

# Life and Teachings of Paul

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## Use of Poetic Metaphors in Scripture

In the writings of Paul this symbolism was carried over in his interpretation of the death of Christ where he utilizes poetic metaphors to create “word pictures” of what God has done to effect the salvation of the human race.

Paul utilizes a literary device found throughout the Hebrew Scriptures called a “poetic metaphor” by literary critics. The metaphor is the most common figure of speech in religious literature. It is the most significant tool of the biblical writer for conveying a word picture of a complex concept. It is the stock and trade of biblical prophecy and apocalyptic literature, both biblical and non-biblical. The most common mistake of the Bible reader is to take the poetic metaphors literally and assume that there is no meaning beyond the common connotation of the words of the text. The consequences of this assumption may be seen in the apocalyptic movements and their literalists’ interpretations of the writings of Ezekiel and Daniel of the OT, and John’s apocalyptic treatise, the book of Revelation, of the NT.

## Either Death Or Resurrection

A similar problem may be seen in an area assumed to be an established doctrine of traditional Christianity. This matter concerns the meaning of the death of Jesus of Nazareth as a saving event for mankind. The death of Jesus by crucifixion has been historically presented as a blood sacrifice made to God as a substitute offering for the sins of the human race. The results of this interpretation has

resulted in a portrait of God as a despotic being filled with anger toward the human race who had to be appeased with the human blood of a sinless being to quite his wrath and satisfy his demand for justice.

The case made for this interpretation is taken primarily from the letters of Paul and the writer of the letter to the Hebrews. The major problem underlying this interpretation is the failure of ancient and modern interpreters to appreciate Paul's use of the poetic metaphors he employs in his presentation of the role of the death of Jesus in the redemption of man.

Paul speaks of the death of Jesus on a cross of crucifixion and the blood shed in that event by the use of poetic metaphors in which the terms "death," "cross," and "blood" are used interchangeably for what Paul calls "the message of the cross," (1 Cor 1:17-18; Gal 6:14; Eph 2:16; Phil 2:8; Col 1:20; 2:14-15). When he speaks of the cross of Christ as an instrument by which Christ redeemed man, he does not intend to isolate the cross from the bloodshed of Christ, the resulting death, or the following resurrection from death as a part of what Paul called "the message of the cross" (1 Cor 1:18), or "the gospel" (1 Cor 15:1-4).

To fail to recognize the poetic metaphors Paul in this "message of the cross," uses results in what appears to be contradictions in his letters. Paul speaks of the death of Jesus (the cross, his blood) as do the speeches of Acts of Apostles. His death was an act of violence, which served as the prelude of the whole process of God's reversal of the curse of death by his resurrection of Jesus into new creation existence, an existence promised to all those who experience new creation in Christ (2 Cor 5:17).

It is difficult to believe that Paul understood the death of Christ as an atonement sacrifice or sin offering by which man's sins are removed in light of his comments 1 Corinthians 15, that without the resurrection of Christ the Corinthian believers were yet in their sins. Here Paul clearly says that without the resurrection, the sins of man were not taken away when Jesus died on the cross: "For if the dead

are not raised,” says Paul, “then Christ has not been raised either; and if Christ has not been raised,” says Paul, “your faith is futile; you are still in your sins,” (1 Cor 15:17). If the believers at Corinth would have yet been in their sins apart from the resurrection of Christ, what of Paul’s words in Romans 5,

*Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God's wrath through him! For if, when we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son (Rom 5:9-10).*

If the believers at Roman had been reconciled to God through the death of his Son, how was it that the believers in Corinth were yet in their sins, if Christ had not been raised? The answer is that Paul never intended for the death of Christ to be understood as having taking away the sins of man apart from Christ’s resurrection into a new existence.

This dilemma is the result of a tendency of biblical interpreters to see things disjunctively (either/or) rather than conjunctively (both/and). A biblical theme or motif does not have to be understood as “either this or than,” which means “this and not that” in their interpretations. Paul has been set in conflict with James in the matter of faith verse works by insisting that the issue is a matter of “either faith or works,” by which the relationship between faith and works is “faith and not works,” or “works and not faith.” This issue is not a matter of either Paul or James, it is more an issue between disjunctive thinking or conjunctive thinking.

There is another aspect of biblical interpretation present here. In both texts of 1 Cor 15:17 and Rom 5:9-10, Paul is using a poetic metaphor functioning as a synecdoche, a figure of speech wherein one part of a greater idea is used to speak of the whole of that greater idea. In the 1 Cor 15 text, Paul’s argument assumes that the reader understands that it was both the death and resurrection of Jesus that effected the salvation of man. So also in the Romans 5 text, Paul assumes that his readers understand that the death of Christ is not a redemptive event apart from the resurrection of Christ.

## Poetic Metaphors and Thematic Categories

Neither the death of Christ nor his resurrection is to be understood as a redemptive event apart from the other. They are “poetic metaphors” that take the form of a synecdoche, which in the science of hermeneutics is defined as the use of a part of a thing to represent the whole of the thing. The part of the whole, whether the death of Jesus or his resurrection, is one aspect of “the redemptive event,” which is the whole.

As an example of how this works, the phrase “the blood of Jesus” envisions the brutal or violent death of Jesus (Rom 3:25; 5:9; 1 Cor 10:15; 11:25, 27; Eph 1:7; 2:13; Col 1:14, 20). Likewise, the phrase “the cross of Jesus” envisions his death by crucifixion (1 Cor 1:17, 18; Gal 5:11; 6:12, 14; Eph 2:16; Phil 2:8; 3:18; Col 1:20; 2:14). To use the terminology of linguistic specialists, the “thematic category” here is “the redemption event of the death and resurrection of Christ,” the specific metaphors of this thematic category are the terms or motifs used to portray the thematic category as a whole, *viz* the redemption event. (Cf. “Thematic Categories” in *Metaphors Dictionary*, editors Elyse Sommer and Dorrie Weiss. The dictionary is arranged by “thematic categories,” with specific metaphors listed under the each thematic category.)

The “redemptive event” (the thematic category) is made up of the specifics of the event using the form of synecdoche wherein one aspect of the redemptive event may be used for the whole: the cross, crucifixion, nails, blood, death, tomb, and resurrection, all of which are the particulars of the redemptive event. To develop an “either/or” interpretation of the redemptive event wherein one aspect of the event is set over against the other, will lead to a faulty exegesis. This has been done with the death of Christ (*theologia crucis*) as set over against the resurrection of Christ (*theologia gloriae*). One set of theologians argue that it was the death of Christ that secured the salvation of man, while others argued that it was the resurrection of Christ that accomplished the redemptive event. Both are right in their assertions from a conjunctive (both/and) point of view; however, both were wrong from a disjunctive (either/or) point of

view.

The fact that Paul clearly states that one is yet in his sins if Christ is not resurrected from death prevents one from insisting that the death of Jesus apart from his resurrection was the redemptive event. If after the death of Jesus the believer could be yet in his sins, then Jesus' death did not remove the believer's sins (1 Cor 15:17). This would in turn imply that Christ's death cannot be understood as an atonement sacrifice or sin offering apart from his resurrection, as a means of redemption. As Paul defines the message he calls "the gospel," he presents it as the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ (1 Cor 15:3-4), not "the death" of Christ.

### Origins of the "Theology of the Cross"

The origins of the doctrine called "*Theologia Crucis*" belongs to the eleventh century Benedictine monk, Anselm of Canterbury, at least the written form of it. In his tractate *Cur Deus Homo* he develops an answer to the question, "Why did Christ Die?" His answer to this question resulted in the view that Jesus' death was a sin offering or blood sacrifice, offered as a substitute for sinful humankind, to pay the debt for sin owed to God. This view has been developed and/or expressed in different ways over the centuries, but it yet stands today essentially the same as developed by Anselm. Here, Jesus is to be understood as a sacrificial lamb in the sense of the lamb offered at Passover, a piece of imagery taken from John 1:29, 36; 1 Cor 5:7; 1 Peter 1:19.

The problem with this is that the Passover lamb was not a sin offering nor did it have any association with sin. The Passover lamb was slain as a meal for the Israelites in the land of Egypt on the night the angel was to "passover" the homes having a firstborn son. Those who had placed the blood of the lamb on their doorpost would receive a "passover" of the angel of death. So, the mention of Jesus as a lamb in the NT is not necessarily associated with Jesus' death as a sin offering. The sin offering of the Day of Atonement was a goat, or two goats; one goat for the blood to carry into the most holy place and the other to serve as a scapegoat to carry the sins of Israel into

the wilderness. Jesus is never called a goat in the NT. Aside from the passover, lambs were offered as sin, guilt, and fellowship offerings but Jesus is never directly associated with these types of sacrifices. The association of Jesus with a lamb is most likely taken from a combination of the lamb of Passover (1 Cor 5:7), and the lamb led to slaughter in Isaiah 52:13-53:12.

The portrayal of Jesus' death in the imagery of Anselm and those who follow his thinking betrays a failure to see the essential difference between the death of Christ as a sacrifice and the purposes of sacrifice in paganism. The purpose of the blood sacrifices in paganism was the appeasement of the pagan deities to prevent the deities from visiting his or her anger upon them. In Judaism the sacrifices were, when properly understood, symbolic in that they dramatized a story communicated by the sacrifice. The Passover sacrifice told the story of the passing over of the angel of death at the time of the first Passover in Egypt. It had nothing to do with the forgiveness of sin. The sacrifices associated with the Day of Atonement had to do with the symbolism associated with the transfer of the sin of the people to the goats being slaughtered and bringing that tainted blood into contact with the Mercy Seat of the Ark of the Covenant, where it symbolically became purified by its contact with the holiness of God. What took away the sins of the people was the repentance and confession of sin by the priest as a representative of the people. All sacrifices of Judaism had an interpretation or story that told the purpose of the sacrifice. The blood sacrifices of paganism and Judaism were all victim sacrifices.

### Victim Sacrifice Vs Self Sacrifice

The attempt to portray Jesus as a victim sacrifice, a blood sacrifice, or sin offering is misplaced in that even the sacrificial offerings of the OT were not the actual means of the removal of sin. As may be learned from the Day of Atonement sacrifices, repentance and confession of sin was the actual means of forgiveness. The fact that the blood sacrifice was not the means of forgiveness is repeated throughout the OT. In Pslams 40:6, David says to God, "Sacrifice and offering you did not desire, but my ears you have pierced; burnt

offerings and sin offerings you did not require.” Further, in Psalms 50:7-10, he says,

*Hear, O my people, and I will speak, O Israel, and I will testify against you: I am God, your God. 8 I do not rebuke you for your sacrifices or your burnt offerings, which are ever before me. 9 I have no need of a bull from your stall or of goats from your pens, 10 for every animal of the forest is mine, and the cattle on a thousand hills (Psalms 50:7-10).*

To say that God has need of the blood of an innocent victim sacrifice is to perceive the God of Israel more as a pagan deity than the Father of whom Jesus spoke. So what is the purpose of the blood sacrifice? In Psalms 51:16-17, David writes,

*You do not delight in sacrifice, or I would bring it; you do not take pleasure in burnt offering.17 The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise (Psalms 51:16-17).*

This motif is expressed again in Proverbs, “All a man's ways seem right to him, but the LORD weighs the heart. To do what is right and just is more acceptable to the LORD than sacrifice,” (Proverbs 21:2-3). This motif appears in the writings of Isaiah,

*The multitude of your sacrifices – what are they to me?" says the LORD. "I have more than enough of burnt offerings, of rams and the fat of fattened animals; I have no pleasure in the blood of bulls and lambs and goats (Isaiah 1:11).*

Jesus, quoting Hosea, has the same understanding of the value of blood sacrifice (Matt 12:6-7). The Hosea text reads,

*What do I care For I desire mercy, not sacrifice, and acknowledgment of God rather than burnt offerings. 7 Like Adam, they have broken the covenant – they were unfaithful to me there (Hosea 6:6-7).*

An alternative to blood sacrifices appears in several texts.

Jonah speaks of a song of thanksgiving as an alternate sacrifice to the blood offering, "But I, with a song of thanksgiving, will sacrifice to you. What I have vowed I will make good. Salvation comes from the LORD," (Jonah 2:9). Paul's association of Christ with the sacrifices of Judaism is seen in 1 Corinthians,

*Get rid of the old yeast that you may be a new batch without yeast – as you really are. **For Christ, our Passover [lamb], has been sacrificed.** Therefore let us keep the Festival, not with the old yeast, the yeast of malice and wickedness, but with bread without yeast, the bread of sincerity and truth (1 Cor 5:4-8).*

In his letter to the Ephesians, Paul speaks of Christ's sacrifice as a self-sacrifice, not a victim sacrifice as in the Levitical system of the Temple cultus,

*Be imitators of God, therefore, as dearly loved children and live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and **gave himself up** for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God (Eph 5:1-2).*

It is the case that Jesus was crucified on a Roman cross, and in his death his blood was poured out, and further, that his death was a sacrifice, not a victim sacrifice but a self-sacrifice as stated in his farewell discourses of John 13-17. These are the particulars of the view called "*theologia crucis*," (theology of the cross), in which Christ's death is seen as a redemptive event, in-and-of itself, as set over against the view called "*theologia gloriae*," (theology of glory) with its emphasis on Christ's resurrection as the means of redemption. In this view the cross and the pouring out of Jesus' blood were preludes to his resurrection. Peter expresses the early apostolic interpretation of the death of Jesus. In his sermon on Pentecost Peter Jesus death is identified as what "you [the Jews] with the help of wicked men put him to death by nailing him to the cross," (Acts 2:23).

In every sermon recorded in Acts of Apostles (with exception of Acts 17), the cross, the crucifixion of Jesus, the shedding of his blood and resulting death are spoken of as a work of evil done by men

filled with darkness in an attempt to destroy the Jesus of Nazareth (cf. Acts 2:23; 3:15; 4:10; 7:51-53; 10:38; 13:26-29; 17:2-3). Never is the death of Christ preached as the means of salvation for man; rather, in every mention of the crucifixion of Jesus, the cross, or a reference to his death is followed with God's reversal of the evil done to Jesus by the leaders of the Jews and the Romans. On Pentecost Peter declares,

*Men of Israel, listen to this: Jesus of Nazareth was a man accredited by God to you by miracles, wonders and signs, which God did among you through him, as you yourselves know. 23 This man was handed over to you by God's set purpose and foreknowledge; and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross. 24 But God raised him from the dead, freeing him from the agony of death, because it was impossible for death to keep its hold on him (Acts 2:22-24).*

To the crowd in the Jerusalem Temple Peter said, "You killed the author of life, but God raised him from the dead," (Acts 3:5). To the Sanhedrin he said, "know this, you and all the people of Israel: It is by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified but whom God raised from the dead," (Acts 4:10); and to the Roman Centurion Peter says,

*You know what has happened throughout Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John preached – 38 how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power, and how he went around doing good and healing all who were under the power of the devil, because God was with him. 39 We are witnesses of everything he did in the country of the Jews and in Jerusalem. They killed him by hanging him on a tree, 40 but God raised him from the dead on the third day and caused him to be seen. 41 He was not seen by all the people, but by witnesses whom God had already chosen – by us who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead (Acts 10:37-41).*

In all these speeches, the death of Jesus is never preached as a saving event; rather, it is what God did in response to the crucifixion and burial of Jesus that is heralded as the "good news" of man's deliverance. It is not that Peter and the others differed with Paul on

this matter. Concerning the essentiality of the resurrection of Christ to their salvation Paul says to the church at Corinth, “if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins,” (1 Cor 15:17). If they were still in their sins if Christ had not risen, then it was not his death that removed their sins; his blood was neither a means of atonement, nor was it a substitutionary sacrifice wherein Jesus took the sins of the world upon himself; rather, it was in his resurrection from death that he redeemed all men in Adam by making it possible for them to experience new creation existence which leads to eternal life.

It is clear that it was the death and resurrection of Christ was essential to the redemption of man. The biblical scholar W. D. Davies, in one of the most thorough treatments of Paul’s theology as rooted in his Jewish background, *Paul and Rabbinic Judaism*, draws this same conclusion:

Apparently the term ‘Death’ by itself would not be used by Paul of the redemptive significance of the work of Jesus. We are justified then in saying that Paul’s use of the term ‘blood’ implies no more than death; it has the active connotation of life as well, as in the sacrificial system where the death of the victim was the necessary prelude, and no more, to the releasing of life.

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. . . both the Death and Resurrection of Jesus are inseparably linked and there is an emphasis on the Death *per se*. To judge from the longest treatment of the meaning of the Death of Jesus in Rom. 6:1f., we cannot but feel that for Paul the Death of Christ is never divorced from its counterpart in New Life, and we suggest that this twofold aspect of death and life is preserved for Paul in the term ‘blood,’ which had this same twofold emphasis in the sacrificial system (W. D. Davies, *Paul and Rabbinic Judaism*, p 234).

The separation of the death from the resurrection of Christ as a redemptive event is clearly not the teaching of Paul. He reminds the Corinthians in 1 Cor 15:1-4, that the gospel he had preached to them

and by which they were saved as that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried and was raised on the third day. To the church in Rome he identifies the gospel he preached as the power of God unto salvation (Rom 1:16). Those who would say that it is the death of Jesus that effects the salvation of man are not speaking for Paul nor speaking as Paul. He says that it was his resurrection from death that ushered in new creation existence for himself and all those "in Christ."

In the death of Jesus God wasn't concerned with receiving a laver of plasma consisting of red blood cells, white blood cells, and platelets to placate his anger, a far grander interpretation of the death of Christ is present here. The death of Jesus resulted in the conclusion of the human existence of man in Adam and the creation of new existence in Christ. This occurred through the death of Jesus marking the end to his adamic existence, and then on the third day of this death God raised him a new creation, the firstfruit of a new humanity in Christ. Christ's death wasn't about blood sacrifice and appeasement; it was about a wondrous act of new creation in Christ.

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