

Did Jesus Die in Our Place?

By Kyle Pope

Because of the extreme views of Calvinism the above question has been a source of earnest debate and consideration among brethren since the early days of the Restoration Movement. Alexander Campbell and Barton W. Stone carried on a written debate on this issue for a year and a half from 1840 to 1841 in Campbell's *Millennial Harbinger*. Having both come out of Calvinism, Stone saw certain ideas regarding substitution as so intertwined with the fundamentals of Calvinism that he rejected the use of any substitutionary language in reference to Christ's death altogether. Campbell, on the other hand, saw some substitutionary language explicit in Scripture and did not believe one had to reject every sense in which Christ acted in our place in order to reject Calvinism. To this very day brethren continue to study this question in order to make certain that our claims are sound, scriptural, and free of any denominational conceptual errors.

There can be no question that Scripture occasionally uses language in reference to Jesus (and other things) acting as substitutions. For example, in Abraham's command to sacrifice Isaac, when God stopped him a ram was provided that Abraham offered **"for a burnt offering INSTEAD OF his son"** (Gen. 22:13, NKJV, emphasis mine). It is generally agreed that Abraham's statement shortly before this, when Isaac asked him about the offering, was Messianic. Abraham told Isaac, **"God will provide for Himself the lamb for the burnt offering"** (Gen. 22:8). If this is the case, the ram offered "instead of" Isaac becomes a figure (or type) of what God would provide in Jesus—**"the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world"** (John 1:29).

Another example is seen when God delivered the Israelites by striking the firstborn of Egypt. The salvation God provided to Israel was not just something that affected the Israelites only at that time. Because of God's deliverance of the firstborn among Israel all of the firstborn males belonged to God (Exod. 13:12; Deut. 15:19). This was true of animals and people. For clean animals, this meant that they were sacrificed as an offering to God and the Levites ate their meat for food (Num. 18:17-18). Unclean animals and human beings were "redeemed" (Num. 18:15). For animals, this meant offering a clean animal in its place. For example a donkey they were **"to redeem with a lamb"** (Exod. 13:13). Human beings were redeemed in some different ways. When the process first started, God took the number of living Levites **"INSTEAD OF all the firstborn among the children of Israel"** (Num. 3:4, emphasis mine). For the 273 non-Levite firstborn over the number of Levites living at the time, God accepted a five shekel per head redemption price (Num. 3:47-51). Later, firstborn males were redeemed with the offering of a lamb or if the family was poor **"a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons"** as Mary and Joseph did for Jesus (Luke 2:22-24). The New Testament makes it clear that this process prefigured the role Jesus would play for mankind. Not only is Jesus identified as **"our Passover lamb"** (1 Cor. 5:7, ESV), whose blood on the doorposts of the Israelites' homes was accepted in place of the death of the firstborn, but Christians are repeatedly described as being *redeemed*, **"with the precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot"** (1 Pet. 1:19, NKJV).

One of the most powerful, and touching texts that directly describes Jesus' death in our place is Isaiah 53. We know that this is prophetically talking about Jesus because when Philip taught the Ethiopian eunuch he was reading from this text in Isaiah (Acts 8:32-33) when he asked Philip

who the prophet was talking about (Acts 8:34). The text tells us that Philip **“beginning at this Scripture, preached Jesus to him”** (Acts 8:35). Isaiah declared, **“He was wounded for our transgressions, He was bruised for our iniquities”** (Isaiah 53:5); God **“made His soul an offering for sin”** (Isa. 53:10); **“He was numbered with the transgressors, and He bore the sin of many”** (Isa. 53:12). This language does not explain the significance of this in complex theological terms but simply describes Jesus’ death *for us*. This is echoed in scores of New Testament texts that speak of Jesus’ death *for us* (e.g. Rom.5:8; 1 Thess. 5:10, etc.). So yes, we can conclude that Jesus died *in our place*.

There are a few things, however, we must clarify. The above examples show: 1) a sacrifice offered in the place of something in order to satisfy a Divine claim, and 2) a ransom price paid in the place of something also to satisfy a Divine claim. Scripture describes Jesus’ death as a *sacrifice* and as payment of a *ransom* for mankind. Yet, this doesn’t mean that Jesus was transformed into a literal animal or money, but that He figuratively represented these things. In the same way Jesus *bearing* our sins does not mean that Jesus became guilty of sin. He was **“in all points tempted as we are yet without sin”** (Heb. 4:15), otherwise He would not have been **“a lamb without blemish and without spot”** (1 Pet. 1:19). In addition to this, the sense in which Jesus died in our place does not mean that Jesus suffered and bore the full scope of what we deserved. The Bible teaches **“the wages of sin is death”** (Rom. 6:23), but this means more than simply physical death. Sin separates man from a relationship of fellowship with God (Isa. 59:1-2). The soul who dies in sin will be eternally separated from God in a condition of eternal punishment in darkness and fire (Matt. 25:46; 2 Thess. 1:9; Jude 13; Rev. 20:15) which is called **“the second death”** (Rev. 20:14). As horrible as Jesus’ death was, He did not suffer eternal punishment. His death served as a figure of the type of punishment mankind deserved. Further, this does not mean that Jesus was ever *fully* separated from God. To do this God the Son would have to either stop being God, or become a second God. Jesus never surrendered His Deity, but continued as one person of the triune nature of the one true God. Jesus did cry out on the cross, **“My God, My God why have you forsaken Me”** (Matt. 27:46), which was a quote from Psalm 22:1. In the Psalm, the psalmist eventually recognized God had not forsaken him. Was that Jesus’ point? Perhaps. We are not told why Jesus said this. Most likely in this horrifying and yet gracious act by which Jesus was offered *in our place* Jesus figuratively represented God’s separation from sin. In this sense Jesus became **“a curse for us”** (Gal. 3:13) and was made **“to be sin for us”** (2 Cor. 5:21b) even though in fact He **“knew no sin”** (2 Cor. 5:21a). Like the ram of Abraham’s sacrifice, the Passover lamb of the final plague, the Levites redemption for the firstborn of Israel, the lamb, turtledoves, pigeons, or redemption price paid for the firstborn, Jesus was accepted as a propitiation to God *instead of* the souls of those who are willing (through obedience to the gospel) to accept His death in our place.

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Amarillo, TX
kmpope@att.net