand-in,” in the “replacement” sense of “for.” God is not there “instead of” us. He is there “because of” us. He is truly *for us*.

So we can wait in confidence for the future, the achievement of salvation in its fullest sense, for we know the kind of God who promises. “We wait for the blessed hope—the glorious appearing of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ, who gave himself *for us* to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good.” Titus 2:13, 14.

He gave himself *for us* so that we could be for him—to be changed into the kind of people we would want to be. Not in some theoretical way of having goodness imputed to us when we really are not, but being truly changed, wishing to live in the only way that makes sense—God’s way. We are changed by the giving God who gave himself for us and continues for all eternity to give himself to and for us.

For if God had not done this, we would never have known, never have discovered the real truth about our “for us” God. But now we know, and can respond in total confidence:

“This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life *for us*... And so we know and rely on the love God has *for us*.” 1 John 3:16; 4:16 NIV.

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